

# DEEP INVOLVEMENT IN *THE WORLD OF WARCRAFT*: AN ‘ELFNOGRAPHY’

by

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(Under the Direction of Douglas Kleiber)

## ABSTRACT

This study presented is a two-year cyber-ethnographic investigation of the deep involvement and commitment observed in participants of the online game, *The World of Warcraft*. This game was selected as the context for the study based on its enormous popularity, evidenced by 12 million subscribers worldwide and a scarcity of prior leisure research concerning virtual world participation. The purpose of this exploratory study was to investigate and examine the socio-technical dimensions of deep involvement and enduring commitment of its inhabitants from within their *ludisphere*, inside the online game and its related meta-game resources. The primary exploratory goal was to experience and describe the disembodied developmental process of playing the game on a regular basis. This aim was approached through the creation of several avatars and advancing them naturally from the beginning of the game up through the endgame content, eventually participating in the culture of *raiding*. Additionally, the study investigated how *guilds*, in-game social groupings, impacted participant involvement. While advancing the avatars, essentially surrogate researchers, key informants were discovered that guided and informed the research process. Taking advantage of the study’s naturalistic constraint of remaining immersed in-game allowed for a third

question to be conceived which investigated what players revealed about their “real” lives during the course of play. Robert Stebbins’ (2007) *Serious Leisure Perspective* was used as a conceptual framework for the study in order to describe player investments by means of the framework’s leisure activity-centric taxonomy. The study revealed evidence of players self-actualizing via their avatars, and conceptualized as “Avatar-actualization.” As the most experienced players persevered to improve their avatars they engaged in a research-like process described as “amateur scholarship” which was in effect peer reviewed by other players as an ongoing effort to progress their characters to higher levels of specialization within the game. Gleaning a deeper understanding of player involvement in online multiplayer virtual worlds and games is important to leisure studies, clinical psychology and education. While educators would be pleased to find students as engaged as some of the players observed, therapists might simultaneously be concerned by these same behaviors.

INDEX WORDS: *The World of Warcraft*, Serious Leisure, Massively Multiplayer Online Games, MMOG, Role-Playing Games, MMORPG, Raiders, Flow, Leisure Specialization, Learning, Netnography, Cyber-ethnography, Virtual Worlds, Play

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## PROLOGUE: DISCOVERING NEW WORLDS

*"The Force is what gives a Jedi his power. It's an energy field created by all living things. It surrounds us and penetrates us. It binds the galaxy together."*  
— Obi-Wan Kenobi, *Star Wars: A new hope*.

It was already hot and muggy outside as the semester ended in late spring of 2007. I was the lab manager in the Learning and Performance Support Laboratory (LPSL), in the college of education at the University of Georgia. Traditionally, this was the time of year when the faculty and staff breathed deeply and thanked God that the students were gone. The halls got a lot quieter and everyone relaxed a little bit. This was the atmosphere in which I was first exposed to the unique culture and psychology of massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs).

“Hey Nic, I need you to check this game out and tell me what you think,” Tom asked, poking his head around the corner of my office door. Dr. Thomas Satwicz, was the newest addition to the LPSL, and his research, most generally, investigated video games as informal learning environments and the nuanced relationships among the in-game and in-room discourse between games and players (Satwicz, 2006). Within a few minutes, he had sent me a web link to create a free account in a new text-based MMOG called *Astro Empires (AE)*. My role in the lab was to provide the technical and systems level support for Tom as well as the other research scientists, and their collective army of graduate students. So, when Tom asked me to create an account in *AE*, I obliged. For me this event represented one of those rare and wonderful moments when one’s work and one’s leisure collide.

I have been an on-and-off “gamer” since the late 1970’s, but had resisted involvement in online games because of their accompanying monthly service fees. However, this particular online game, *AE*, was free to play and curiously primitive at first glance. Today, *AE* would be easily be recognized as a precursor to the massively popular social networking games such as *Mafia wars*, or the mega hit *Farmville*, which currently boasts a 75 million player-base (Gross, 2010).

*AE* is a text-based online computer-based game that lacks both sound and animated graphics (*Astro Empires*, 2010); a fact which caused some of my friends to suggest that in lacking these seemingly universal elements, *AE* was not a real videogame. “But it is!” I protested. Inside the game a player’s attention is primarily focused on sets of timers, each counting down the completion time of various resources currently in production. And here too, my friends suggested, “watching a bunch of little ticking clocks was reminiscent of watching water come to a boil, without the payoff.” However, beneath *AE*’s Spartan exterior was a brilliantly complex game with respect to its designed strategic management system, social necessity, and a persistent universe, meaning that things can happen to you even when you are not actually playing. After a few short hours of creating my avatar, Demos, and some initial exploratory tinkering with the interface, I was “hooked!”. At this point, however, I had not yet begun to conceive of the deeply social aspects of this game that were soon to follow.

Over the coming weeks and months (13 months altogether) I made a dozen or so online friends in the game and in short order the appeal of the social aspects became readily apparent. By this point I recognized, but couldn’t explain, the enormity of the psychological appeal of participation in MMOGs. Concurrently, I had applied to the

University of Georgia Recreation and Leisure doctorate program with an interest in exploring “cyber-leisure,” and online cultures, more broadly.

It was in the process of narrowing my research interest into a more focused area that the context, and the appeal, of online games became overwhelmingly apparent. These online game-centered communities are significant in terms of their globalized and computer-mediated nature, massive population sizes, and the participants’ levels of commitment and effort they bring to these games. They are under-researched across the academy and generally ignored in twenty-first century leisure studies scholarship. For me, this pursuit became a natural fit.

I have so many questions, and so little time: where should I start? Why were all those participants of *AE* so dedicated, involved, engaged, and immersed in this game, I wondered? Why were they so loyal and committed to their particular guilds, (the game’s term for teams) and what drives such deep devotion, developed in such short periods of time? These players were hyper-engaged and they all seemed to know each other (even across guilds), and also they seemed to know a hell of a lot about this game.

Perhaps the only thing that was obvious was that *AE* was rich with culture. It had its own secret language, and customs, hidden deep inside this database-driven, text-only, game. I was baffled by the seriousness of the *AE* community and the behaviors of its citizens, immersed in this synthetic and yet somehow collectively imagined universe. There were so many other videogames with far more immersive sound, graphics, and far deeper narratives. Yet this obscure international MMOG, hosted out of Spain, was

causing people all over the planet to wake at ungodly hours in an effort to synchronize numerous planetary attacks against other guilds and/or regions of synthetic space within a virtual and expanding universe.

After having alluded to my powerfully social first encounter in a MMOG, I would be remiss not to tell the tale, in an abbreviated fashion, in order to illustrate how I have arrived at the forthcoming study. In the beginning of the game a player starts with a single planet and proceeds to construct buildings, leading to spaceships, in an effort to eventually colonize other worlds, and in controlling more worlds a player expands their construction options, which develop an exponentially expanding revenue stream used for continuous synthetic geographic expansion. Increases to a player's economic capital reinforce and contribute to the player's social capital, the influence they wield inside the population of the game universe.

Simultaneously, players must also build defenses on their planets in order to avoid being occupied by the other players and guilds. Thus, players are encouraged to band together into communities or teams for the purpose of mutual protection and also to collectively conquer the other players and guilds. This is a game of power and dominance between virtual tribes within an online community. *AE* remains the most violent and emotionally upsetting game that I have ever encountered.

In a strange sequence of events, my first guild had disbanded within a few days after I had joined, and I was far too new to this culture to understand why this disbanding had occurred. Subsequently, I was alone and unprotected in a violent area of [synthetic] space. Concerned about this turn of events, I recruited five real life friends, along with a few whom I had recently met inside the game, to start a new guild. We were all *noobs*

[new to the game] for the most part, and I was their leader. We did our best to form alliances with other guilds and to recruit more players into our guild.

Meanwhile, the Romanian empire [an all Romanian guild] was threatening an attack to occupy our worlds, destroy our fleets, and in so doing obliterate our fledgling guild. I felt an oddly deep sense of responsibility, as leader, to defend my friends and our nascent guild. So we planned a preemptive surprise attack and our ragtag collection of noobs destroyed the amassed Romanian forces. It was a glorious victory.

Like wildfire, the news of our accomplishment spread across the [synthetic] universe. We, “The Artian Empire” [TAE], were suddenly considered a respectable guild within the community of established guilds. With this newfound respect came the privilege of access, and I gained a voice within the AE community of guild leaders. So, I began to ask them questions about their involvement in the game. I repeated a seemingly simple question to every player I encountered, “Why is this game so addicting?” This deceptively simple line of inquiry led to my first published paper questioning the concept of gaming addiction as a pathological disorder (Holt & Kleiber, 2009).

*"I feel a great disturbance in the Force, as if millions of voices suddenly cried out in terror, and were suddenly silenced." — Obi-Wan Kenobi, Star Wars: A new hope*

TAE's rise to glory was short lived and the news of our victory against the Romanians had made us far too visible to avoid being noticed by the larger, stronger, and vastly more experienced guilds. We eventually fell prey to one of these far more experienced guilds; in fact sadly, it was a single player who destroyed us all, forcing us to disband and merge into their guild.

These events peaked my interest in this uniquely intense in-chair leisure activity. Eventually, my attention shifted to wondering about other MMOGs and how unique

player experiences and cultures emerge inside these intriguing synthetic worlds. I decided to leave *AE* and to move forward on my quest by exploring the most massive of these massively multiplayer online games, *The World of Warcraft*, with its 12 million strong, player-base (Blizzard Entertainment, 2011), in an effort to continue to investigate how these emerging leisure-based cultures are forged inside these deeply immersive online synthetic environments.

## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

### **A Brief History of Multiplayer Online Games**

Given that members of my committee and other interested readers have varying degrees of familiarity with technology, massively multiplayer online games, and online communities, I feel that it is essential to set the stage with a brief situated history of how these games and their communities came to be. In the study of mythology, stories of how something comes into existence are referred to as etiologies. This is the etiology of massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs). This history reveals how technological innovations, fantasy literature, and tabletop role-playing games (RPGs) merge to form a new media culture, one which continues to develop today.

Videogames have been part of the leisure landscape for nearly 40 years, while MMOGs, on the other hand, have only been widely available for a little more than the last decade. In the early years, this pastime, videogames, was available to only the savviest of the “techy-crowd.” Today, however, videogames hold a culturally ubiquitous position, making it increasingly difficult to find an individual who never played a videogame, across all walks of life, and with global implications. The following section is a brief history of videogames provided to situate the reader in this research study.

Videogames have steadily become an increasingly significant leisure activity since the release of the first commercial videogame, *Computer Space*, on 1500 coin-operated machines in 1971. *Computer Space* marked the first commercially available videogame designed by Bushnell and Dabney who proceeded to found Atari in 1972



(Mäyrä, 2008). Unfortunately, the complexity of play in *Computer Space* was too difficult for the audience of the period, and its release curiously also marks the nascent industries first commercial failure. The following year, as Atari, they released the arcade version of *Pong*, which was a huge success (Lowood, 2006). In the same year Magnavox released the first in-home console video game system, Odyssey, followed by Atari's console version of pong in 1975, thus arguably marking the dawn of the Golden Age of Commercial Videogames (Burnham, 2001; Kent, 2001; Sellers, 2001).

These earliest videogames were all action-oriented, and contained no narrative backdrop. This, however, changed in 1975 when Will Crowther, an avid spelunker, Tolkien reader, *Dungeons & Dragons (D&D)* enthusiast, and pioneer router programmer of the ARPAnet project (the predecessor to the modern internet) developed the first interactive fiction game. Crowther was in the midst of a divorce and wanted to create a computer-based game that could bring him closer to his children. His design was based on his explorations and mappings of Mammoth cave in Kentucky, playing *D&D* with his friends, and his goal to create a game that would not be intimidating to “non-computer” people (Montfort, 2003).

Later, Don Woods discovered Crowther's original game code in early 1976, on a medical computer at Stanford University. Woods began to debug and further expand the fantasy aspects of the game, based on his own love of Tolkien's books. These earliest IBM releases are known by several names including *Colossal Cave Adventure* and, more commonly, *ADVENT* and are credited to both Crowther and Woods (Montfort, 2003).

Loosely based on Crowther and Wood's text-based game, Warren Robinett, created the first graphical incarnation, *Adventure*, which was published by Atari in 1979

for their 2600 console system and sold over a million copies. Following *Adventure's* success, more fantasy-based and increasingly graphically sophisticated adventure games were released across the spectrum of competing console systems throughout the 1980's; a trend that continues into the present, as reflected by such titles as the hugely popular *Final Fantasy* and *Legend of Zelda* series. During this period, computer networks on university campuses were also rapidly developing. The PLATO system, created at the University of Illinois in the late 1970's, housed two multi-user text based games, *Empire* and *Avatar*, the latter of which is considered by some as the first true MUD-, Multi-User Dungeon, type game (Mäyrä, 2008).

*Avatar* was the first game to have a digitally connected social network of players; notably marking it as responsible for the first online game community in history. Collectively, these types of multi-user text-based games came to be referred to as MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons). However, Trubshaw and Bartle at the University of Essex programmed the first officially named MUD, *MUD1*, in 1980. In 1996 Bartle wrote the seminal MMOG article, *Hearts, clubs, diamonds, spades: Players who suit MUDs* defining four player archetypes found in MUD's: achievers (diamonds), explorers (spades), socializers (hearts), and killers (clubs). These archetypes continue to be used by MMOG researchers today to describe player psychology and specifically player motivations (Castronova, 2007; Jenkins, 2006; Pearce, 2009).

By the mid 1980's and into the 1990's technological advances in the areas of processing power, the graphical user interface, and networking, propelled computer gaming to new heights and transformed the text-based MUDs into 2d graphic "virtual" environments such as Lucas Arts, *Habitat* (1985). These newly graphical MUDs like

*Habitat* are referred to collectively as MOOs (MUD object oriented). Also during this period the social context for gamers more broadly shifted away from arcades and into the home (Mitchell, 1985; Williams, Hendricks & Winkler, 2006). As the popularity of arcades faded, console and computer games continued to develop alongside the vast improvements to the infrastructure of the Internet.

The 1990's marked the beginning of three-dimensional representations in videogames and the emergence of networked and online gaming to far less tech-savvy audiences. Notably the much-maligned videogame, *Doom*, released in 1993, created a new kind of videogame-based social event, the local area network (LAN) party. *Doom* brought together the 3d graphics and networkability, which allowed players to connect their machines together at someone's house or office to play a digital, and much more violent, version of hide-and-go-seek or tag (Anderson & Bushman, 2001; Kushner, 2003; Sherry, 2001). The success of *Doom* spawned the massive popularity of a new genre of games, the First-Person-Shooter (FPS). This genre has received much of the scholarly attention in the area of aggression research (Anderson & Bushman, 2001).

Simultaneously, another videogame genre, real time strategy games (RTS) also came of age due to the new ease of networking, increases in Internet bandwidth, and stable connectivity. In 1994 Blizzard Entertainment released *Warcraft: Orcs and Humans*, a 2d RTS, marking the birth of the *Warcraft* mythos. This was followed by their release of the first network capable action role playing game (RPG) *Diablo* and concurrently their release of an online network game service, *battlenet* that hosts Blizzard's growing number of online titles.

At the dawn of the millennium, *EverQuest* (EQ) was released by Sony Entertainment and reached 300,000 subscriptions in its first year. In many respects this moment represents the birth of the modern 3D MMORPGs, still intimately connected to their MOO and MUD forefathers, and tabletop RPG's like *Dungeons and Dragons* that started it all in the early 1970's. EQ's fan base continued to climb until 2004 when Blizzard released its MMORPG, *The World of Warcraft* (WoW). Blizzard's release of WoW met with instant success, rapidly eclipsed EQ in subscriptions, and currently holds the Guinness (2011) world record for the largest MMOG at 12 million players!

By 2007, it was estimated that more than 50 million people were currently playing subscription based MMORPGs (Escoriaza, 2008). By 2010, these numbers doubled to exceed 100 million participants when including the MMOGs, like *MafiaWars* and *FarmVille* that are embedded inside massively popular social networking sites such as *Facebook* and *Myspace* (Shell, 2010).

In order to fully understand the enormity of these numbers, *The World of Warcraft* alone holds a larger population than all of Greece and MMOG consumers in total are approximately equivalent to the entire population of Mexico (Central Intelligence Agency, 2010). Beyond the strikingly gargantuan number of people participating in these online worlds is the vast number of hours that individuals are spending inside them. A survey of MMOG players found that, on average, players are spending an amazing 25.86 hours per week gaming and perhaps even more surprising was the finding that adult players are playing for more hours than younger players (Williams, Yee, & Caplan, 2008).

Given the population size and vast hours spent, it should come as no surprise that this is big business. As a whole, the video game industry reported a whopping 11.7 billion dollars in revenue for 2008, which does not include MMOG subscriptions data (Entertainment Software Association, 2010). And Blizzard has apparently dodged the current recession, announcing that they had made over 500 million dollars in revenue for 2008 from *WoW* subscriptions alone (Rosenberg, 2009). These numbers collectively-- population, individual time spent, and annual revenues generated--deserve immediate and serious scholarly attention and lead to the problem, purpose, and significance of this study.

### **Statement of the Problem**

As MMOGs have only been a reality for a little more than a decade, the research concerning individuals' involvement and deep commitment is still very limited. *The World of Warcraft* currently represents the largest global subscription-based on-line game, at 12 million players and no ethnographic study has been identified that specifically explores the nature of involvement and commitment of players to this online game as a leisure activity. A central question guiding this research is: What is the experience of playing *WoW* on a regular basis?

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this exploratory study is to investigate and examine the socio-technical dimensions of deep involvement and continuing commitment from within the global online game, *The World of Warcraft*.

## Significance of the Study

The value and contribution of this study is based upon the following rationale:

1) Gap in the body of leisure scholarship

The most significant reason for this study was to propel leisure scholarship into some relatively “uncharted” areas, namely cyber-leisure and specifically the culture of investment in MMOGs. I was surprised at the absence of published manuscripts on the subject of online games and even more surprised at its absence in leisure scholarship. The following section details my methods for locating any relevant articles in my literature search.

I began scanning for relevant literature using UGA’s *Galileo* retrieval engine *EBSCO host* and searching in *Academic Search Complete* for any relevant hits across the following key terms: “Online Games,” returned 546 hits, “MMOG” returned 34 hits “Multiplayer Online Games,” returned 68 hits “videogames” returned 11,923 hit and “World of Warcraft” returned 175 hits. The results (with the exception of videogames) revealed that they were not being published in the primary journals of leisure studies.

To crosscheck these findings, using the same set of search terms, I then specifically searched the following journals: *Annals of Leisure Research*, *Journal of Leisure Research*, *Leisure Studies*, *Leisure Sciences*, *Loisir (Leisure)*, *Loisir et Societe (Society & Leisure)*, and the *World Leisure Journal*. Of all these journals, only *Loisir et Societe* had a single match with online games. Additionally, I searched the journals focused on play (none of which were available using the UGA search tools). A general search via Google found that *The American Journal of Play* contained three relevant articles and six book reviews published between 2008 and 2009.

Additionally, I searched *Pro Quest* for any published dissertation abstracts, which returned 69 hits for “online games,” 15 hits for “MMORPG” (massively multiplayer online role-playing games), 15 hits for “MMOG” (massively multiplayer online games), and 21 hits for “Warcraft.” While these dissertations, and studies, demonstrate that MMOG research has begun, considerable work remains, especially within leisure studies, given the size and degree of participant involvement inside these online worlds and its obvious connection to leisure and recreation.

## 2) Size issue- scope of population

Making a case for the importance of this study based on the scope of the population of participants given the relatively short history of these games is straightforward. In a period of only ten years, the popularity of MMOGs has spread like a virus, attracting over 100 million people to this fledgling leisure activity, so rapidly in fact that it has caught researchers and game developers by surprise (Castronova, 2007; Shell, 2010).

Imagine if basketball had been invented 10 years ago and suddenly millions of people were investing over 20 hours a week to participate in the sport. Would scholars of recreation and leisure take notice? Would they investigate it? If so, how and on what would they focus their research efforts? In fact, this is exactly what has occurred with this nascent genre of videogames. Why has this mass adoption remained virtually beneath the radar of leisure research? I know of no other leisure activity’s emergence which has been adopted by so many in such a short period of time. And the numbers continue to grow. *The World of Warcraft* has demonstrated a particularly steep and unprecedented adoption growth curve, going from zero to 11.5 million paid subscribers in only three years. In this case, I believe size matters!<sup>3</sup>) Time and involvement issue

The third area of significance is the deep commitment of MMOG participants as measured by the time, or effort, spent involved in the activity. Yee's survey data set is topically broad, however, the aspect cited most often is the average number of hours individuals spend playing MMOGs. He found that players spend an average of 25.86 hours per week playing the game. Although his earliest surveys (2006) were of *EverQuest* players, subsequent studies of other MMOGs including *WoW*, yielded similar results ranging between 20-25 hours per week. A more detailed description of these studies will be provided in the following chapter.

Imagine if 100 million people went camping for 20 hours every week. Would recreation and leisure scholars take notice? To the contrary, they seem to be aware of and greatly concerned about the decline in outdoor activities. Louv's (2005) book *Last Child in the Woods* suggests a trend that children are spending less time involved in outdoor activities. Rhetorically, I ask if they are not in the woods then where did they go? Castronova's (2007) book, *Exodus to the Virtual World*, suggests that he may have found these missing children in MMOGs. His book concludes with a provocative question about the potential impact, and consequences, that this "exodus" would have on the "real" world. This question is, of course, beyond the scope of my study, but interestingly it points to the fact that while we know participants, on average, spend an excess of 20 hours per week in online games, we know far less about what they are actually doing during that time. This study adds to the growing literature about how, and perhaps why, participants spend this time and effort inside *The World of Warcraft*.

A final consideration for the significance of this temporal investment dimension is that while Yee's work points to 25.86 hours spent gaming per week as an average, we



must recognize that this represents a continuum of involvement ranging from the most casual player to the most deeply engaged, known as “Raiders” in *The World of Warcraft* community or more generally as “Power Gamers” (Silverman, 2006; Taylor, 2006).

These later participants are spending far greater amounts of time, and I intended to focus my attentions on this population. As we move from 20 plus hours to investments of 40 to 60 hours, the career-like nature of this involvement begins to resemble the work-like qualities of “Serious Leisure,” a concept developed by Stebbins initially in his (1979) study of amateurism and maturing into the Serious Leisure Perspective (2007). His work served as the primary framework for this study.

#### 4) Competing and Contradictory Discourses

The time dimension opens the door for my fourth point for the significance of this study. There are multiple, and contradictory, discourses surrounding the deep involvement and investment of participation in MMOGs. A keyword here is “addiction.” From my earliest work in *AE*, the player’s prospective of the term “addiction” connotes a positive meaning, a game that is so much fun, enjoyable and gratifying that it’s difficult to stop. “Addicting” is a hallmark of a well-designed game (Holt & Kleiber, 2009).

From a therapeutic perspective, addiction is clearly negative. Therapists are seeing more and more cases of patients who are experiencing real life problems as a result of their deep leisure commitment to MMOGs. The call by therapists for gaming, or Internet addiction, to be included into the next release of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) in May 2013 was however denied for the forthcoming manual update (American Psychiatric Association, 2010). Some scholars, however, have chosen

to refer to these issues as “problematic usage” instead of addiction (Caplan, Williams & Yee, 2009; Holt & Kleiber 2009).

Educators interested in using these games for instructional purposes replace, or avoid, the word addiction; instead they describe videogames broadly as highly engaging, motivating, and fun (Gee 2003; Squire et al., 2007). In other words, their focus is on the effort and self-determined motivation that players bring to these games. Educators deeply desire to engage and motivate students and videogames appear to be doing just that. Researchers in the learning sciences believe they can capitalize on the deep participatory engagement and motivation behaviors witnessed in videogame play and convert them into pedagogical platforms, or deep learning contexts (Barab, Thomas, Dodge, Carteaux, & Tuzun, 2005; Squire et al., 2007).

However, this approach is simply a different perspective on “addiction” and what these proponents of serious games are really seeking is to design highly engaging instructional contexts where learners are as deeply involved as they appear to be while playing entertainment-based videogames. In other words, the unstated goal is to use these games to get students “addicted” to learning. On the surface this may seem to be a good idea, but have the consequences of this course of action been fully considered? Leisure scholarship may have something to offer to these efforts. The work around issues of perceived freedom may in fact undermine the efforts of some of game-based learning contexts to create the levels of motivation and deep involvement witnessed in games that are freely chosen. At the very least I would hope that leisure research might be used to support and inform the “serious games” movement.

##### 5) Global/multicultural issues

The final reason I will suggest that this study is significant is that these online inhabitants are not tethered by geography. These play spaces are being sold and shared globally. Around the world, individuals from vastly different cultural backgrounds are sharing leisure experiences. Online leisure offers possibilities for shared interactions between peoples who just 10 years ago would have never come into contact with one another. This globalized multicultural-shared experience is both emergent and immersive. This type of continuous and synchronous globalized recreation is completely unprecedented in the history of recreation and requires special and immediate attention.

The significance of this study is by no means confined to leisure studies, although it is grounded by it. I hope that eventually these data and findings might be useful to inform scholarship in other fields such as gaming studies, education, media studies, counseling, psychology, social psychology, anthropology, and sociology, as these areas of study have all uniquely informed my interest in this topic. The following literature review looked to these fields for guidance, grounding and contributions for this study.

## CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

The organization of the relevant literature presented several challenges. The “parts” need to work together as a whole, making it difficult to determine which parts should take precedence. The content domains, the paradigmatic and epistemological positioning, and the methodology and methods designs come together, forming the “web of significance” for the study (Geertz 1973). The “web” Geertz referred to was the interconnectedness of culture, but his concept holds appropriate here as well. This section is organized to move from the MMOG literature to the theoretical literature, which together frame this study. The review of literature was organized within the following structure: MMOG’s, Play and Games, and Leisure theory, followed by a brief consideration of the roots of ethnography and its modern, and sometimes postmodern, twenty-first century variants.

Beyond the organizational challenge was the challenge to determine relevance and stay current for an exploratory study on a nascent and emerging topic. I approached this problem by including what I believed to be important at the time, and what I believed to represent the foundational work necessary to begin. As the study progressed, new literature became available that continued to influence and inform the study both methodologically and conceptually (Bainbridge, 2010; Flanagan, 2009; Nardi, 2010; Pearce, 2009; Thomas & Brown, 2011; Turkle, 2011).

Finally, and encompassing the two challenges mentioned above, is the fact that this is my first “professional” research experience. “I am a noob,” which is gamer jargon

meaning new and inexperienced. Pearce (2009) described a similar humbling effect in detailing her first ethnographic experience as a researcher inside an MMOG. She prescribed transparency to this challenge and suggested the dualistic consideration of “playing” ethnographer while concurrently “playing” the game. I appreciated and accepted her suggestion and followed it. I will further describe her work and its relevance to both methodology and MMOG research. First, I will shift to a more micro view of the most relevant MMOG literature.

### **Massively Multiplayer Online Worlds**

At the heart of my study is an ethnographic investigation of the practice and culture of participant’s deep involvement inside the MMORPG *The World of Warcraft*. The most relevant literature to this study stems from the scholars who have investigated this context, or similar ones, and the behaviors of the inhabitants of these synthetic worlds. Beyond these MMOG studies are the theories and methods that have informed them. Interestingly, much of the previous work investigating MMOGs and their emerging cultures lacked any direct inclusion of leisure studies scholarship. Although, as leisure studies is an interdisciplinary field, some of the sources used in these game-based studies, and in the MMOG literature in particular, are also common to leisure studies, such as Huizinga’s (1938/2008) *Homo Ludens* and Csikszentmihalyi’s (1990) work on optimal experience, or Flow. I will begin with the MMOG literature most directly related to my proposed inquiry.

Given that the context for this study, *The World of Warcraft* is barely six years old, the breadth and depth of directly related literature is limited. That being said, I believe that Yee’s work from 2000 through 2010 around the social psychology of

*Everquest* and *The World of Warcraft* players, as well as other MMOGs and their participants more broadly, is perhaps the closest match to my area of interest. However, his online survey-based studies are epistemologically post-positivist and leave significant room for expansion and for additional and supportive qualitative inquiry. While, from his research we may learn that MMOG players play for an average of 20 plus hours per week, we are still left wondering exactly what the participants are doing within that time. Yee's career has been both pioneering and prolific in such a short amount of time (Yee, 2006a; 2006b; 2008). His findings provided a strong backdrop to my study as both a point of comparison and as a point of contrast.

The ongoing qualitative MMOG research also features several significant and influential scholars who have shaped my thinking. Most recently Pearce's (2009) *Communities of Play*, Nardi's (2010) *My Life as a Night Elf Priest*, and Turkle's (2011) *Alone Together*, serve as a rigorous ethnographic exemplars set in a MMOG contexts and focused on the behaviors of participants and online communities. Additionally, all three provide guidance for future scholars on virtual ethnographic methodology and methods. Prior to Pearce's contribution was Taylor's (2006) ethnographic work in the MMOG *EverQuest*, *WoW*'s predecessor, which informed Pearce's work and also inspired this study. And perhaps the earliest qualitative research on online communities was the (1995) pioneering work of Turkle. She was similarly curious about the deep player involvement she observed in the 1990's inside MUDs and MOOs and defined in the previous chapter.

Within the MMOG and game studies literature, the term "power gamer" is commonly used to describe the deep player involvement in these games (Silverman,

2006; Taylor 2006; Turkle, 1995; Yee 2006a). As mentioned in the brief historic context of chapter one, Bartle's early work in developing and researching MOOs and MUDs in the early 1990's, and predating Turkle's work, establishes the four player archetypes: "achievers," "explorers," "socializers," and "killers" (1996). Bartle suggested that "achievers" were the equivalents to power gamers within his theoretical schema. I intend to use Bartle's archetypes as a point of player reference, and also to frame the actions of the participants. Within the culture and language of *WoW*, "Raider" is the equivalent term for power gamer or achiever.

### **Play and Games**

It seems reasonable to situate MMOGs into the context of play and Huizinga's seminal (1938/2008) work, *Homo Ludens*, is an appropriate starting point. Huizinga was a Dutch cultural historian whose work on play has inspired most, if not all, other investigations of play. He is by no means the first to contemplate the power of play. For example, Heraclitus the Greek philosopher once said that, "man is most nearly himself when he achieves the seriousness of a child at play" (*Fragments*, n.d.). Huizinga (1938/2008) also recognized the seriousness of play and established one of the major paradoxes of the nature of play itself when he said, "Play is the direct opposite of seriousness" and "...for some, play can be very serious indeed" (p.5). This aspect of the seriousness of play for the player while engaged in non-serious action continues as a central theme across the literature and is more than applicable to MMOG participants.

Huizinga (1938/2008) again captivated future scholars of play, amazingly, with the first five words of his treatise, "Play is older than culture." (p. 1). His statement, premised on the observation of animal play, is perhaps the impetus of numerous

Darwinist approaches to understanding the functions of play and discussed later in this chapter. *Homo Ludens* describes play in broad cultural terms and offers little in terms of distinguishing between the play of children and adults. However, examples for both are offered within the text. Late in the text, Huizinga (1938/2008) broadly operationalized play as autotelic and woven into a socio-cultural context:

*Summing up the formal characteristic of play, we might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious' but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings that tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress the difference from the common world by disguise or other means. (p.13)*

Huizinga's definition sets the stage for French sociologist Caillois' work on games. His seminal work, *Man, Play and Games* (1962/2001) spends little time discussing the general nature of play, which is only addressed as such in his first chapter. He credited *Homo Ludens* as a thoughtful discussion on the nature of play, but believed that Huizinga, "...deliberately omits, as obvious, the description and classification of games themselves, since they all respond to the same needs and reflect, without qualification, the same psychological attitude" (Caillois, 1962/2001, p. 4). Based on this perceived omission, Caillois proceeded to create a detailed taxonomy and nuanced discussion of games, with added emphasis on gambling and games of chance. He classified games broadly into four categories: 1) *Agon* – competitive games, 2) *Alea* – games of chance, 3) *Mimesis* – mimicry or role playing games, and 4) *Ilinx* – vertigo inducing or perception-alerting games. The four classifications are not mutually exclusive, meaning that more than one type may be found within any particular game.



With regard to play as a general construct, Caillois (1962/2001) defined it as holding the following 6 characteristics:

1. Free: in which playing is not obligatory; if it were, it would at once lose its attractive and joyous quality as diversion;
2. Separate: circumscribed within certain limits of space and time, defined and fixed in advance;
3. Uncertain: the course of which cannot be determined, nor the result attained beforehand, and some latitude for innovations being left to the players' initiative;
4. Unproductive: creating neither goods, nor wealth nor new elements of any kind; and, except for the exchange of property among the players, ending in a situation identical to that prevailing at the beginning of the game;
5. Governed by the rules: under conventions that suspend ordinary laws, and for the moment establish new legislation, which alone counts;
6. Make-believe: accompanied by a special awareness of a second reality or free unreality, as against real life (p. 9-10).

Caillois' definition primarily accounted for the deficit in Huizinga's conceptualization of games of chance, and gambling in particular. He suggested that Huizinga's explanation of play's relationship to culture left no place for connecting play to economic interests, a point which appears important with regard to the economic impact of MMOGs and also to the importance of virtual economies with these online worlds (Castronova, 2007).

Caillois considered the player of games of chance as an entrepreneur and gambling as a form of pointless work. Strikingly similar is Geertz's (1973) description of games of chance (betting games) observed in the Balinese cockfights as "deep play," where the potential of a devastating outcome (financial ruin) was only moderately outweighed by its social value. If we were to replace the financial aspects of "deep play" with the temporal aspects "spending time" in MMOGs, there may be a significant connection to the conjecture and debate around game addiction and, more specifically,

the investments of time as observed in power gamers' and their deeply involved relationship with MMOGs, and to problematic videogame usage more generally (Caplan, Williams, & Yee, 2009).

Caillois also connected his economic considerations of play to professional athletes, believing that if one is paid for play within a professional domain, then play ceases to be play and should be considered instead as a form of work. However, this leaves Caillois' position of the autotelic nature of play ambiguous with regard to gaming, gambling, and purposeful play. His work and play dichotomy, however, resonates strongly with the common binary expressed in Leisure Studies between work and leisure, a dichotomy, which I believe can only limit our understanding of the relationship between and within work, play and leisure! Curiously this consideration of the blurring of work and play is also an issue that is explored by Yee (2006a) in his investigation of MMOG player psychology. Currently, I consider the "work or play" discussion to be one around the nature of observed, or perceived "effort," and not necessarily exclusive to one or the other. We can "work" at improving our aptitudes in our play and conversely find playfulness in our work.

Caillois adopted his functional definition of play from Valery, who stated that play "happens only when the players have a desire to play, and play the most absorbing, exhausting game in order to find diversion, escape from responsibility and routine" (Caillois, 1962, p. 6). Caillois described play further as a "separate occupation, carefully isolated from the rest of life and generally is engaged with in precise limits of time and place" (p. 9). Here too, modern scholarship notes the blurring of play and non-play

activity, considering Huizinga's metaphoric "magic circle" to be more porous than rigid (Castronova, 2007; Pearce, 2009; Salen and Zimmerman, 2004; Satwicz, 2006; Taylor, 2006).

Caillois also made an astute connection between pretense, or fantasy play, and rules, suggesting that while pretending may at first appear absent of rules; functional rules exist and are governed by the association to the real life analog. For example, the rules of playing "house" become based on how a house functionally operates, or in playing "Cowboys and Indians," functional rules become based on the players' knowledge of how cowboys and indians operate in the real world. This understanding of the rules, and roles, of fantasy play is similarly suggested in the developmental psychology of Piaget (1999/1932) and Vygotsky (1976).

Vygotsky (1976) observed these types of symbolic transformations in the way children use objects to symbolically represent another object during play, such as a stick being imagined as a gun while playing Cowboys and Indians. Piaget's work focused on how children conceived and developed concepts of rules. He did this by observing their comprehension of rule sets and their ability (or inability) to conceive new rules while playing marbles (1999/1932). Both Vygotsky and Piaget believed that play serves an important and necessary role for ones' development from childhood into functional adult. Caillois, like Huizinga, does not distinguish greatly between child and adult play, although the themes of pretending and of diversion begin to emerge in their respective work, developing into current theoretical differences between the play of children and adults.

Beyond Caillois, more contemporary work, such as that of Gary Fine (1983), investigated tabletop role-playing games (RPGs) and the communities of players who embrace taking on fantasy roles. These pencil and paper games hold deep historic connections with MMOGs and more specifically Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) such as *Everquest* and *The World of Warcraft* as described in the situated history of these games found in Chapter One. More recently, the impact of RPGs as a lifestyle from youth into adulthood is explored in *The Elfish Gene: Dungeons, Dragons and Growing Up Strange* (Barrowcliffe, 2007). The deep emotional investments put forth by players of RPGs and the emergence of subculture stemming from fantasy gaming is addressed in a series of essays in *Gaming as Culture*, by Williams, Hendricks and Winkler (2006). The book offers a provocative set of perspectives on how relationships between players and games form and develop into a context for cultural emergence. And finally, connections between the social worlds of tabletop RPGs and MMORPGs are described in *Fantasy Freaks and Gaming Geeks* (Gilsdorf, 2009). All of these works all hold deep connections with Unruh's (1980) work on "social worlds" and also to Stebbins' (2007) conceptualization of "ethos" of serious leisure pursuits in his Serious Leisure Perspective.

Other relevant contributions can be found in modern play literature as well, such as that of the work of Garry Chick and Brian Sutton-Smith. Chick's (2009) research takes a Darwinistic evolutionary approach to inform our understanding of play. His proximate explanations of play are based on biology and observed animal behavior, grounding his work in the Huizinga-esque, "play is older than culture" tradition. He distinguishes between two forms of play, growth-based embodied capital (physical

proficiencies), and experience-based embodied capital (specific skills and cognition) in order to explain the function of play in human development.

If one adopts Chick's evolutionary approach towards play, it might suggest that modern play, such as the popularity of videogames, is related to our adaptation to changes in the modern information-age ecology. Is our information-based play based in a need to develop proficiencies in the skills necessary for survival in a postmodern information-based world? Taking this adaptive position, would it be so surprising to witness a decline in outdoor and physical activities (Louv, 2005; Nader, Bradley, Houts, McRitchie, & O'Brien, 2008; Schwartz & Brownell, 2007) in favor of information-based play such as videogames for youth and adults?

However, Chick's (2009) evolutionary focus is on the role of play in mate selection. He accounts for adult play and mate choice through the concepts of prestige and status. This notion may also help to inform my understanding of MMOG engagement given that these games rely heavily on player perceptions of prestige and status as potential mechanisms of engagement, and also in that MMOGs are being used as a mating platform for some adolescent and adult participants. More consideration is needed on how the nature of tele-presence, or computer-mediated interaction, changes traditional mating dynamics. Specifically, I suggest that removal of the physical body from the mating ritual creates fundamental changes to relationships and also to successful courtship practices, and deserves more research attention.

Another important contributor to the play literature is Brian Sutton-Smith. He takes an interdisciplinary approach to studying the nature of play in *The ambiguity of play* (2001), where he places the nature and importance of play into cross-cultural and

historical contexts. Similar to Huizinga's cultural approach, his research seeks to operationalize play into a unified theory, which accounts for both children and adults. Sutton-Smith emphasizes the importance of play for all ages and its cultural significance. His holistic and interdisciplinary approach towards play research evokes history, cross-cultural studies, psychology, education, and folklore.

In a strange connection to Sutton-Smith's emphasis on folklore is another scholar of play, Stewart Brown. He is currently the president for the National Institute for Play and, in particular importance to this study, wrote the forward for *The Hero's Journey: The World Of Joseph Campbell* (2003) that contains the writings of Campbell, and was edited by Cousineau following Campbell's death. This book, and Campbell's work in general, caused me to reflect on my classical training and the potential for relationships between deep involvement to MMOGs and Campbell's theory of "the Hero's journey" which suggested that it was a powerful standard narrative motif found in the myths of many cultures from around the world.

Campbell (1988) suggested that modern society is myth deficient, or deprived, and that the mass popularity and success of films such as "*Star Wars*" could be explained by the powerful time-tested narrative structure's ability to tap into a Jungian collective unconscious (1959/1990) around a set of mythic narrative archetypes. Campbell's (1988) motto, "follow your bliss," prescribes that individuals strive to find their own personal "heroic journey" and perhaps MMOGs function as this personal heroic journey for some individuals, which could in part be a theoretical explanation for the deep involvement observed in both online games and tabletop RPGs (Corneliussen & Rettberg, 2008).

## **Flow, Involvement, and Serious Leisure**

The theories of Flow, leisure involvement and serious leisure each share a unique and individual relevance to this study of deep participant involvement in *The World of Warcraft*. However, I believe that it is in their synthesis, where they collectively spawn enduring qualities through the compounding of situational and episodic involvements, where the essence of deep MMOG participation may be captured. The following section will elaborate on each of these theories and their relevance to MMOG participation.

### *Flow*

Csikszentmihalyi's (1975, 1990) concept of flow is certainly the most popular and well known of the three constructs to students of leisure studies and, perhaps more generally as well. Flow is an optimal experience of deep psychological involvement, which is described as an optimal experience of deep psychological involvement that occurs when one's skills align with the level of challenge provided by the activity, or task. In order to remain in a state of Flow, the participant's skill must continue to increase proportionally as the level of difficulty of the activity is raised. In other words, the Flow state is dependent on the individual's ability to increase their acquired skills in harmony with the increasingly difficult challenges presented by the activity. If the required challenge is too low, the likely result is boredom and the individual falls out of Flow. Similarly, if the challenge is too great, anxiety results and the individual again falls out of the Flow state.

Csikszentmihalyi's (1975, 1990) research on this phenomenon revealed similarities across many contexts, including work and leisure, and across cultures He found flow

experiences reported by groups as diverse as surgeons, rock climbers, chess players, and my personal favorite, Japanese motorcycle gangs (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi 1988). Across these studies, eight attributes were determined as central to the flow experience (1990):

- (1) A task that could be completed
- (2) The ability to concentrate on the task
- (3) Clear goals
- (4) Immediate and clear feedback
- (5) A sense of control over actions
- (6) A deep but effortless involvement that removes awareness of the frustrations of everyday life
- (7) Loss of self-consciousness
- (8) An altered sense of the duration of time

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) made the claim that the activities he observed were “autotelic,” done purely for sake of enjoyment, with no obvious extrinsic reward. I began to question this claim in the sense that if flow is found within the work context, then perhaps individual reports may be confounded when multiple motivations are involved. And the similar situation of multiple motivations could also be found in MMOG participation. The centrality of autotelic experience to the flow theory needs further examination.

The relationship between Flow and MMOGs may explain to a degree how a series of “flow” episodes might collectively lead to deeper involvement, a quest for the re-experiencing of enjoyment. However it is not the whole story, and I agree with Taylor’s



(2006) statement that the flow channel is too narrow and “unforgiving to boredom” to fully explain the high levels of engagement in persistent online environments (p. 91). More precisely to Csikszentmihaly’s Flow construct, I would suggest that the first attribute of Flow “a task that could be completed” does not, and cannot, exist in MMOG type games because they lack both victory conditions and formal narrative conclusions. Both of these game mechanics are essential and define the MMOG genre. This is because these games consist of a never-ending series of tasks. This problem came to my attention when examining the “GameFlow” model developed by Sweetser and Wyeth (2005). Their model uses eight elements, based Csikszentmihalyi’s flow attributes, and is specifically tailored for game designers to build flow experiences into videogames. Strangely two are omitted, the first, a task that could be completed and the last, an altered sense of the duration of time. These are replaced with social interaction and challenge in their model, which both provide for a broader and more usable set of design constraints for creative game developers.

Regardless, the flow state is temporary, perhaps even only momentary, and difficult to sustain. The example of Michael Jordan playing an effortless and excellent basketball game creates misconceptions around the flow concept. It seems that one can move in and out of Flow within the course of a basketball game, but one could surely not maintain that state for the duration of a game. This movement in and out over the course of time may have the appearance of sustained flow, but in actuality it is a series of flow episodes. Also, I question how much the level of challenge could really increase during a single game? The goals are not moved higher as the game progresses.

### *Leisure Involvement*

As I expressed interest in MMOG “engagement” as a potential dissertation topic, it was suggested that I explore the term “involvement,” a conceptual term more frequently used in the field of leisure studies. In a conversation with Dr. Michael Orey, he suggested that the term “engagement” implied cognition, while involvement implied embodied characteristics. His distinction continues to resonate with me. However, for the purpose of this study I will use the term involvement as taken from the leisure studies lexicon.

Involvement as defined by, Mannell, Kleiber, and Walker (2011) is, “the extent to which people engage cognitively, emotionally and behaviorally with an activity, a product, a place, or destination, or a service” (p. 119). This concept is flexible, broad, and potentially captures and categorizes leisure experiences across at least two dimensions: duration and degree. Two types of involvement are identified, situational and enduring, and are organized around the following three concepts developed by Havitz & Mannell, (2005):

- 1) Centrality, the position that a particular involvement holds relative to the other factors of a person’s life.
- 2) Attraction, which address why a person gravitates to a particular activity.
- 3) Self-expression, which represents the connectedness of the activity to one’s ego or identity.

This review of the literature revealed that conceptually the involvement construct creates a “virtual” cornucopia for leisure investigators. It conceptually appears to be adaptable to every conceivable aspect of leisure, including games, videogames and MMOGs. Previous connections included investigations on motivation and arousal (Havitz & Dimache 1997; Kyle, et al, 2007), place attachment (Bricker & Kerstetter,

2000), socialization and personal relationships, (Kyle and Chick, 2004), identity formation and evaluation (Hoelter, 1983; Shamir, 1992), recreation specialization (Bricker & Kerstetter, 2000; Tsaour & Liang, 2008), and Flow, (Havitz & Mannell 2005). Perhaps even more important was what was not discovered in the involvement literature. There is an apparent gap with regard to technology, or specifically, video games and MMOGs.

This absence leads me to begin to connect this work to the involvement literature and particularly to the conception of “virtual” place attachments and may hold even closer ties to Oldenburg’s (1989) conceptualization of “third place” due to its emphasis on community building. Oldenburg’s notion of third place is distinguished from the first place, the home, and the second place, work. This third place is generally defined and described by a local connotation, such as a restaurant, bar, or café. So, I wonder if the globalized nature of these “virtual” spaces represents the need for yet an additional fourth place, communities lacking geographic connection, i.e. cyberspace? While place and other attachments can be described and or measured by degree, involvement can be distinguished in terms of its duration as in situational and enduring involvement.

Situational involvement can be used to describe contexts of flow experiences while enduring involvement is situated more closely with Stebbins’ notion of serious leisure, discussed more fully in the following section. Additionally, this conceptualization is equally as useful in describing work contexts, as it is for leisure interactions, potentially useful in clarifying distinctions between the work/effort necessary for developing videogame expertise and also the autotelic leisure of play. Virtually any video game

research connects to the construct of involvement, either situational or enduring, and also to the sub-concepts of attraction, centrality, and self-expression.

We could also ask questions which link participant responses to the involvement sub concepts, such as attraction. “How did you first discover *The World of Warcraft* and what keeps you coming back?” The involvement construct allows a researcher to ask the broadest of questions down to the most minute and specific. I see no limitation to the use of this construct, though perhaps that is its largest weakness, that it is too broad.

Like Flow, involvement is not limited to the domain of Leisure Studies; it may just as easily be applied to the inquiry of work domains as well. In contrast, Stebbins’ work holds a special place ... it is specific to leisure! Serious leisure, causal leisure, hobbies, amateurism, and to a lesser extent volunteerism, are all seemingly fixed within the context of leisure. I believe that its leisure-centric quality makes it the most distinctive and appealing aspect of the three constructs presented and for this reason the most applicable to frame my proposed study.

#### *Serious Leisure*

Stebbins (2007) defined serious leisure as “the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer core activity that people find so substantial, interesting and fulfilling that, in the typical case, they launch themselves on a (leisure) career centered on acquiring and expressing a combination of its special skills, knowledge and experience (p. 5). The key concept is that serious leisure engagements require the participant to spend a significant amount of time, attention, and effort, attributes all associated with “power gamers”.

The construct of Serious Leisure is credited to Robert Stebbins and specifically to his original work on amateurism (1979; 1992). More recently, he broadened his original model to include hobbyists and volunteers. The current model (2007) classifies serious leisure participation into at least one of the following categories: amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer and across these three classifications, Stebbins identified six characteristics of serious leisure engagement. They include:

- (1) Significant personal effort
- (2) Perseverance
- (3) An analogous “career” or profession to the activity
- (4) Strong identification with the activity
- (5) A “unique ethos” surrounding the activity
- (6) Long-lasting benefits (Stebbins, 2007 p. 11-13)

These long lasting benefits go beyond pure enjoyment, and are described by Stebbins (1992) as enhancing ones self-image, self-actualization, self enrichment, self-expression, renewal of self, a sense of accomplishment, and in a belongingness to a community sharing the similar interest. While writing *The Sirens’ Song*, I suggested that “Stebbins would likely regard most video gamers as hobbyists” (Holt & Kleiber, 2009, p. 229), due to the “analogous career” characteristic. However in a series of personal communications, Stebbins reminded me that video games are becoming professionalized, so the classification status may be either that of hobbyist or amateur (personal communication, Stebbins, 2009). Perhaps an expansion to our concept of career, which allows for “autotelic careers,” could be useful to describe the player’s work/effort

towards the development of an avatar within MMOGs. Either way, the career-like characteristics of commitment for “power gamers” are undeniable.

Juxtaposed to the concept of serious leisure is the concept of casual leisure. Casual leisure is defined by participation in activities which do not require the levels of commitment required for serious leisure involvement. For example, casual leisure includes activities like television viewing or reading for pleasure. Learning to play a musical instrument to any degree of proficiency requires a great deal of commitment, although it may never reach the characteristic requirements of serious leisure. Similarly, one may approach playing basketball as either casual or serious leisure, but the basketball based game “horse” would be difficult to place into the context of serious leisure. Videogames too, have many variants, and some of these are better suited for serious leisure engagements like MMOGs, while others generally hold a better fit with the casual leisure construct such as arcade or action games.

The strategy or MMORPG gamer is more likely to epitomize serious leisure than an action or arcade gamer because the game structures, to large extent, dictate the relationship, or level of commitment that the player can have with the game. In this sense, I would suggest that the structures, or nature, of any leisure activity might make it more or less conducive to becoming a serious leisure pursuit.

In terms of the MMOG-contextualized study being proposed, the most salient aspects of these constructs are the enduring qualities and the compounding of situational, episodic, involvements. I’m also interested in questions concerning one’s attraction to the game and how this is sustained over long periods. I think questions concerning the degree of centrality to a particular game in relation to other aspects of the player’s life context

would be fruitful in understanding commitment formation. Questions about place attachment and specifically, virtual place attachment or product attachment intrigue me. I'm less interested in the Flow concept, except in its relation to building and reinforcing lasting commitment. Serious leisure however, is so conceptually rich and its cost-versus-benefits approach ties to the self-expression aspects of enduring involvement in terms of both relationship formation and its loss. Overall the three primary constructs presented here complement each other nicely for framing an understanding of how and why deep involvement in MMOGs is formed and sustained.

### **Ethnographic Roots and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Variants**

With its theoretical roots in anthropology and sociology, the earliest ethnographic fieldwork occurred in remote and exotic locations (McGee & Warms 2000), such as with the classic work of Boas from the nineteenth century on Inuit migrations (Muller-Wille & Barr, 1998), Malinowski's *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922/1961) and *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928) by Margaret Mead. Modern ethnographic fieldwork often, in contrast, occurs in far less exotic locations such as in schools or coffee shops.

Hammersley & Atkinson (1995) reminded us that the social setting "however familiar to the researcher, must be treated as anthropologically strange; and the task is to document the culture- the perspectives and practices- of people in these settings. The aim is to 'get inside' the way each group of people sees the world" (p. 152). Ethnography requires that the researcher be immersed inside the social setting of the culture-sharing group in order to deploy the methods of data collection. Curiously, the fantasy settings of MMOGs

harkens back to the remote and exotic locations of the earliest ethnographic works, with the exception that getting to “remote computer mediated” locations may now be measured in milliseconds.

*Netnography, and other online Ethnography*

As we moved into the information age and the Internet became more accessible, more researchers became curious about the formation of online communities and cultures. Many different terms are currently tossed about to describe the ethnographic methods and products focused on online groups such as listserv communities (Kozinets, 2002, Wellman & Gulia, 1996), or message boards (Donath, 1998; Hine 2000; Rheingold, 1993). Names such as Virtual Ethnography (Crichton & Kinash, 2003; Hine, 2000), Netnography (Kozinets, 2002), and cyber ethnography (Ward, 1999) are used to describe this online variation to traditional ethnography. The primary difference between a virtual ethnography and non-virtual is that traditional ethnography is the physical positioning of the ethnographer in relation to the community of interest.

*Elfnography*

While netnography may serve to distinguish itself from ethnography in describing peculiarities of disembodied and technologically mediated fieldwork, it potentially may not go far enough. Further perplexities in this method of qualitative inquiry of synthetic worlds may have an impact on both, the research, and the researcher. I have chosen to refer to these peculiarities, as “Elfnography” and during my study I will pay close attention to the methodological considerations for:

1) Deep narrative immersion – the degree in which the player is placed into an unfolding story or mythos inside the virtual world.



2) Projected identity transformations – the projection of a player’s consciousness into the virtual world, and the level of attention focus into the virtual game space.

3) Multiplicity of identity – the various identities at stake including the player and their control and performance as one or more avatars within the virtual game space.

These three issues are unique to this type of fieldwork where the researcher is immersed into a synthetic persistent computer mediated world. The concept of “Elfnography” serves as additional sub-category of ethnography in order to articulate the nuance and peculiarities of virtual world ethnographic research.

The review of the literature revealed the need to more directly understand player experience in order to account for the deep investments of their time, attention and commitment with the game. Additionally, the literature reviewed raised more questions about the role that the online community plays in broadening, or limiting, participant involvement. The following chapter will describe the methods and procedures utilized in order to explore inquire into the player experience and the role community plays in relation to participant involvement in The World of Warcraft.

## CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

### **Methodology**

As discussed in the previous chapter, games research broadly, and MMOGs specifically, have been approached methodologically from both quantitative and qualitative paradigms. From the perspective of a pragmatist, however, the selection of methods must be matched as a best-fit approach to addressing the research questions at hand. This study initially asked the question, what are the factors that contribute to the continued involvement and deep commitment for participants of *The World of Warcraft*? This question was divided into two more manageable and pragmatic questions that explore 1) the personal experience of participation and 2) how the social aspects of the game impact the experience. These are question are expressed simply as:

- 1. What is the experience of Playing *WoW* on a regular basis?**
- 2. In what ways do “guilds,” impact participant involvement?**

Where prior studies have investigated who the players are in real life, I have intentionally bound my methods to stay within the metaphorical “magic circle” however, I too am curious about who these participants are in real life and how reality leaks into the ludisphere. This inquiry required an additional question concerning players’ real life disclosures occurring inside *The World of Warcraft* and is expressed as:

- 3. What do participants reveal about their “real lives” during play?**

The best methodological fit for this particular set of questions called for an ethnographic approach for several reasons. The first reason is simply the fact that,

collectively, these three questions are best addressed through active participant observation. For this sort of MMOG inquiry, Pearce (2009) suggested that this decision is in part, “more technical than philosophical” (p. 196). Pragmatically, the study of the inhabitants, social dynamics, and culture of synthetic worlds necessitates the researcher’s involvement and embodiment within the space via an avatar. This consideration aligns closely with Denzin’s (2003) description of *Performance Ethnography*, which requires considerable “immediacy and involvement” on the part of the researcher (p. 8). The field for this study inherently is a socio-technical play-space and knowing it requires the researcher to play along, thus joining the performance. This notion, however, of gaining deeper insight through immersion in lived practice remains historically as a core tenant of the ethnographic tradition (Van Maanen, 1988; Wolcott, 1999).

The second reason is that it stands as the best way to find the participants necessary for this study, from within their ludisphere, the *WoW* game-space. Finally, the design flexibility and improvisational nature of ethnography is best suited to inquiry in an exploratory study of this sort. An ethnographic approach to these three initial questions afforded me the opportunity to discover and pursue new directions as they emerged during the course of the study.

#### **Site Selection: Realm selection in *WoW***

*The World of Warcraft* was selected as the best MMOG context for this study for several reasons. First is simply the scope of the player base. Prior to the study, on November 21<sup>st</sup>, Blizzard Entertainment (2008) issued a press release claiming that *The World of Warcraft* subscription base had reached 11.5 million active players. It also currently holds the Guinness (2011) world record as the most popular massively

multiplayer role playing game (MMORPG). The second reason was the mounting evidence of deep player involvement and commitment in *The World of Warcraft* (Castronova, 2007; Taylor, 2006; Yee, 2006b; Nardi, 2010) and the need for additional scholarly inquiry into this pop-cultural phenomenon.

The computer-mediated transactions between the 12 million plus players are constrained down to thousands of players by means of realm selection. A realm is a game server and each realm is a complete copy of the entire game world. The exact number of players per realm is proprietary information and not released by Blizzard. Realms also allow for different types of play such as Player vs. Player (PVP), Player vs. Environment (PVE), and Role-playing (RP). The realm, *Dagger's End*, was chosen at random from a list of PVE servers also known as "normal" realms. [Note: The realm name, *Dagger's End*, is fictitious, as are all the following avatar names in an effort to protect the confidentiality of the participants of this study.]

All of the fieldwork for this study occurred within the *Dagger's End* realm. I participated in *Dagger's End* from the time my account was first created in January of 2009, when I began to learn the *WoW* basics, and continued through February of 2011 playing my first avatar, a female human mage (wizard), Ana. As the study progressed two additional avatars were created on the same realm in order to experience the game from multiple avatar-based perspectives and determine the "uniqueness" of my experiences as Ana.

Across the three avatars, 2712 hours, or 113 days, were spent in the field. This was calculated by typing the command "/played" in the game, which returned the total time spent logged on as a particular avatar. As Ana, 72 days, 14 hours, and 56 minutes

were spent in the field compared to a little over 25 days and 16 days, respectively, as the other two avatars. At first glance this may seem short by traditional ethnographic research standards, however, these times represent “active time” spent in the field as opposed to real time and equate to 67, 40-hour workweeks of total cultural immersion.

### **Participants: The Avatars and Guilds of *Dagger’s End***

The participants for this study were limited to the players existing in the *Dagger’s End* realm. While studies such as Nardi’s (2010) have observed the culture of *WoW*, there remains a considerable gap in the literature concerning the most involved and committed players, the “Raiders,” *WoW*’s term for a “power gamer” (Taylor, 2006). Raiders participate in activities, which only become available when an avatar reaches the maximum level, 80 at the time of this study. It is likely that this gap in the literature exists because many researchers lack the time required to reach the level-cap (Nardi, 2010). They may also lack the time necessary for extended observation and participation in the activities of raiders, the population of interest. This gap also calls into question some of the findings of *WoW* culture from these prior studies. An appropriate analogy to this situation would be an ethnographic study of elementary school culture which, for whatever reason, omits participant observation and discussion of fifth-graders. In an effort to fill this gap, it was necessary for me to level an avatar to level 80 in order to 1) gain entry into the community, and experience the endgame culture and activities and 2) the time and effort necessary to develop key informants and trusted relationships with members of raider culture.

### *Gaining entry to the field and community of interest*

In order to accomplish entry into the endgame culture it was necessary to progress Ana to level 80, acquire the necessary virtual equipment (“gear” in game speak) and become skilled enough to be invited to participate in the raids for the purpose of direct observation and interaction with their community. Ana, a female human mage, was invited into the Clockwork Gnomes guild in March of 2009 by a pair of players who initially served to inform me of the culture of the game as well as mentor me to be a productive and skillful player. The importance of their tutelage cannot be overstated. In order to gain entry into this ecology of play, it was necessary to be proficient in my role as mage, enchanter, tailor, and cook, (all of which will be described in detail in the following chapters). It was essential to this study that my avatar became needed and valued by the group and integral to the success of a raid team in order to sustain the ability to participate in raids and overall guild discourse concerning raids. In ethnographic terms, this equated to the issues of gaining access and of reciprocity (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995).

### *Disclosure and Key Informants*

Across my time in the Clockwork Gnomes and subsequent guilds, I disclosed the fact that I was investigating *WoW* culture as a researcher to some, but not all, of the potential informants I encountered. One of those who was informed was the guild leader, Icarus (IC), who raised my guild status to that of officer. This allowed me to observe and participate in a level of discourse--"officer chat"-- that is hidden to all non-officers and involved discussions of issues and concerns within the guild about guild members and

situations. In Goffmans' (1959) Dramaturgy perspective, which conceptualizes the field as a theatrical metaphor, my officer status equated to access into the "backstage" or behind the scenes aspects of guild life.

Another set of critical key informants were Kashi and Fierce. Kashi was promoted to co-leader during the course of this study. Her role was to plan, organize and lead the endgame raid activities. Over the months that followed, a critical issue emerged concerning the evolution of the Gnomes from a social guild to a raiding guild. For reasons unknown to me at the time, IC was resistant to this transformation. In December 2009, Kashi and a few others left the Gnomes and joined the raiding guild WarzRus and over a short time, a major exodus from the Gnomes occurred, leaving me unable to continue to investigate raid culture.

This left me with a very difficult decision to either stay in the Gnomes or to join WarzRus by invitation from Kashi. In February 2010, I left the Gnomes and joined WarzRus, believing that it was necessary in order to provide a holistic picture of the culture of raiders. I did not disclose my status as ethnographer to the WarzRus leaders, Sircat and Caprista, or any of the other guild members until I had gained IRB approval in May of 2010.

My move to WarzRus damaged my relationship with IC as a key informant, even though I disclosed my true reason for leaving the guild, this study, to him. The mass exodus of his most experienced players hurt him, and although at that time he seemed to understand my rationale for leaving, my relationship with him deteriorated.

It was during this period that I created several other avatars to verify my experience as Ana and placed them in the Gnomes. I did not log into these other toons

(called “Alts” in game-speak) as often as Ana, instead focusing my primary attentions on developing the necessary rapport within the ranks of WarzRus as a regular raider.

Eventually I was selected for raiding with a regular team who met and raided every Tuesday and Thursday from nine PM to midnight. The raid leader for this group, Jacob, became another key informant and was instrumental in deepening my understanding raiding culture, ritual, and practice.

#### *Confidentiality, Informed Consent and Ethics*

As I developed these new relationships, I intentionally refrained from learning the participants' real names, although some were disclosed during the study. My effort was to maintain the natural anonymity provided by the game via the participant avatars; and to gain participant consent provided via their avatars. Pearce (2009) explained a similar dilemma in her MMOG study with regard to obtaining informed consent. She suggested that gaining participant signature approval would cause two significant issues. First, in signing their real names, the subjects lose the privacy they currently hold while being represented only as an avatar, and secondly, requiring a signature would create a bureaucratic problem “making research with large distributed groups impossible” (Pearce, 2009, p. 200). She claimed that human subject approval boards are becoming more familiar with these online research issues and generally will accommodate informed consent approval via text chat, which was exactly what happened. An in-game script was constructed and after reading it, the selected participants would type “Yes,” giving their consent to participate in the study. Eight players were enlisted in this fashion.

Additionally, I created pseudonyms for all avatars, guilds, and realm names used in this study. Although by doing this, I lost some of the creativity demonstrated by



players in their often humorous and insightful names. However, this loss was offset by the importance of protecting their confidentiality and maintaining ethical research standards.

Beyond issues of consent and anonymity, Huberman and Miles (1994) also ask researchers to consider participant harm and risk. Could this study hurt participants? This is a difficult question considering the story above. IC was, to some extent, emotionally harmed by the players' exodus from his guild, but not directly as a consequence of my actions or this study. However, I remained mindful of issues concerning the participants' emotional investment across the duration of the study and also to concerns that I, in my role as researcher, may be perceived as an infiltrator within the participants' ludisphere.

In addition to an investment of time, players develop other in-game emotional attachments as well, such as with other players or to their guild. These attachments raised new ethical questions such as the potential for psychological harm as a result of my inquiry. For example, was there a potential for harm if I were to ask IC about the mass exodus from his guild? As a final consideration of ethics for this study and perhaps the most difficult to achieve, I envisioned and abided by a *Ludologist's Hippocratic Oath*, meaning that I would not disrupt the fun of any player while conducting this study. This was achieved by simply asking participants, "Is this a good time to talk?" or "Let me know when you have a few minutes to chat." I was often told by participant to "Give me a few minutes," or "Wait until I finish this quest" and the players would let me know when they were available for my inquiry.

### *Participant Compensation*

It is a common research practice to pay or provide some form of compensation for research subjects. I paid my subjects 10 gold pieces in the game's virtual currency. For players new to the game this sum would be quite substantial, but Raiders are the "virtually" affluent class in the game and my compensation became more of a laughable moment to my key informants than anything else. The paltry sum of 10 gold pieces held absolutely no real value to them. However, to the best of my knowledge, this compensatory act may represent the first time virtual compensation has been used to pay the participants of a research study!

### *The Tools*

Given the context of this study, it may be of value to future inquiry to include detailed description of the hardware and software utilized for this project. The primary hardware consisted of a Mac Book Pro running a 2.53 GHz processor with four gigabytes of RAM, a 250-gigabyte hard drive and 256 megabytes of RAM on an NVIDIA Geforce 9400m video card. The laptop was connected to a Samsung 27" LCD external monitor, which provided an optimal area for game screen display. The dual-display setup allowed for the game to be displayed on the external screen concurrently with the research and data capture applications on the Mac Book's built in monitor. Additional hardware included a Logitech Bluetooth mouse, an Apple USB external keyboard, and a Logitech USB headset with a built-in microphone. A weekly data backup was performed on an external USB Fujitsu 500-gigabyte hard drive using Apple's "Time Machine" backup and recovery software.

The laptop was running operating system OSX 10.5. The suite of software applications consisted of the *WoW* application plus the two game expansions, *The Burning Crusade*, and *The Wrath of the Lich King*, and all necessary game patches and updates as they were released by Blizzard. The *WoW* application includes a built in screen capture feature which I used to collect image files throughout the study.

*Firefox* was used as the primary web browser for frequent viewing of guild websites, online game reference resources, like blogs and wikis. A free voice-over-IP (VOIP) application, *Ventrillo* (called “Vent” by the player) was used during raid sessions for communications between team members of detailed and just-in-time instructions. The VOIP audio stream and the in-game music and sound effects were captured using *Wire-Tap*, a shareware application that reliably saved the audio files as time-stamped MP3 files. The small post-it like application, *Stickies*, was used for taking field notes during game sessions.

Another domain of the software necessary for this study was *WoW* add-ons. These are small applications installed into the larger *WoW* application. They alter the display or automate game tasks and are a critical aspect of the culture of the game. Add-ons are designed by third-party developers, generally free, and distributed by means of a software manager client; in my case I used the *Curse* client available freely from [Curse.com](http://Curse.com).

Although I experimented with numerous add-ons, the primary set used for this study included: 1) *Deadly Boss Mods* (DBM) that provided a player with a visual cue of incoming boss spells and powers and provided a means for increasing the survivability of these most difficult raid encounters, 2) *Quest Helper*, which shows the player where they needed to go to complete their quests on the in-game map. 3) *Recount* designed to display

statistical information on how much damage or healing each player in a raid group is doing during an encounter, and 4) *Auctionator* was used to display the values of items acquired. The majority of players with whom I interacted commonly used this set of add-ons.

One of the biggest challenges for the study was capturing the in-game chat, which curiously, is not easily accessible inside the game. An early solution was to use a chat command “/chatlog,” which toggled on or off the logging of a complete chat log file into the game’s application folder and then saved it as a “.txt” file. This method unfortunately collected too many chat channels and made it extremely difficult to view the flow of discourse hidden inside a sea of other game messages. Using it to read dialog was like trying to drink from a fire-hose.

Eventually I discovered an add-on called *Elephant*. It was designed to sort chat by channel, such as Raid, Guild, Whisper, and Party, into time-stamped categories. *Elephant* also allowed for copying and pasting the captured chat into other applications. It could save up to 1000 lines of chat from each category and then I would paste them into Microsoft Word. The end result was the creation of full text time-stamped transcriptions of player discourse sorted by the type of chat into a standard “.docx” file format. As Blizzard released new patches to the game, most of these add-ons would need to be updated by their respective developers in order to function properly. On these occasions, I was filled with a sense of dread that *Elephant* might cease to function and my ability to collect the sorted and time-stamped chat data could come to an abrupt halt.

## Data Collection

The fieldwork of observing and participating with players in this study began the moment I first logged in and clumsily accepted my first quest in January of 2009. However, at that point I was far too overwhelmed by the interface (and concerned with issues such as avoiding walking into walls) to be in any way rigorous in collecting data. I refer to this stage of the study as “getting started” the journey from “noob” (new to the game) to novice and it is described in the first section of Chapter IV.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, in order to compensate for the lack of data collected during this period of the study, I relied on my initial experiences beginning the game and also developed two additional avatars, Hammy and Minx. Additionally, I relied on the recollections of starting the game from key informant’s perspectives and allowed them to member-check my descriptions of these earliest stages of participation. However Ana, my surrogate researcher, served as the primary vehicle for data collection, across the duration of the study.

The primary method of data collection for this study comes from Ana’s fieldwork (as I sat in my chair) creating the important distinction between “in-game” and “in-chair.” I never met with any of the participants outside of the game during the course of this study. All data was collected within the ludisphere of *WoW*, meaning that the tools and techniques used were also available and commonly used by the *WoW* community. My intent was not only to constrain the study inside the game, but also to protect the confidentiality and privacy of the participants, while operating as an authentic member of the community. This did not, however, limit me solely to the *WoW* application, but rather to the collection of applications required for functioning as a competent Raider.

Rigorous data collection began following the approval of the prospectus and the human-subjects board. Systematic data collection began in June of 2010 and continued through November of 2010, although due to some early experimentation with the “/chatlog” feature, nearly a thousand pages of chat data were retrieved from the earliest stages of the study spanning the period of April through December of 2009. I attempted to rebuild the minor temporal gaps in the data thorough interviews with key informants recalling past experiences, generally focusing on specific critical events as the narrative was reconstructed.

During the heaviest collection period, data was captured between two and four times per week, and sometimes more. Sessions typically lasted from three to five hours. The collection times were varied early in the study, but became focused around the participant’s patterns of heaviest play as I entered the culture of raiders. For example, Tuesday at 9:00 pm was a standard scheduled raid, and the hour leading up to it was a prime opportunity as the players came and were most actively chatting.

Other collection periods occurred during less structured times which allowed me to capture a wide variety of player activity and discourse. The following section lists the ethnographic protocols for data collection I deployed during the study including, field notes, naturalistic and event-situated interviews, artifacts such as audio captures from raid sessions and screen image captures.

*Field Notes: Session Stickies*

During each play session I used the digital post-it application, “*Stickies*,” to keep field notes of events, observations, and methodological concerns. These notes taken during play were instrumental in creating a comprehensive timeline of the events

encountered during the data collection period. They were also used to remind me of issues that I would discuss with key informants during scheduled and unscheduled interview sessions. Approximately 50 pages of field notes were produced across the duration of the study.

### *Chat Log Transcripts*

The task of extracting chat data from *Elephant* and pasting it into word was cumbersome and clunky. The sorted log could not be copied all at once and required between 20 and 30 manual copy paste operations for each of chat categories. Some of these, like the personal whisper chat, posed little difficulty, while the raid data was often full of embedded add-on data and required the most time to copy into word. Early in the study I made the mistake of attempting to clear out the log prior to a raid session and found myself in a race against the clock to finish the operation in time. After the chat log files were copied into a word document, the file was saved and carefully named by avatar and date on which the data the chat was extracted, i.e. ana\_09\_17\_11.docx. These were kept in a “chat\_data” folder easily sorted by name or date. During the course of the study, a total of 1691 single spaced pages of chat data were collected from *Elephant*. Additionally, 976 pages were recovered from the initial experimentation with the “/chat” command. While most of the data was the natural discourse of the community, some Whisper chat (private one to one chat) was derived from ethnographic interviews.

Ethnographic interviews were short informal interviews that generally addressed only immediate and situational issues. In hopes of eliciting truthful responses, these interviews were naturalistically *in situ* with current in-game issues and conversational in nature. Interviewees were selected with intent to uncover specific information about the

game or to gain insight from a cross-section of members from both inside and outside the key informant base. Most of these informal interviews only lasted a few minutes but the conversations stretched across days and weeks.

To a lesser degree, semi-structured interviews were occasionally requested and scheduled with players. Semi-structured interviews afforded a more focused approach to gather information and were used to member check my interpretations, and inform them concurrently across the study. As the study progressed and themes emerged, deeper and more focused questions were necessary. For example, these types of questions involved player histories, reasons for involvement, and perceptions of social dynamics within the guild, or raid group. Perhaps due to the nature of the game as a leisure activity, the more naturalistic ethnographic interviews yielded better results than the structured variant. Interviewing someone playing *WoW* can be like attempting to interview someone crossing a busy street; their attention is simply not focused on the questions being asked and thus, I often waited for players to finish quests and raids to ask questions. Over time, I became more adept at finding appropriate interview times as I grew familiar with the patterns of participant play.

#### *Screen Image Capture*

Over the course of the study, 348 screen-capture image files were created. However, much like the attention issues with structured interviews, these generally were taken during moments of rest and lacked in representing the intense action of the game. Imagine being the photographer for a basketball game and simultaneously as a player. As the study progressed and I became more competent in my role as mage and my responsibilities in the raids grew, I was able to take more action-oriented photographs.



These time-stamped files were kept in an “image” folder and used to inform the analysis of Ana’s development and progression through the raids.

### *Audio Capture*

During a raid, quest groups of 10 or 25 players must coordinate a complex set of maneuvers synchronously. Typing in chat is too slow and cumbersome so audio chat is used to choreograph this group activity. The complexity of these raid encounters necessitates the use of an application with VOIP capabilities. For this purpose, players used the application *Ventrillo*, which they call “Vent.” Capturing *Ventrillo*’s digital audio stream was essential to collecting the spoken raid discourse. However, the record feature on the Mac versions of *Ventrillo* was not enabled. The external application *Wire Tap* successfully recorded the *Ventrillo* audio stream and saved time-stamped files in a standard MP3 format. 98 hours of digital audio was captured across all the raid sessions during the course of the study.

### **Data Transformation, Analysis and Writing**

The raw data consisted of a massive text log of over 1600 pages of chat, 348 images, 98 hours of digital audio and over 50 pages of field notes. The data needed to be transformed into manageable and meaningful chunks for analysis. In *Transforming Qualitative Data*, Wolcott (1994), described that the most common difficulty with qualitative research is not collecting enough data, but rather how the data is transformed into a purposeful product of research. Towards that effort, all 1691 pages of the text data was sorted into separate files by the primary chat categories of Whisper, Guild, Party, Raid, and Officer, each in chronological order. Each complete chat document was then printed and bound (my preferred format for reading) and also maintained in a digital

format for ease of search and retrieval for specific words or dates. The image files were categorized by avatar, location, and date and then sorted into photo albums using Apple's *iPhoto* application.

The field notes were used to develop a timeline of the major events and turning points of my time in the field. Next, each text log was read, beginning with the whisper log, which contained all the interviews and personal discussions. Major events and issues were added to the timeline. This was followed by working thorough the guild log, revealing details of the social aspects of guild life. Proceeding this way through all the logs fleshed out the timeline and created the events, turning points, and themes. While working with the raid data, I would play the audio file and read the chat at the same time, recreating the synchronous experience. As the timeline continued to develop, I would search *iPhoto* for any images that were captured at that time. The timeline was then used as reference that I could use to go find all the data collected from specific points in time because all of my collected data was precisely time-stamped at its point of creation.

Wolcott (1994) suggested a strategy of description, analysis, and interpretation known as D-A-I. In the description phase, the researcher relies on the data to speak directly by using the authentic participant responses and quotes. In constructing my narratives I used the timeline to pinpoint an event and then located all the relevant the discourse surrounding that event..

During the analysis phase, I sifted and sorted the data-set thematically, allowing for salient issues to emerge in a naturalistic discovery process as my timeline was developing. This became an iterative process as I requested the key informants to have a voice in developing these themes, thus creating a contextualized and embedded form of

member check within the game space of my interpretations of the data. Doing this allowed for both member checking and the discovery of researcher omissions. I was surprised how willing they were to participate as some had invested considerable time with helping me (on my quest). No omissions however, were ever suggested and I'm sure there were some. Perhaps the participants were not fully comfortable telling me something they perceived I would not want to hear, although I had asked to do so.

Specifically, I asked the key informants to assist in the identification of the aspects leading to deep involvement in the game and found that both the ethnographic and semi-structured interviews were well suited for this type of initial analysis. I asked them this again after the narratives were constructed and they gave consistent responses and again, reported no overt omissions from the narratives. I approached this thematic refinement process with an overall sense of patience and persistence, allowing themes to emerge collectively between participants and researcher. Finally, when the themes were selected and reasonably solidified, deeper interpretation was possible through reasonable speculation based on the data description, analysis, and member checking.

I must mention that the most helpful resource for the process of analysis and interpretation at the end of my study was Richardson's (1994) *Writing: A Method of Inquiry*. She described two essential and guiding concepts. First, as the title of her work implies, that writing in itself may be used as a form analytical of inquiry. And second, her description of crystallization, described as an interpretive process, provides a framework for analyzing data from various angles and subjectivities. In the case of this study, the development of the timeline served as the initial guiding analysis followed by the

construction of three narratives representing the major turning points, or developmental stages, of the participant experience, in essence the journey from noob to raider.

I must also recognize the contribution Pearce's (2009) *Communities of Play*, and Nardi's (2010) *My Life as a Night Elf Priest* which both served as exemplars for the design and presentation of this study. Wolcott (1994) suggested that new researchers benefit from spending additional time looking at what others have done instead of what they say one should do. In taking that suggestion, Pearce's and Nardi's respective studies served to guide as well as inspire. Both studies provided me with a similar context to my study and rich methodological description of what they did.

On writing, Wolcott (1994) stated that qualitative researchers must be storytellers. And I believe that a "good" ethnographic product must contain "thick description" (Geertz, 1973). Also, it must also tell a story which entices the reader to continue. If that goal is not met, then the work serves little purpose.

A solid ethnographic product paints a cultural portrait from the emic and etic (Creswell, 2007), but I would take this further and suggest that the "portrait", or its derivatives, should be both, appreciated, and consumable, by both the emic (gamers) and the etic (non-gamers), a quality I observed and admire in the writings of bell hooks. I personally experienced the power of this effect during a writing retreat in 2009 at the Georgia state park, Unicoi, following an reading of my writing which revealed how my fiancé and I maintain, and nurture, our physically-distanced relationship through shared play in *The World of Warcraft*. I have repackaged that tale in the following narratives and delve deeper into its power and meaning.

Both Pearce's (2009) and Nardi's (2010) study's used Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical approach in their writing. Following their tradition, I too approached the writing task by describing and conceiving of "avatars as actors," on the conceptual "stage" in *The World of Warcraft*. As natural metaphor it worked exceedingly well within the context of virtual world ethnographic research. Further thought lead me to refine the metaphor considering the avatars more as puppets and their players the puppeteers in a massively multi-puppet virtual puppet show. The metaphorical backstage, however, remains the same as in their respective studies, in-chair, where the physical body resides.

Lastly Joseph Campbell's (1949) concepts of archetypal elements of the hero's journey and hero's quest were so strongly represented in the game's design and my experience as player, that they must be given voice. The developers at Blizzard are metaphorically, the meddling gods of this world, and must be represented in any just description of *The World of Warcraft*. The final product of this ethnographic study is the heroic odyssey of Ana the mage and her adventures discovering the people, and their customs, across the lands of Azeroth; an odyssey unfortunately, but appropriately, interrupted occasionally by me in my chair. Together, the realities of virtual and physical blend to form the essence of the studies central question what it means to participate in *The World of Warcraft* on a regular basis.

## CHAPTER IV: ANA'S ODYSSEY

### **Part One: Getting Started**

These stories are simultaneously true and untrue. They are the essences of a mythic journey in *The World of Warcraft* from level one to level 80 and the story of transformation into the deep involvement of a culture of raiders. Some of what you will read may, at first, appear to stray from the study's central focus, deep involvement in the game, but I implore the reader to bear with me. It is the author's opinion that these seemingly irrelevant intersections between in-game and in-chair are indeed relevant, and they may begin to reveal how an activity develops into an integral aspect of one's "real" life and identity. Representing the developmental phases of player experience, this chapter is divided into three sections: getting started, the social world, and finally the culture of raiding. I believe that these stories reflect unique experiences, but aspects of this narrative hold true to the experiences shared by Azeroth's 12 million inhabitants.

Admittedly a large degree of happenstance and serendipity played a role in how this saga unfolded, but isn't that the point? Virtual worlds and fantasy settings are merely distorted reflections of the physical world, designed and inhabited by real people. The stories reveal how the virtual world is perhaps more real than we tend to want to believe. I do not expect the reader to enjoy this journey as much as I did, but I do hope that something may be found here to inspire thought, much needed additional scholarship, and, in parts, to inspire a smile, or better still a hardy laugh. I wholeheartedly embrace these spaces where absurdity is not only possible, but welcomed.

*Love and Installations (Level 0)*

Christmas of 2008 was only a few days past and I could smell the lingering aroma of some amazing Pad Thai wafting through the house that my fiancé, Apisata, and I had cooked for dinner on that crisp winter night. She had been attempting to teach me to cook Thai food, and although I had thoroughly enjoyed every minute of its preparation, mostly enjoyed the warmth of her company. We had just become engaged on Christmas day. And although we both knew that in a few short months she would be returning home to Thailand, we rarely mentioned that fact out loud. There was an unspoken sense of *carpe diem* in the air, mingling with the aromas of Pad Thai.

We were at that moment, and currently, hopelessly in love. The things that most of us take for granted, we didn't. We so greatly appreciated and maximized the limited time we had to occupy the same physical space together. However, she was, and is, a Thai scholar who I had met while she studied abroad here at the University of Georgia, so much of this maximized time was simply used working next to each other. She worked constantly, so after that wonderful Pad Thai dinner, she sat down at her laptop and typed away at the last remaining chapters of her dissertation. As usual, I sat next to her, in front of my own machine. While she worked, I was installing a game, a big game, requiring five discs to be loaded one after another. After about an hour, I inserted the fifth and final disc required to play *The World of Warcraft*. I was unaware at the time that this would become the subject of the dissertation and perhaps, more significantly, the role that it would play in my ridiculously long-distance relationship. While reality would soon come to force us to endure communicating across a vast distance, curiously it was the

installation of this virtual reality which would provide us an unusual and unexpected means to closeness through a shared day-to-day experience; a fact that wouldn't emerge for several more months.

As that final disc auto-ejected, I was eager to enter the fantasy world of Azeroth, the virtual world of this massively popular multiplayer online game. As I excitedly launched the application, my hopes were temporarily dashed by the on-screen message "downloading updates." The famous holiday classic *A Christmas Story* played fully through twice on TBS while I impatiently waited. Three hours later, it was finally done and time to login.

#### *Accounts and Setup (Level 0)*

After a four-hour installation I was thinking, "This better be good, really good." Blizzard, the producers of the game didn't disappoint; it was! The logon screen was typical- a username and password required, and I didn't have one yet. I was directed to their website via a "manage account" button on the bottom right corner of the application's logon screen. Clicking it launched my browser, Firefox, and took me to the account setup page. I created an account name, "nicholt" and a password, which will not be revealed for obvious reasons. Next, the exceptionally long serial number was entered from the provided materials inside the box of installation discs and voila! I was finally ready to create my first character. Launching the *WoW* application, I logged in with my username and password. After a brief loading screen, I arrived at the 'Realm Selection' screen. This screen had four columns: realm name, realm type, number of characters, and population size. Beneath these columns are three geographic tabs: United States, Oceanic, and Latin America.



A realm, technically, is a server that hosts a copy of entire virtual world and the characters, which inhabit it. This schema allows the millions of players to be distributed by their real geographic location into smaller groups of approximately 5000 players per server (although the exact number is proprietary information known only by Blizzard) across a number of servers in order to support the online game's technical performance and optimize the players' experience. A player is permitted to have up to 10 characters per realm and up to 50 across multiple realms. Realm type determines the type of play allowed. There are three types: Player vs. Player (PVP), Player vs. Environment (PVE), and Role-playing (RP). PVP allows players to fight with other players of the opposing faction, either Alliance or Horde at any time throughout the world. PVE realms limit players combat to specific areas in the world and RP servers are for players who prefer to be more deeply involved in the performative aspects of the fantasy environment; they "play" their characters.

The impact of this realm decision cannot be overstated. My experiences described in all of the following pages would certainly have been vastly different based on this single click of the mouse. In order to maintain the confidentiality of my participants I will not divulge the true name of the realm I selected, nor the players I interacted with, however I will discuss the rationale for my realm decision. I selected a PVE server in the United States with a low population (which developed into a medium sized realm as my study progressed). I selected PVE thinking that it was the most inclusive decision, in the sense that it could allow for some role-playing and some PVP situations, while dedicated

solely to neither. The realms are all named after a geographic location in the virtual world. I clicked on the realm named “*Dagger’s End*” and was taken to the character creation screen.

Back in the early 80s, I spent many hours playing *Dungeons and Dragons* with friends and was familiar with making characters, and *Warcraft* was very similar in its conventions. The most important aspect is the realization that you will “be” this character for a very long time, so it’s critical to choose something that sustains one’s interest. Additionally, in the video game genre I realized that I would see my avatar every time I played so the character’s appearance was also important.

On the left side of the screen were two columns of possible races, one blue for the alliance and one red for the horde. The alliance choices for race were: Human, Dwarf, Night Elf, and Gnome. The horde choices were: Orc, Undead, Tauren, and Troll. Clicking on any one of the eight choices caused descriptions of those races’ special abilities to appear in the upper right side of the screen. For example, humans received a bonus to the ‘Spirit’ attribute, bonuses to reputation gains with the various factions in the game, increased expertise with swords and maces, and they could escape from speed altering and trapping effects. Beneath race selection was gender selection, male or female. There were not any differences to abilities or attributes for selected one over the other aside from aesthetic appearance. Males and females are truly equal in every way inside the meritocracy of the *World of Warcraft*.

Beneath the gender selection was the choices of class. As with race, the term class means something quite different here than from the current academic vernacular of socioeconomic status. Here class is more akin to vocation with the following player

choices: Warrior, Paladin, Hunter, Rogue, Priest, Mage, Shaman, Druid, and Warlock. The selection of class is constrained by race, for example a human cannot be a Shaman, and a Gnome cannot be a paladin. The class choice also determines the types of weapons, armor, spells, and abilities the character will be able to utilize and are displayed in the bottom right corner of the character creation screen as different types are selected. Additionally, players may customize their character selection skin color, facial appearance, and three other cosmetic choices that varied by the racial choice, such as hairstyle and color in the case of humans or horn style and color for the Minotaur-esque, Tauren race. As I explored different combinations of possibilities, a picture of my character would change corresponding with my varying selections in the center of the screen. I needed to commit to something now, with the awareness that other characters could be generated later allowing me to explore the game from numerous character perspectives over time.

I decided that I should start out in the game as Alliance, thinking that it was more my style. This was primarily because I didn't want to identify as a monster and secondly because the Alliance race choices simply seemed a lot more familiar to me. As for race, I really liked the Night Elves (secretly, I always wanted to be one) and I kind of had my heart set on being a Night Elf mage from the moment I first purchased the game at Best-Buy. I remember a moment of disappointed shock when I first realized that I could not be a mage and an elf. My heart sank to my stomach. And sadly, I just did not particularly gravitate to any of the Night Elf class choices, so I selected a human character, in

essence, by default in order to be a mage. The decision was internally justified by the thought that it might be a little easier to find my feet as a human since I am one and was new to the game.

Leaning back to those good old *Dungeons & Dragons* days, I had always enjoyed being a mage, casting spells and blasting enemies from a range. Mages were weak and could die easily since they only wore cloth armor but at high levels they did amazing damage; for this reason they are considered “glass cannons” in the game and in fantasy literature more generally.

I knew that I would enjoy the project of developing into a powerful mage and then I realized something strange. Was purchasing this game in some sense a vehicle to transport me back to my youth, back to those wonderful carefree summers of *D&D* my early teens? Was that what I was attempting to recreate? So I committed myself to becoming [or rather playing the role of] a human mage, but which gender? I looked at the male and tweaked the aesthetics and it wasn't appealing. So, I switched to Warlock, which differed from the mage in that they summon a familiar, a demonic pet of sorts who helps them. I really didn't want to deal with the complication of controlling two avatars, so I went back to mage and selected female. This was much better. She was sexy, and I gave her glorious straight shoulder length auburn hair. Yes, I can live with this, I thought. There was one more step before I could begin; I needed to give her a name. What would I call her? I tried a few but found they were already taken and so unavailable to me. Finally, and fictitiously, I settled on the name Ana.

I was done and ready to begin. Filled with anticipation and excitement for the countless adventures that were now single click away, Ana's life, my new alternative life was about to begin. <ENTER WORLD>. Click.

*Insert Consciousness (Level 1)*

Fade from black: The cinematic trailer opens with the rosy glow of a setting sun, the camera flies us into the world of Azeroth providing a bird's eye vantage above the Alliance capital city, Stormwind, a glorious city protected by its massive white stonewalls. The camera sweeps through Stormwind and proceeds across the lush landscape of Elwynn Forest eventually coming to rest in the nearby courtyard of Northshire Abbey. All the while, a deep male voice narrates the events, which lead to the current conflict between the Alliance and the Horde. Now, I am called to action to help defend the Alliance in its ongoing struggle against the Orc-led Horde.

As this cinematic opening comes to a close, I find myself standing on a grassy knoll just outside the Abbey where Deputy Willem, dressed in the military regalia of Stormwind, awaits my arrival signified by a large exclamation mark above his head. Another player does not control Willem; he is an A.I., an artificial intelligence designed to give quests. Game-controlled characters or Non-playing characters, (NPCs) are placed through the game world in multiple roles such as vendors, trainers and quest givers. I move towards Willem, click, and a text box appears on my screen. He offers me my first quest. Simply, he wants me to speak with Marshal McBride, the military leader of the Stormwind army. Behind Willem I can see the arched stone entrance leading into the abbey and McBride just inside, awaiting my arrival. Looking around, to Willem's left I

see several young player-controlled heroes interacting with a group of merchants standing in front of their red-canvassed caravan at the forest's edge. They appear to be buying and selling wares from the merchants.

I head towards the abbey and up to McBride, who also has a large question mark above his head, signifying my completion of Willem's task. Clicking on McBride, another text box appears. He explains that a clan of Kobalds, small dirty, goblin-esque creatures had set up a camp nearby and needed to be investigated, and eventually eliminated. Additionally, he explains that something was making wolves around the abbey sick and I should speak with Eagan Peltskinner for more details. Accepting both of his quests, I decide to deal with the wolf situation first. I leave McBride, and head off to speak with Eagan who was standing just outside the abbey's walls in hopes of obtaining additional information about the wolves.

After finding Eagan, he requested that I, a young mage, reduce the population of diseased wolves around the abbey in order to prevent the potential of an epidemic spreading into the surrounding valley and to bring back their pelts as proof of my deed. Looking around, I spotted a few sickly wolves roaming about near the edge of the forest and a small contingent of young heroes, presumably working on the same task. I moved in on the wolves and began the grizzly task of dispatching them. Curiously, I noticed that one of the heroes fighting the wolves looked exactly like me and assumed that he or she must also be a new mage like me. I proceeded to clumsily attack and kill the sickly wolves as requested. From my chair in the real world, I am disoriented. There are so many buttons and objects on the screen and I'm not sure what they mean or what they do. Cognitive overload.

Quickly, and by necessity, I learned that as a mage Ana could hurl fiery bolts at the wolves. Or she could bash them with her staff, although the latter method took considerably longer to take down even a sickly wolf. Additionally, she could conjure mystic frost armor, which offered significantly greater protection from the wolves' attacks. Dispensing of the diseased wolves left their carcasses lying all about the forest's floor. By moving the mouse over a dead wolf, the cursor changes from the usual pointer to a small brown sack, indicating that I can loot the bodies by clicking it. As I collected the requested pelts off the dead, I noticed that the wolves offered more than merely pelts. Some wolves apparently had money, a few copper pieces, and occasionally armor or weapons. Truthfully, I still have no idea why sick wolves would be in possession of such things. Over time, I learned that some of these items could be equipped, like a robe or a dagger, but other items could not, such as a two-handed sword or a leather helmet. A character's class determined the types of items that could be equipped; in my case only items that a mage can use could be equipped. After collecting the pelts I headed back to Eagan. Again, I saw that the little exclamation mark he had as a quest-giver had transformed to a question mark, signifying the quest's completion.

At my return, Eagan was pleased to receive the pelts and offered me a choice of rewards: a pair of soft fur-lined shoes, or a pair of leather wristbands, which he called bracers. Having learned that mages could not wear leather items, I took the shoes and equipped them, increasing my armor score by a few points. Additionally, Ana received 170 experience points and my reputation with Stormwind increased by 250, although I had no idea what that meant exactly. A prominent "ding" sounded from my speakers

signifying that Ana had reached the second level and the chat window displayed a list of improvements to my character as she progressed: an additional 2 points of strength, intellect, stamina and spirit.

*Making friends with the resident avatars (Level 2)*

While taking care of the wolf issue, Ana found the encampment of Kobolds that McBride wanted her to take care of so she headed in their direction. Upon reaching the camp, she could see that some other heroes were working on the same quest. A new message caught my eye inside the chat window located in the lower left corner of the screen. This chat was pink text making it stand out from the standard white text I was used to. Someone was speaking to me, but I did not know how to communicate back to her.

<Kara Whispers> Hey Ana, are you on the Kobold quest line?

I type “Hi and Yes” in the chat box and press return

<Ana Says> Hi, and yes, but I’m new to the game and don’t know what is going on. Why is your chat pink?

My chat was white

<Kara Whispers> Oh, welcome to *WoW*! Hit ‘R’ to reply or click on me and select whisper to send me a private message. Do you want to join with me to finish these quests faster? I remember how confused I was when I first started. lol

I type ‘R’ and whisper to Kara, now pink, appears in my chat window

<Ana Whispers> thanx, and yes

A box appears in the middle of the screen “Join group” with two buttons “yes” or “no.” Selecting yes, a portrait of Kara appears below my portrait in the upper left corner of the screen; we are grouped. Kara and Ana proceed to kill the Kobolds, chat and eventually return to McBride. Ding, level three! McBride gives us another Kobold quest



that is a little further from the abbey and also a letter that instructs Ana to report to Khelden Bremen, the mage trainer. Kara receives a different letter sending her off to meet with the warrior trainer.

<Kara Whispers> meet me back here after you visit your trainer.

I find the mage trainer, Bremen, inside the abbey and show him the letter. He explains that I must visit him as I progress and he will teach me new spells. I click to train with him and learn the new spell, Arcane Missiles. Back outside Kara is waiting near the merchants' covered wagons. I speak with one of the venders there and look at what they sell.

<Kara Whispers> Sell stuff you don't need from your backpack so you have room to get new stuff.

<Ana Whispers> ok

After opening my backpack, I understood what Kara meant. My backpack had 16 slots in a 4x4 grid and all but two were filled with the loot I had collected from wolves and Kobolds. I sold the junk from my bag to the vender and followed Kara to a cave where we killed many more Kobolds before returning to McBride. We continued to quest together around the abbey until McBride told us to report to Marshal Dughan in Goldshire, the nearby town in Elwynn Forest south of the abbey.

#### *Achievements, Hearthstones, and Professions (Level 7)*

We left the abbey and headed south down a long cobblestone path until we reached the town of Goldshire. Upon arriving, I was startled to see many players battling with each other around blue banners planted in the ground and I asked Kara what was going on. She told me that they were dueling, which was just for fun and a way for them to practice PVP (player versus player) skills. PVP was enabled in designated locations on

a PVE realm. She challenged me to a duel and defeated me quickly. Then we did it again and I won. I'm certain that she let me win, and I received my first achievement, "Duelicious!" I asked her about achievements and she told me they were just for fun and that they didn't help my toon in any real way; "toon," is *WoW*-speak for a character or avatar abbreviated from the word cartoon. Much later, I discovered that one way players could judge the worth, or experience, of another player was by inspecting their earned achievements.

There were many quests in Goldshire and Kara and I accepted them all. There was an inn as well as a blacksmith shop and several vendors outside. We were both level seven now and she wanted to show me around Goldshire before we continued with the Elwynn Forest quests. We entered the Lion's Pride Inn, which was surprisingly large and consisted of two floors and a basement.

<Kara Whispers> Click on the innkeeper to set your hearth to this inn.

<Ana Whispers> Huh?

<Kara Whispers> Find the hearth stone in your backpack. You can use that stone to teleport back to an inn. Use it to jump back to towns after you finish quests and it saves you time instead of running all the way back to turn in the quests. It has a cool down (CD) of 30 minutes, meaning you can only use it once every 30 minutes. You set it to an inn by talking to innkeepers located in any of towns or cities. See the hearth symbol on Innkeeper Farley. Click on him.

<Ana Whispers> OK

I spoke with innkeeper Farley and made the Lion's Pride Inn my new home and in doing so, he briefly engulfed me in sparkly magic aura, alerting me to the fact my hearthstone was now set to the Lion's Pride Inn and I could return whenever it was used.

We explored the other rooms inside the inn next. There was a lobby with a fireplace and people were dancing on top of a table nearby. There was a kitchen with an eerily empty basement. The inn also has a few guest rooms upstairs, some of which were occupied by vendors. We went outside, crossed the street and entered the blacksmith shop. I noticed that I could train to be a blacksmith in this location. Kara asked me if I had selected my two primary professions yet. I told her that I had not and asked her what my choices were and if she had suggestions.

<Kara Whispers> U can only pick two and some of them work in pairs, one for gathering and one for creating. You should Google *WoW* professions in order to find the list and descriptions. Next find a leveling guide for leveling the ones you choose faster.

I understood “Use Google.” Switching between applications, my search revealed many ‘*WoW* professions’ related sites complete with lists, descriptions and leveling guides. My choices according to *WoW*wiki.com were the following: Mining & Blacksmithing, Herbalism & Alchemy, Skinning & Leatherworking, Enchanting, Tailoring, and Engineering. There was also Jewel Crafting or Inscription if I had *The Burning Crusade* installed, a content expansion to the game that I did not have. Next, I typed in “*WoW* mages,” and again I was amazed by the amount of information available. I wondered who was creating all this content. Wiki’s, Blogs, Forums, and websites discussed every topic imaginable. Taken as a whole, a tremendous amount of metadata is dedicated to this game and most of it is created, edited and maintained by players.

Returning to the game, Kara suggested Tailoring would be a good choice because I could use the raw cloth looted from some monsters to create new armor as I progressed. As a second choice, Enchanting would be helpful since I could use it to enchant my armor and weapons and make some money enchanting gear for other players. In addition

to the two primary professions, I could also have cooking, fishing and first aid. She told me that with the cloth I looted, I could make bandages to heal myself a little with the first aid skill. With fishing and cooking, I could make food from the fish, which could temporarily give me a benefit called a “buff” slightly improving my stats such as stamina and intellect.

She then proceeded to take me to first aid, cooking, and then fishing trainers who were all stationed around Goldshire. I should have asked her how to fish at that time but I did not think to ask that. Later on I must have spent 30 minutes figuring out what to do and where to purchase a necessary fishing pole. Finally, I asked Kara where the tailor and enchanting trainer were, but she said I would have to wait until I went to the city of Stormwind to meet the trainers. While in Goldshire, Kara learned skinning and leatherworking and was able to collect leather off some of the beasts we killed after we looted them. She would use the leather to make armor kits we immediately used, adding a small permanent bonus to a piece of armor like chest hands, or feet. She also made me a lovely new cloak. [Kara was incredibly nice and helpful and I wondered if this was normal behavior or had I just got lucky finding a willing tour guide.]

*Fire Mage Specialization (Level 10)*

One of the quests we had picked up at the Lion’s Pride Inn was from William Pestle. He needed candles for his brother Morgan, an apothecary in Stormwind. Apparently we could obtain the wax for the candles from some Kobolds working at the nearby Fargo Mine. Kara and Ana set off to the mine completing a few other quests along our way. Ding level 10 and Ana earns the Level 10 achievement.

<Kara Whispers> Grats on your first talent point, Ana!

<Ana Whispers> Ty, what’s it for?

“Grats” is the abbreviated form of congratulations, a common response when someone leveled or received an achievement. More importantly, at level 10 a toon receives their first talent point and one more at each subsequent level. The point is spent on a selected ability inside a skill tree. Each class has three skill trees to choose from, allowing players to customize their toon within its class. For example, the mage’s three trees are Fire, Ice and Arcane. The allocation of these talent points customizes the toon and, in effect, creates greater diversity within a particular class. This essentially expands the number of classes from nine to twenty-seven. The talents either provide a new ability or improve existing ones. As more points are acquired and spent, more powerful talents become available in a hierarchical fashion until finally the ultimate talent is learned for a particular class in their specialization. Ana selects the fire tree and begins the specialization path to becoming a Fire-Mage. Her first point is used for an “improved fire blast” that increases the rate at which the fire blast spell is cast. From that point on, each new level gained would offer Ana another talent point in addition to the normal leveling benefits.

Kara and Ana continue towards the Fargo Mine. Nearing the mine we killed many Kobolds. They dropped the wax we needed as loot in addition to a few coppers. Occasionally they dropped weapons and armor but those drops were rare. They also frequently dropped linen and I was amassing quite a bit of it. Pieces of linen would stack up to twenty pieces in one backpack slot which was great because my bags were rapidly getting full.

After only a short time questing with Kara, my backpack was full and I was unable to pick up any more loot. This forced me to select items to discard. I really needed

more bags, seeing that there were four empty spaces for equipping additional bags, providing more slots for loot. Entering the Fargo Mine, I laughed at the sight of the small Kobolds wearing lit candles on their heads. It was much darker than outside in the forest, which was disorienting. Navigating the underground maze became the real challenge. Deep inside the mine, we encountered Goldtooth. He was stronger than the rest of the Kobolds and bigger too, although not he or any of the Kobolds posed any real challenge to Kara and me as a team. After killing Goldtooth, he dropped a pattern that could only be used and learned by tailors. It was the recipe for creating a magic red robe. Thankfully I had not discarded any linen, which would be needed to create the magic robe in addition to red dye and some thread. Regardless of the ingredients necessary, I was still unable to learn the recipe or use the linen until I learned tailoring, requiring a trip to the trainer at Stormwind. We finished collecting the candle wax and eventually found our way out of the mine and back to Goldshire. Along the way, Kara jumped instead of running, adding a playful edge to our serious questing. As we headed back, I would occasionally see a much higher-level character riding a horse or even more exotic mounts like giant cats. [I thought that having a giant cat to ride around on, would look very cool.] Back at the Lion's Pride Inn we handed over the wax to Morgan. Ding, I was now level 11.

William Pestle proceeded to bundle up the candles and asked us to deliver them to his brother in Stormwind. I was excited to finally be going to Stormwind where I could learn tailoring. Back to the in-chair world, I look at my clock and to my astonishment three hours had passed. Time flies when you're having fun and although it was about 11 p.m. I had to keep going and reach Stormwind. Quite abruptly Kara announced she had to leave. Just before she disappeared she said,

<Kara Whispers> Add me to your friends' list. I just put you in mine.  
<Ana> What is that?  
<No player named Kara is currently online>

She was gone; I couldn't find the "friends' list", and I was really getting sleepy, but before I went to bed I was going to see Stormwind and find that trainer. Where was Stormwind? I see a street sign in Goldshire and move my mouse over the arrows pointing in different directions on the sign. Fortunately one points to Stormwind, so I head off in that direction. As I start to move away from Goldshire I notice that the activity in my chat window decreases, as I get further out of town. As I walk north up the road, I soak up the serene beauty of the Elwynn Forest. It's filled with trees and streams, and bears, wild boars, healthy wolves (which I credited to my earlier good deeds at Northshire Abby), and giant fuzzy green spiders.

There were areas where humans had tamed the land like an orchard, a pumpkin farm and, of course, Fargo Mine. As I walked, it started to rain hard. I loved the sound the rain made [but it also reminded me of just how sleepy I was getting]. I continued up the road and kept a close eye on the sides where I could see encampments of Defias thugs, pickpockets, and bandits, who I would happily avoid if possible. As I crested the top of a long incline, I could see it. An enormous wooden gate supported by 20-foot stonewalls leading up to a bridge 50 feet above the moat. Lining both sides of the bridge were two pairs of 40-foot tall battle-posed stone statues of alliance heroes protecting this most epic capital city. And patrolling the bridge and portico were the real Stormwind guards, deterring any potential Horde raiders from approach. I entered the city in awe.

*A sleepy noob in the city (Level 11)*

The city of Stormwind is massive. There is a hustle-bustle here like any other metropolis. As I pass under the iron gate, I enter the trade district. There is a sizable security detachment of guards patrolling the street. On my right, I see a cheese shop and to my left, a welcome center. I step into the welcome center and speak to the vendor. He only sold a couple items, guild tabards and guild charters. Seeing these made me wonder when I would join a guild and how that all worked. Guilds are an affiliation of players who work together like a team, but at this point I didn't know much more than that. Making my way further into the city I saw many heroes entering and exiting a shop straight ahead so I went there. This was the auction house and I could see two vendors on a stage and twenty or more player heroes gathered around so I squeezed into the group and spoke to the auctioneer. A new type of window appeared on my screen, which displayed all the current items being auctioned by players. The screen contained an overwhelming amount of information, so I quickly left and followed a Paladin (a holy warrior) outside and around the corner. There was a large fountain with a statue atop and a number of player heroes milling about around it. Some were standing, some dancing, and a few were sitting.

Moving closer to the fountain I noticed a sign for another inn across the street and to my left, stone steps led up to another building where a stream of players were entering and exiting. This building looked different than most of the others in the trade district, which were all generally two-story buildings made of wood. This stone building was the Bank of Stormwind, and inside the players were interacting with bank tellers behind gated windows. Traditional red velvet ropes formed queue lanes, although the bank's



patrons were clearly ignoring them as three or four players crammed together to access a teller. When in Rome, I thought, as I crammed my way up to a teller. Speaking to her opened a large grid of slots like when I opened my backpack. Apparently I could store extra stuff here so I put the 62 pieces of linen I had accumulated. After closing my bank window I immediately opened it again just to be sure that I still had access to the cloth. This action reminded me that I needed to find the tailor trainer in order to make the red robe and that I also still needed to deliver the wax to the apothecary. I was really sleepy but I wanted to complete my goals before quitting.

Leaving the bank, I headed to the inn and set my hearthstone with the innkeeper there so that I could teleport back to Stormwind in the future. Every so often, a hero would materialize in the inn and then go running outside. These were players logging on and conversely, players would walk in and then disappear as they logged off. I was tired and frustrated that I did not know how to find the tailor trainer or Morgan Pestle so I began type to into the chat box to see if someone in the square around the fountain would help me.

<Ana says> Where is the tailor trainer?  
<Jiby says> LFG deadmines  
<Ranto says> LOL NOOB ALERT  
<Loinedes says> WTB 200 iron bars  
... Chat text continues to scroll by...

There was a lot of chat going on here and the text window was scrolling faster than I had seen elsewhere. There was a language of abbreviations that I could not interpret causing me to realize that I would need to learn these if I wanted to understand and communicate in this unique language. It was obvious that this would take time, attention, and effort to learn the ropes for progressing Ana. I needed to learn which quests

to take and which to ignore, and which gear was best to equip or to sell. I needed to learn the best spells to use in succession, a concept called spell rotation. Additionally, I would need to learn which abilities to invest my talent points in and how to speak the language Warcraft, in fact two languages. There was a formal yet informal rhetoric of the text chat and additionally, a procedural rhetoric and both were necessary and both were daunting.

As Ranto had pointed out in the open chat, I was a NOOB, a new player, inexperienced and unfamiliar with the culture of this strange and fascinating world. Although mildly frustrated by my lack of proficiency in this new world, my previous experience with role-playing games told me that this was the mark of a good game and so in a weird way I was very pleased to cope with these sorts of frustrations. After numerous pleas for assistance, eventually the pink chat of personal communication crossed my chat box.

<Angeleyes whispers> Tailor trainer is in the mage quarter. Turn left past the inn and cross the bridge and it's up the hill on your right. If you get lost you can talk to a Stormwind Guard for directions.

<Ana whispers> thanx for helping me ☺

<Ana whispers> Can you tell me how to access the "friend-list" and do you mind if I add you.

<Angeleyes whispers> It's in the guild button on the menu bar and np hun. Have fun.

I guessed that "np" was chat speak for 'no problem' and proceeded to follow her directions into the Mage Quarter district of Stormwind. Before leaving, I found the friend-list and added Angeleyes to it just in case I got stuck in the future and she happened to be online. I also added Kara and hoped I would find her again. It was definitely more fun playing with someone else and much easier to finish the quests. I

smiled when I notice that Angleyes called me hun, such an endearing term. In playing a female avatar myself, I was not sure if either Kara or Angleyes were really female and rather doubted they were, but in the spirit of a role-playing game gendered pronouns (she, her, he and him...) are always based on the avatar's gender unless someone said otherwise.

I left the trade district and crossed a little bridge on my way to the Mage Quarter. Several players were fishing off the bridge as I crossed, but I didn't have time for that. I was on a mission to find the tailor trainer, make the robe, and to find the Mage trainer who I assumed would be located in this area as well in order to update my spell list. I passed under an archway and was surprised that the streets in the Mage District were grassy instead of the cobblestones that I had walked on inside the trade district. Under the arch I could go right or left and I chose left [which is normal for me, probably since I'm naturally left handed.] Up the little path there were large hardwood trees with tiny spotted pink mushrooms growing beneath them. The sides of the path were lined by tall stonewalls with occasional nooks and little platforms cluttered with barrels and boxes strewn about in a disorderly fashion.

The first shop up the path on my right was the tailor's shop as Angeleyes had communicated. Walking around inside were three NPCs: two vendors and the tailor trainer, Georgio Bolero, who was dressed to the nines. Without delay I spoke to Georgio and I quickly accepted his offer to train me in tailoring and become an apprentice tailor. I purchased all the patterns he made available to me. [In the game, purchasing the patterns constitutes learning to make them as well.]

First, he trained me to make bolts of linen from the raw cloth that I had looted during my adventures. He also taught me how to make brown shirts, simple linen pants and linen cloaks, all of which required some number of bolts of linen and the additional purchase of some coarse thread. I also learned to make a white shirt, which required the linen, thread, and a bottle of bleach. The vendors in the shop sold the thread and other necessary ingredients. Realizing that I had put all my cloth in the bank, I ran back to get it. A new icon was now in my action bar next to my mage spells for accessing my tailoring profession.

Running back to the bank, I got the cloth and proceeded to convert it into bolts of linen. Every time I converted two pieces of raw linen, I got one bolt and the chat box revealed that my skill in tailoring was increasing. I converted all the linen I had to bolt and my tailoring skill reached 45. Although still producing bolts from the raw linen, eventually I was not receiving points for its creation, indicating that my proficiency at that task was reached. Fortunately, I was now skilled enough to learn and produce the red linen robe pattern that had dropped off Goldtooth deep inside the Fargo Mine. I clicked the scroll containing the pattern for the robe and it was added to my tailoring list. I read the required ingredients for making the robe, three linen bolts, two coarse threads, and two bottles of red dye. I had everything but the dye.

I wondered if one of the shops in the trade district sold red dye so I could avoid running back to the Mage Quarter. I decided to investigate the shops near the entrance to Stormwind and coincidentally discovered Pestle's Apothecary. Inside, Morgan accepted the wax and the quest rewarded me with 790 experience points, 350 reputation with Stormwind and also five potions of something called 'oil of olaf' which, when used,

increased my armor statistic by 50 points for one hour. He was also a vender so I checked if he sold any red dye; he didn't. Leaving, I crossed the street and entered another shop. This vendor had the red dye needed for the robe. I made the red linen robe right there and put it on. Back in-chair, I hear Apisata's sweet voice "Honey it's two o'clock and I'm sleepy." I reply, "Ok baby, let me just run back to the Inn and logout." Thinking to myself how much fun I just had, I log off, still smiling. I felt alive and excited about continuing my adventures the next day.

That night I slept like a baby and dreamt of adventures in Azeroth. In the morning, *Warcraft* consumed my mind. While the coffee percolated, and the kettle whistled that Apisata's tea was ready, Ana's day was being planned. Half in the real world and half in the virtual, the French toast was prepared, one of Apisata's favorites. I went and woke her with hot tea in hand and then went back to cooking the French toast. When breakfast was ready, she wandered into the kitchen and we had breakfast together. She asked me how I was enjoying the game, which made me happy because really it was all I could think about and I wanted to talk about nothing else. "Nic, you know I played a game like that when I was an undergraduate called *Ragnarok*?" she asked.

"Really? I've never heard of that," I said. She replied, "Oh yes, it was very popular all across Asia. Hey did I tell you that your toast is delicious! Well I need to get back to work now. Are you going to play your game today?" "Yes, definitely! Actually, I've been thinking about it all morning and I think I dreamed of Gnomes last night" I replied. [We laugh]. "What's a Gnome?" she asked. [We laugh again]. "I will explain it later and let me know when you get hungry and I will make you some lunch," I told her. We both got up and went to our computers, she to work and I to play.

Logging in, Ana was still at the Inn where she had ended the night before. I needed to go back to the Mage Quarter and find the mage trainer to learn any available new spells. There were fewer players running around now than were here the night before. Ana set off up the winding grassy path, beyond the tailor trainer's shop in the mage district. A Night Elf, non-player character (NPC) stood on the path up the hill. She was the herbalism trainer and waited for business just outside the alchemy shop. Ana ignored her since I wanted her to learn enchanting as her second profession, but that could be dealt with later. She proceeded up the hill to an immense stone tower. I guessed that this was the headquarters for the mages of Stormwind. There was a beautiful spiraling stone ramp that encircled the tower. Ana carefully went up so as not to fall off the sides. At the top, she entered the mage tower where there was another spiraling ramp. At the top there was a green glowing magical arch. I walked through it.

Several NPC mages stood inside and an occasional player appeared in the middle and ran back through the portal behind me. I supposed they were just logging on and perhaps the tower was also an Inn. This assumption proved incorrect, and much later I came to realize that higher level mages held the ability to teleport, or create portals teleporting entire groups of heroes, between the major cities of Azeroth. This was a very useful ability for moving through the vastness of Azeroth quickly. Here at the mage tower were the mage trainers and also the portal trainers. Given my low level, the portal trainer offered me no assistance except to say "Greetings mage" repeatedly, annoying me to no end.

After speaking to the mage trainer, it was apparent that I had neglected to update my spells for quite some time, so much so that in fact that many new spells were

available for purchase. It was at this point that the pattern was recognized; new spells could be learned every other level. Each new spell had a corresponding level number, informing me at what level it could be learned. Ana proceeded to learn Frost bolt, a spell similar to my fireball but that dealt ice damage instead of fire. She learned Frost nova, which could freeze my enemies in place for a few seconds. Then Counter spell, which could stop enemies from casting. And finally, pyro-blast, which hurled a giant ball of flame and continued to deal damage for twelve seconds after it was cast. The purchase of each new spell costs a little more than the last, so after learning all the patterns from the tailor trainer and getting up to date with my mage spells I was nearly broke, down to 1 silver and 23 copper left to my name. I needed to get back to the quests and make some money. However, the fact was not lost on me that the trainers, the teachers of the virtual world, were being paid very well indeed, unlike teachers in real world.

Inside the mage tower I read up on my new spells, rearranging their icons on the action bar. Each icon on the action bar could be used by clicking on it and was also associated with a number on the keyboard. Using the keyboard shortcut was considerably faster than using the mouse. So as I learned what each spell could do I also customized their arrangement on the action bar optimizing the spells for the most efficient keyboard usage. For example, I put frost nova in the fourth slot of the action bar which allow me to press <4> on the keyboard, and freezing my enemies in place. <2> was assigned to Fire blast which was used the most often, and called spamming in the game parlance. In combat, a normal rotation might be to press <4> freezing the enemy, then move backward by pressing <down arrow> in order to avoid being hit by their melee attack. This maneuver would then be followed by spamming <2> a series of fire blasts, repeated

until the monster was dead. Time melted as I figured this all out, arranging my icons and learning the best ways to use my spells and abilities. Back in-chair I heard ...“Honey do you want a snack?”

“Sure,” I said looking up at the clock. I was shocked to see that three hours had passed and I hadn’t even left Stormwind yet. “Apisata, would you be interested in playing *Warcraft* too?” I asked. “Yes of course I would, and we can do it together when I go back to Thailand,” she said. “Ok, I will get you an account” I replied. I had no idea at that time how important playing together would be for maintaining and even strengthening, our relationship. In this regard, virtual reality would become our reality, our shared reality for fun, and a new type of relationship that would be forged in Azeroth. The power of play is indeed compelling. Our shared activity, and new identities, although not ideal, provided us more than a means for coping and enduring the distance and time which separated us; we played together from the opposite sides of the very real earth. We were happy.

## **Part Two: The Social World**

### *Learning the ropes and making friends (Level 54)*

Now level at 54, Ana had set her hearthstone to Nethergarde Keep in a region known as the blasted lands. The landscape is a twisted red clay desert and a dark magic churns in a purple sky. Frequent bolts of lightning strike the rocky plains in the distance. At the heart of this land lies the dark portal leading to an alternative dimension know as Outland. With the portal open, dark horde magic seeps into Azeroth as the Alliance stands vigilantly on guard from Nethergarde Keep, attempting to keep demonic beings from transgressing the portal.



Here Ana was tasked with collecting parts and organs from some of the creatures mutated by the presence of the dark portal. Hyena jowls, boar intestines, and the pinchers of a scorpion-like creature called a Scorpok. These creatures were quite powerful and could easily kill Ana if I was not careful. The work was slow going. I could see a couple of Night Elves working on the same task nearby. I realized that I was safer by staying closer to them. After a close call against a couple of Scorpoks who caught me off guard, I was assisted and saved by the Night Elves, Arres and Quilz, both members of the Clockwork Gnomes guild.

<Quilz Whispers> do you need some help? You are kinda low level to be here.  
<Ana Whispers> oh yes please.

I joined up with them and we continued to kill these mutated creatures that were roaming about the area and collect their requested parts and organs. This task was much easier working as a group and naturally, a strategy developed. Quilz was a hunter and she and I would attack from a range, combining the damage of my fire blasts with her razor sharp arrows. Meanwhile Arres, a warrior, charged in and held the creatures' attention keeping the ranged heroes safe from their attacks, a tactic called "holding agro" in the parlance of the game. Within the group, a new form of chat was available called party chat allowing us all to text with one another but not broadcasting it to the surrounding area.

<Arres> Ana use your frost nova to freeze the hyenas in place when I attack them.  
<Ana> ok, I will try  
<Quilz> freezing them in place will help the tank hold agro and keep us from being attacked.  
<Ana> got it!

I used my frost nova on the next group of hyenas and it worked great.

<Quilz> good job

<Ana> thanx. You guys are great teachers and I'm still learning how to play.  
 <Arres> Good work Ana, you are doing fine. Do you want to run ST with us.  
 <Ana> sorry I don't know what that means, but sure. lol  
 <Arres> It's an instance, a dungeon, called The Sunken Temple just north of here  
 in the Swamp of Sorrows

*Going Under (Level 54)*

An "instance" is essentially a dungeon adventure that allows a group of up to five heroes to enter together. The groups experience inside becomes private because the instance exists separately from the larger world thus allowing multiple groups to run through the same dungeon at the same time and preventing them from encountering each other while inside. At this time Ana had very limited experience with this type of play.

<Ana> sure that would be fantastic, thanx  
 <Quilz> sound goods. Give me 30 minutes to make some lunch for my son.  
 <Arres> I'm going to make some coffee and go to the bank and repair my  
 armor before we start.  
 <Ana> Great! See ya'll in 30 ☺

I was excited about going to the Sunken Temple and "hearthed" back to Nethergarde. From there I ran to the wooden tower to find the flight master and clicked on him; the flight map appeared and I selected Stormwind and off I flew on the back of a golden griffin, giving me a wondrous bird's eye view of the terrain below. Flight masters were sparsely located all across all of Azeroth and I could fly to any of them that I had discovered during my exploration. Using flight points provided the fastest way to travel across the entire continent of the Eastern Kingdoms, where the human, dwarfs and gnomes begin. Flight points also existed across the continent of Kalimdor, the lands of the elves, orcs and tauren. But moving between these continents, across the great sea required a journey by ship, unless you were a mage, like Ana and could teleport your way to any of the major cities of the alliance.

Back in Stormwind I went to the armor vendor, repaired my armor and sold him all the junk contained in my five bags. While leveling my tailoring, I had learned to sew my own bags and could carry a lot more stuff than when I had first started. From the armor shop, I headed to the bank to stow the stuff, like the mageweave cloth, that I wanted to keep for later use. With my armor repaired and my bags emptied, except for some magely essentials like mana and health potions, I headed back to Stormwind's flight master and flew back to Nethergarde eager to explore the sunken temple with Arres and Quilz.

Still grouped, I see that both are ready for the Sunken Temple adventure and as I approach them I see that they both are waiting mounted on twin frostsabers, large saber-toothed tiger looking cats. I too had purchased a mount at level 30, first a black steed and later upgrading to a swift white steed at level 50. The initial type of mount choice was determined by race, unless a player had earned an exalted reputation with another faction's city. In order to get the frostsaber mount I wanted, I needed to complete many more quests for the Night Elves of Darnassus. Although I didn't know it at the time, the ability to obtain the mount of a different race was only possible once patch 3.0 was released by Blizzard in January of 2009, shortly after I had started. Blizzard occasionally released updates to the software, called patches, which changed features and functions of the game. Sometimes these were minor and sometimes major.

We rode onward north of Nethergarde and into the Swamp of Sorrows. We took care to avoid the Horde town in the middle of the swamp. Traveling east, we reached a beautiful bay and in its center was the top of the sunken temple. The temple had a Mayan appearance with stair-stepped pyramid design. We swam there and climbed the long

stone staircase to the top. From here, stairs descended downward in to the center and into the water. Arres dove in, then Quilz, and I followed as they swam down a long hallway underwater. I could see a meter indicating that I would need air very soon. Under the water I could see fish swimming around the columns of the dilapidated temple. It was not long before we surfaced and I took a deep breath. There were naga, half human and half sea serpents, guarding this place but we took them down with ease as we continued through the temple, eventually arriving at a shimmering portal deep inside. As we entered the portal, Arres shared several quests for the sunken temple and Quilz and I accepted them.

Inside the instance, the temple was a complex labyrinth. Overwhelmed, I worked hard to stay with the group. Quilz now had an albino ape escorting her; this was a special ability of hunters to have a pet. I giggled at his name, "Bubblez," which was the name of Michael Jackson's pet monkey. Arres and Quilz were extremely funny and playful, and could type in chat and play a lot faster than I could. I was still overwhelmed. We would spot a group of trolls standing together along with a couple of winged serpents and Arres and the monkey would charge in and attack while Quilz and I shot at single targets from a range.

<Arres> Ana, use blizzard and AOE them

<Ana> Ok ... what's AOE

<Quilz> Area of effect, your blizzard spell will do huge DPS to a group.

<Ana> will do! And what is DPS? Sorry I'm a noob.

<Arres> Damage Per Second. And no prob we all had to learn sometime.

<Ana> ok let's do this and thanx for being so patient.

This level of the sunken temple was a circle and we proceeded to kill all the groups of monsters standing around it. As we went on I began to feel more comfortable

and confident in using my AOE blizzard attack, perhaps too confident. I would rain down the ice shard of my blizzard as Arres and the monkey approached our targets. I noticed a red outline appeared around my portrait in the upper left corner of the screen and that all the trolls were running straight for me. Wack! I was dead. Then Quilz was dead and within a few seconds, Arres met his maker too. A button that I was all too familiar with appeared in the center of the screen. "You have died. Press release to continue to the nearest graveyard." I pressed it and I was back in the Swamp of Sorrow but as a ghost and would have to find my way back to the instance to return to life. I could see the ghost of Arres and Quilz appear and I followed them back to the temple. Once inside, we returned to life. And the monsters we had killed were still dead, which was, of course, a good thing.

<Arres> you have to let me get agro on the trolls before you attack, ok?  
<Quilz> A good rule of thumb is to give the tank 3 seconds before you attack.  
<Ana> Ok and sorry about that  
<Arres> np we really should have a healer with us anyway but these guys aren't too difficult so let's move on and finish this awful place.

After clearing the outer circle, we had to run up six twisted staircases, each one leading to a separate balcony with the task of fighting a more difficult adversary on each one. Once completed, a small serpent statue could be turned to a different position and when all the six statues were properly aligned, a magical barrier below us was opened, allowing us to finally reach the main boss and our final goal. But before we could get there we had to get to the bottom level and fight through many more difficult encounters. Near the end we fought the Troll boss, Jammal'an the Prophet, and the two drakes who appeared after his death. Defeating them, we made our way to a ghostly green dragon, Eranikus, and began the most difficult and final battle of the sunken temple. When the

dragon Eranikus was dead, we looted him and each received the Essence of Eranikus, which began a new quest. However, I was so over-stimulated that I neglected to notice the new quest, which only required walking only a short distance to a brazier in the corner and offering his essence to the gods. Arres and Quilz completed the quest and we all hearthed away still in the group.

<Ana> WoW that was super fun. Thanks for bringing me along.  
 <Quilz> np Ana, I added you to friends and we can join up again.  
 <Ana> oh great, I will add you guys to mine  
 <Arres> Thanks Ana and good job back there. Did you turn in the quest?

This is when I realized my colossal mistake.

<Ana> no... crap! That was stupid.  
 <Arres> no worries I can run you through there tomorrow.  
 <Ana> Really? That's a lot of work.  
 <Arres> Nah ... it's easy and I want more practice tanking before we head to Outland.  
 <Ana> Ok, I will send you a text tomorrow if I see you online and we can plan a good time to run it again.  
 <Quilz> Did you want to join our guild?  
 <Ana> Yeah, absolutely.

A message box immediately appears on my screen "Quilz has invited you to join Clockwork Gnomes." I click yes and a flood of "Welcome to the guild" messages scroll down as each member of the guild online sends me a personal greeting in guild chat. I didn't know how to respond but my heart was filled with welcome and acceptance in finding my new online family.

<Ana whispers> Thanx Quilz! Now how do I get to guild chat?  
 <Quilz> LOL type /g  
 <Ana> /g  
 <Ana> Hi & thanks everybody for the warm welcome. It's great to be here!  
 ☺

*There is no place like Gnome (Level 56)*

Joining a guild is like the first day at a new school. I wondered what the others would be like and how they would perceive me. Would I fit it? I wondered who else was a new member or possibly new to the game like I was? Were there guild rules and what are my responsibilities to the community, if any? I was curious who the members really were in their physical lives and, simultaneously, was content to know them only in relation to this place. Obviously there was no way of knowing any of the history of the guild or relationships between its members right away; it would take time. My life in the virtual world of Azeroth had just expanded exponentially and so did my desire to begin this research.

I realized that a game as rich as this could take a lifetime to understand: truly, since the designers' were/are actively creating new content, tinkering with the existing rules, and the application's interface. If all the existing complexity was not enough, now there was a social world, which would also require yet another type of attention beyond the procedural attention I was still mastering. A complex and evolving environment filled with people was the recipe for techno-cultural emergence and development. It was something new.

And following the revelation of the increased scope of *WOW* as a potential dissertation study, I considered the implications of being a researcher, in essence, disguised as a woman in a virtual world. What significance would that decision bear on forging relationships within this online community? When I had first created Ana I had not fully considered the social realities that would emerge in three short months.

Mildly dumbfounded, I sat and watched the green colored guild chat scroll past; it was mixed in line with the other colored chat channels and I tried to make sense out of what they were saying. The overall tone was conversationally light containing a mixture of humor, game support, mixed in with some friendly bragging and occasionally some tempered “trash-talk”. Before I describe my experience in “Clockwork Gnomes” I should first describe the guild more generally as, concept and construct.

A guild consists of a group of avatars organized by a top-down hierarchy consisting of a leader, officers and rank and file members. The GM, or guild master is the leader of the guild and determines the ranks and privileges for all the other members through a set of interface controls. For example a guild master may give out the power to invite new members to the guild or control the level of access a member has to the guild bank or sanction the use of guild money to pay equipment repair costs. Joining a guild requires accepting an invitation from a member with the invite privilege. While a player may belong to multiple guilds, a toon may only belong to one guild at any given time. There are only two ways to leave a guild: by quitting it or being kicked out of it. At the most basic level, the guild serves as a means for long-term social connection as opposed to other short-term grouping mechanics such as parties or raids, which have end points. Relationships form between members of a guild through repeated interactions in the chat channel and from engagement in collaborative activities, such as quests, instances, or raids.

As a construct, a guild is symbolically represented in two forms. First and primarily, it is a closed chat channel. This chat is easily accessed by typing a forward slash followed by the letter “g” followed by the message to the guild. Guild members



always receive chat messages sent through guild chat regardless of their location and are recognized in the chat window as green text. Officers in the guild also have access to a special officers' chat, which allows for private discussions without the knowledge of the rank and file members. The second representation is the guild window. It's accessed via the guild button in the menu at the bottom right of the screen. The guild window shows all the members by name, level, class, and region of the world, or how long since their last logon. There is also a small space where a member can leave a note and another space for officers to leave a note. These were usually used to show a toon professions and skill level or if it was a player's primary toon called a "Main" or one of their other toons referred to as "alts," short for alternate toons. So, if someone needed a tailor, they could see that Ana was a tailor and how skilled she was and that she was my main toon. I mainly used the guild window to see who in the guild was online.

[Nine months were spent in the Clockwork Gnomes from April 2009 to January of 2010 and my study wasn't fully approved until June of 2010. I was beginning to experiment with chat capture techniques and so this part of the study comes from those first scraps of data in addition to interviews with key informants reflecting on these events during the formalized data collection period.]

<Icarus Whispers> Welcome Ana, I'm Icarus the guild leader. Everybody calls me IC. If you need anything let me know and feel free to use what you need from the guild bank. What professions are you?

<Ana Whispers> I'm Enchanting and Tailor. Let me know how I can help the guild. I'm new to the game and have a lot to learn. This is my first toon. Nice to meet you IC.

<Icarus Whispers> NP see ya ;)

*Hanging with my ‘Gnomies’ (Level 58)*

A few days later and after running back through the Sunken Temple with Arres for the second time, I hit level 58 which meant I could finally go through the Dark Portal in the Blasted Lands and begin questing in outlands. [Unfortunately I couldn’t go there until I went to Best Buy in the “real” world and purchased the expansion to *WOW, The Burning Crusade*.] Recognition of advancement is at the heart of the game’s collective ethos. This was demonstrated by the Clockwork Gnomes response to my announcement of reaching level 58 in guild chat. The etiquette for someone indicating that they had advanced to the next level was to type the word “Ding” into guild chat, and then a chorus of customized variations of the word “congratulations” would follow this announcement of advancement. As each level takes a player longer to achieve, the guild’s response matched the accomplishment earned.

```

/g
<Ana> ding
<FiveAlive> grats
<Zoran> gratz
<Icarus> grats Ana
<Moltar> WTG!!! (what the grats)
<Quilz> congrats Ana!
<Arres> grats get rdy for Outland!

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After returning from Best Buy, with *The Burning Crusade* in hand, I was pleased to discover that it only contained one disc. It installed quickly and then the patching process began. I logged into my account on the website and the downloading began. I noticed that I could have avoided going to Best Buy and done everything online. I called my fiancé while the updates continued. I mentioned to her that she could try installing it from Thailand this way instead of buying it in an actual store. I was concerned that she would get a pirated copy and wasn’t sure what would transpire if that happened. So, she

created an account and began downloading the game as well. Understandably, this was much slower process for her. At the time she did not have in-home Internet access and would “borrow” a wireless signal from the monk who lived across the street. Eventually, but with great effort, she was up and running. It was worth the trouble, as I will explain in the next section. It was still another month until we really began playing as she was in the final throws of defending her dissertation and graduation, but at least it was all set up and waiting for us.

*The Burning Crusade* expansion offered players a new world to explore and two new races to play, Blood Elves for the horde, and for the alliance, the Draenei, an alien race now stranded in Azeroth. [I would try both later, but at the time I was more interested in leveling my main toon, Ana.] Also with the release of patch 3.2, the next mount was available at level 60, ten levels lower than it had previously been and it was a flying mount. Many of the more seasoned players grumbled about this change. They talked about how they had to work much harder for the all the mounts and how the game was being dumbed-down for new players as well as a virtual lowering of standards of the work ethic here. Also, this talk had a quality of “Oh you have it easy, I had to walk six miles to school through the snow” sort of feel to it. It was a demonstration of players’ history and experience with the game. They were the natives and wanted everyone to know it.

Ana stepped through the Dark portal, entering the alternative dimension of Outland. Outland was the shattered red remains of the Orcs’ home world called “Draenor.” On the other side of the portal Ana, finds herself atop a stone temple and a witness to an epic battle between gigantic green demonlords and the small Alliance

cohort charged with protecting the this side of the portal. This was the Hellfire Peninsula and my quest was to deliver a report describing the defense of the portal to the alliance leader at the nearby town of Honor Hold.

School was out and I suddenly had some free time to really put some effort into leveling. Each morning I would get up, make a pot of coffee, and login. I would quest through the day, taking short breaks to perform domestic chores. Often, Arres and Quilz would log in around the same times so we would run some instances or quest together. At level 60, I got my flying mount. Seeing the game from above was incredible. I spent several days flying on my giant bird throughout all the regions of Outland, earning the “explore Outland” achievement and a round of “Gratz” from the guild.

In the evenings, the guild would begin to get more active and invites would go out to run instances in Outland. Ramparts, Blood Furnace and the Shattered Halls were all part of the Hellfire Citadel and popular instances at the time. These were all much harder than the Sunken Temple and required five players, a tank, a healer, and three DPS and would take 45 minutes or more to complete.

Usually Ana was invited when someone else was not available to go. I noticed that there were a lot of folks that played in pairs with a friend or family member. This made it harder to get invited into a group since the positions filled up fast. I was alone, and not to mention, a noob. Another reason I was not always invited was my role, which was not as in demand as a healer or tank. As a mage, my role was always DPS (damage per second), as was the hunter, Quilz. IC was a druid and would take the role of healer or, if he was unavailable, there were a few other healers in the guild. Arres on the other hand

could DPS or Tank. Fierce was another Warrior, in the guild who frequently ran instances with us. When Fierce was in the group he would always Tank and Arres would DPS.

From my perspective, Fierce and IC were professional-level players. (However, the distinction between noobs and experts is always relative to the particular players, the issues discussed, and the individuals' knowledge of the game space. In some cases, for example, I was the expert on the topic of mages, and also when I played with Apisata.) That being said, Fierce was online a lot and exhibited a level of expertise that made me a little intimidated to talk with him. He had the best gear, was six levels beyond me and always knew exactly what everyone should be doing. He was a solid leader and a solid tank. Aside from directing us he was fairly quiet, except for an occasional discussion with Arres on tanking techniques. Or, when he occasionally inserted some raunchy quip related to something a party member said or that we had witnessed in the dungeon. For me, his jokes were hilariously off-color but rare, which gave them a little extra zing when he told them.

There are not as many stories as one might think of Ana having to explain that she/me was a he, but after a couple of boobs' jokes one day from Fierce, I felt compelled to tell him that I was a guy. We laughed and got back to the killing. My gender was also disclosed to IC who conscientiously would refer to me in guild chat with some masculine pronoun, thus circulating this information to the entire guild. "Ana's a tailor, I will ask him to make you some new bags." Somehow I had become the guild's tailor and would make many bags for the guild bank. IC excelled at making everyone feel needed but not subservient.

All of these dungeon runs in this period were with guild members, but because of a patch released by Blizzard, that would change. The party chat in the dungeons was more adult-oriented in comparison to the guild chat. IC, and some other guild member were quite vigilant in keeping the guild chat family-friendly since we did have a number of children in the guild, as well as their parents.

Another regular member was Kashi; she was a hunter and also, like Quilz, she was very helpful and supportive. When I was doing something wrong, she would whisper to me what I should be doing. I really appreciated this since she could have just as easily typed the instruction into party chat and embarrassed me. This group consisting of IC, Kashi, Fierce, Arres, and Quilz became an expected part of my evening sessions and, over time, I learned more about them. Arres and Quilz were friends who lived together and were laid off from their jobs in the electronics industry in Texas. Quilz's sister, Delta was also in the guild and she had originally invited both Arres and Quilz to Clockwork Gnomes. Fierce, and Kashi also lived together in Ohio with Kashi's young son. And IC was a twenty-something wedding planner based in Canada. They also learned about me and that I was a student who wanted to study this culture. They were very open to this idea and IC made me an officer in the guild, so I could see what was happening from the inside. With their help, I leveled to 68 and could leave Outland and beyond *The Burning Crusade* expansion. Now it was time to install *The Wrath of the Lich King* and head to the newest continent in Azeroth, Northrend.

The description of my time in *The Burning Crusade* is brief and lacks the detail of my adventure in the original game. Outland did not hold the same narrative power as Azeroth. A lot of time in Outland was spent "Grinding," which means gaining experience

through repetitive non-quest related tasks. Grinding was the most mindlessly boring way to level up Ana quickly, requiring more perseverance than skill. A normal grinding session required finding a spot where monsters were a higher level than Ana, providing the maximum experience points for each kill, and then spending hours killing, looting, waiting for them to respawn (meaning that the creatures rematerialized), and repeating the entire process. Grinding leveled Ana fast, but in a process more like work than play.

I was grinding because the group that I had been running dungeons with had out-leveled me and moved on to a new area called, “Northrend.” I was not invited to group with them anymore because I was too low level and would not have access to the places they were playing until I had reached level 68 and installed *The Wrath of the Lich King*. This was a lonely time for me for two reasons: I wasn’t participating with my guild friends, except in guild chat, and because my fiancé was back in Thailand defending her dissertation.

*When the Monk’s online there’s love in Azeroth (Hammy, Level 1)*

Both of these situations took a turn for the better after I installed *Wrath* at the end of May 2009. My fiancé was finished and immediately become a faculty member at her university. She started to play *WOW* and I was again able to participate in the dungeon runs with my online friends and guild mates. The summer of 2009 academically was divided into two parts, statistics from May to July and a weeklong writing retreat at Unicoi State Park in the lush north Georgia mountains at the end of July. This schedule was conducive to a lot of time in Azeroth.

Getting my fiancé, Apisata, setup in *WOW* was an ordeal. Troubleshooting technical problems is hard enough in the same room, but she was literally on the other

side of the planet, not to mention we had to make sure that the monk across the street had his router turned on for her to be able to use his wireless internet. With great effort, she was eventually set up. There is a twelve-hour difference between Bangkok and the East Coast US, so usually we would play in the evening for her and morning for me. This worked well since most of my guild-related activities would happen in the evenings. I was curious about the relationship between online games and English as a Second Language so it was my belief that playing with her could provide me with some insight. We discussed the type of characters we would make and decided to both be Paladins since they could tank, heal and DPS. Also, in being the same, we would have the same set of spells and powers.

This time, I created a male character, Hammy, and she created a female, Iron. We were both human, which allowed us to start in the same place and start questing together right away. Also, I knew all the quests from having done them once before as Ana, and that would make things proceed much faster. It is common for a *WoW* player to have several characters in *WoW*. As stated previously, the avatar played most often is called the player's "main" and all their other characters are referred to as "Alts" for alternates.

The impact of this new experience in *WoW* was incredible. She and I had many ways of communicating which were only possible as a product of the technology revolution in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century. We had a phone card that allowed us 2000 minutes for twenty dollars; we had Skype, a free video chat application, and now we had the virtual amusement park of Azeroth to run around in and do things together. We utilized all of them and each was different with regards to our interactions. The phone



was great for quick good morning or good night calls and of course “tell me about your day” type stuff. However, the phone required holding to one’s ear and eventually this causes discomfort to your ear and neck. I suppose some of the negatives could be mitigated by speakerphones or headsets but we didn’t have any of that, just the standard hardware.

Skype didn’t come with the same physical discomfort as the telephone but did require some planning, scheduling, and that the monk’s Internet router was turned on. When it did work, it was great to see her smile or wave and vice-versa, but it’s not like being there. In fact, the distance is accentuated by the audio/visuals and not to mention frequent technical difficulties. I could see her Thai furniture and décor. Sometimes, I could hear vendors and neighbors selling stuff from trucks on the street or mundane daily life of family members speaking Thai to one another in the house. It was all quite foreign and far away. I was not alone in this feeling. On Skype, she could see my studio where we had spent so much time together only a few months back. The place where we held hands and watched movies together was now reduced to an image on a computer screen. Although real, it was not; it created a longing to be together in that space. My cat would occasionally walk into the room and there were times when it inspired a smile and other when it brought on tears. We cried a lot those first few months.

But being in *WoW* was different. We played together. We shared an experience, many in fact. Doing the same activity felt so much more real than the “real” phone or “real” video chat. After playing for a few months, even the use of those technologies changed. She would call and say “the monk’s online, meet me in the game.” Or our Skypye conversation would be about how silly the Kobolds in Fargo mine looked with the

candles on their heads. It became a context for discussing something we were doing together. We were together, at least until the monk went to bed and turned his router off.

Iron and Hammy were a beautiful team and I invited her into the Clockwork Gnomes. She didn't interact with them much but over time she did make some causal friends. We leveled together much faster than Ana had alone. Across the course of the study, I learned that many of the players in the guild were also partners, either as lovers, friends or roommates, and these partnerships had an impact on the play.

Interpersonal relationships between guild members were revealed in normal discourse overtime in guild, raid, party and whisper chats. Most often this was revealed in a straightforward manner such as "... Arres is my roommate." or "Fierce and I are going to the beach this weekend." Relationships could also be somewhat discerned by logon and logoff patterns, or through the divulging of information by one player about another player's work or immediate real life whereabouts.

Playing *WoW* with Apisata revealed a tangible difference to me in experience between playing with someone known in real life and playing alone. The game seemed much easier and more fun with someone from the real world than it did alone. Talking about the game world outside the game directed and focused our activity inside the game and simultaneously gave us a fun and shared context for our real world conversations.

Iron and Hammy almost always played with an agenda, where we would go and quest, or how to get around the monster that had just killed us. Our playtime however planned, was light and casual, and we didn't care about our gear or playing with others. This orientation was in stark contrast to Ana who was increasingly keeping up with the other members of the Gnomes. As Ana, I perpetually wondered what to do next to get to

the next level as fast as possible. It was important to become more powerful so she would be invited to the next guild run and continue to be a valued member of the team. Usually, I thought this sort of thing while Ana was standing in the bank and sorting through her bags, and ironically, not accomplishing very much.

With Hammy and Iron, we didn't care about being good players. We were just having fun being together. A shared sense of purpose, however virtual, was filling the void created by spatial distance. It was all about being together and the shared experience. So much so that we hadn't noticed how fast we were leveling. There was however, a price for this capricious mode of play. Iron never really learned the game, the geography of the world, or the most effective ways to use her abilities in different situations. Upon reaching Nothrend, where group play becomes essential for progression and for engaging into new game content like dungeon runs, she was stuck. I was put in an awkward position when we attempted a few dungeon runs with non-guild members. The party members were quite mean to her for not being able to play her role effectively. She was unable to do the amount of DPS that was expected and needed for the group to be successful. Although being mean to other players may seem unreasonable, it is understandable if someone fails to do their job, which results in a "wipe," where everyone in the party is killed. Iron was forced to decide whether to learn the details of being a paladin she had neglected or to avoid group play and remain a causal player, and not progressing. She chose the latter. Overtime, I quit playing Hammy, but he waits patiently in my list of toons to return to heroic duty someday.

*Gnomish Politics where everybody knows your name (Level 79)*

The Clockwork Gnomes grew to feel like a family of sorts. I would logon and smile as a number of players typed variations of “Hey Ana” in the guild chat. When IC logged in almost everyone would say hello; he really had developed a loyal following. Learning the etiquette, I would always do the same when someone I knew, like Arres or Quilz logged in. I was surprised at how such simple recognition could raise my spirits. I didn’t know everyone and was certainly confused as to who was who most of the time.

Most of the primary members had several Alts (alternate avatars) in the guild in addition to their main, and except for the players who had devised a consistent naming scheme across their toons, it was difficult to tell if I was talking to someone I knew as a different toon or not. Fierce’s toons were a good example of creating a recognizable naming schema across avatars. His main was Fierce, but his alts followed a pattern, Fiercedruid, Fiercemage etc. When I was not certain who someone was, I checked the guild window to see if there was some note hinting at their other mains or alts. The guild was growing and there were more than 350 toons in the guild. Conversations about not allowing any new members were becoming more frequent.

More and more of the mains began to hit the level cap of 80 and after earning that achievement, the players could now run heroic dungeons and raids. Ana would login and quest, pushing to get to level 80 as fast a possible. Using add-ons like “Quest helper” made the process much easier and efficient since I could see where to go on the map to complete the quests. I was excited to begin raiding and could see now that my research could focus on this transformation of how a leveling guild evolved into a raiding guild. IC, Kashi, and Fierce were helpful in offering tips to level faster such as picking up daily

quests in the argent tournament grounds and jousting. These quests were repeatable once per day and provided not only good experience points but also a lot of gold. I could generate about 250 gold per day simply by finishing my set of daily quests, and jousting was fun way to do it.

I hit 80 in mid-June and was finally invited to run again with my original crew in the heroic instances. They were a lot harder, but I was running with the professionals and they knew how to do everything. I just needed to stay alive and blast whatever the tank was attacking with my fire blasts. At first I was a little confused about my purpose now that I had hit 80. Kashi explained that now it was a new game and I would need to work on my gear in order to go to harder and harder raid quests where the gear that dropped was progressively better. I followed her instructions and was invited by her to my first raid in OS, The Obsidian Sanctum.

This was a 10-man raid located in the bottom of Wrymrest Temple in an area called Dragonblight. About an hour before the raid, the guild chat was very active as folks logged in. There was an excitement in the air. Kashi sent me a whisper and said that I should download Ventrilo, a voice chat application. I downloaded it off the web and installed it although I no idea how to use it. I launched it and went back to *WOW* where I received a message that I was being summoned to the raid. I appeared next the obelisk-esque summoning stone beneath Wrymrest Temple. The room was circular and there were several portals but I followed IC through one and entered the Obsidian Sanctum, a moltenous cavern. As we entered, I saw a new type of chat channel, raid chat. Now familiar with the chat conventions, I typed /raid and entered the chat. There were several players from another guild but most were familiar Clockwork Gnomes. Fierce, Arres,

Quilz, and Kashi were all inside waiting. One name was new, Sircat; he was from a different guild called WarzRus. He and Kashi were working something out in the chat.

<Kashi> Ok Fierce is Main tank and Car is Off tank  
 <Sircat> I will explain to IC the healing assignments  
 <Kashi> K, good  
 <Kashi> Everybody get in vent then I will give a rdy check  
 <Sircat> Did you post the vent info?  
 [Raid Leader]h Kashi: Vent Info  
 [Raid Leader]h Kashi: IK2.Seetvent.com  
 [Raid Leader]h Kashi: port 3819  
 [Raid Leader]h Kashi: pass clockwork  
 <Sircat> I'm healing the raid and IC has the tanks  
 <Kashi> When we get to the blue drake, after we kill the trash, don't go into the portal! Got it!  
 <Sircat> Let's do this!

Quickly I entered the vent info into the Voice-over-Internet protocol application and clicked the connect button. This was the first time I heard the actual voices of the players who I had spent so much time with over the past six months. In some ways the voices I had created in my head were better. Now these heroes were reduced back to normal humans simply playing a game. The fantasy was blown. Fierce was not nearly as fierce as in my imagination. His voice was soft and low. Kashi, with a Midwestern American accent, was serious and all business. She sounded a little frustrated that getting started was taking so long. I couldn't hear IC's voice and I didn't know which button was set to "press to talk" so no one heard mine either. Kashi asked if everyone could hear her and the other nine of us typed, "yes" into the raid chat.

Next she issued a "ready check" and we all typed "R". Then there was a flood of all the missing buffs reported in the raid chat. Someone had an add-on that broadcasted what was missing. When everyone in the raid had the proper buffs, we proceeded to kill the trash. The targets would be marked with the Skull, X, Moon, and Square above the

monsters head. This gave the DPS players the attack order to follow. The tanks were marked the Square, and Circle (which some players called the nipple) so the healers could see them clearly at all times. My computer slowed down from the activity of spells and attacks going off simultaneously. The slowing effect was called “lag” and was common if there was a lot of server activity or as a result of local network issues. As we approached the first blue drake, Kashi gave an overview of the fight. The trick to this one was that some of the raid would need to go inside portals during the fight while others stayed outside. The idea was that the drake needed to be destroyed from two different dimensional planes concurrently.

We began the fight and Kashi called everything out over vent. “Portal-team, go inside now! “ Followed by, “OK good, now move back out” Then, “Main tank taunt her now” (this was the verbal command and tank ability handling how the two tanks could switch on and off holding agro from the drake.) Essentially they take turns in a similar fashion to “tagging up” in a tag-team wrestling match. The drakes would spawn groups of small welps (baby dragons) and the tank off the drake was responsible to hold agro on the welps. Success was only possible with the perfect execution of coordinated precision, the sort exhibited and necessary in synchronized swimming routines. This fight only lasted for a couple of minutes but it seemed like a long time. If this game had moments of “FLOW” this was one of them and my heart was racing; this was very fun indeed. [Although, through most of it I was confused and overwhelmed and just hit 2, my fire blast, over and over]. Kashi continued to direct us like a symphony director but doing so verbally, conducting the raid like it was an orchestra of heroes.

We fought two more of the blue drakes, each with the added variation of who needed to go into the portal and when. After killing all three drake lieutenants, Shadron, Tenebron, and Vesperon, we faced their boss, Sartharion the Onyx Guardian, a very large black dragon. Sartharion could produce a large wave of flame that had two small openings. The trick was to not get hit by the fire wave when it happened during the fight and then to continue to damage the dragon until it was finally dead. Even with Kashi calling out the wave, seeing the openings was tricky and we wiped several times. The solution was found by entering a command into the chat window, which moved the camera, (a player's visual perspective of the environment), allowing us to see a wider area. Now the gap in the wave was clear and we finally, after 30 minutes of enjoyable frustration, downed the boss and claimed our loot. None of the loot was for mages so I didn't get to roll for any of it, but I was happy just about completing my first raid. And most of us got an achievement for OS that day and it was auto-announced to the guild, like all achievements. The guild chat scrolled a chorus of grats for our accomplishment. Just as we were leaving Hinez asked if anyone has the recount DPS data and Fierce posted it.

[Raid] Fierce: 1. Kashi 3780540 (2428.5, 22.2%)  
 [Raid] Fierce: 2. Fierce 3211818 (2124.3, 18.9%)  
 [Raid] Fierce: 3. Quilz 2553955 (1744.9, 15%)  
 [Raid] Fierce: 4. Arres 2377591 (1463.9, 14%)  
 [Raid] Fierce: 5. Hinez 1743157 (1183.2, 10.2%)  
 [Raid] Fierce: 6. Ana 1695218 (1390.6, 9.9%)  
 [Raid] Fierce: 7. Caprista 1584201 (1212.4, 9.3%)  
 [Raid] Fierce: 8. Linxtra 5486 (3.7, 0%)

Recount was another common add-on that would keep up with damage, healing and other statistical information generated during combat. I whispered Kashi.



<Ana whispers> That was great, thanks so much for inviting me.  
<Kashi whispers> I thought you would like raiding. You did fine and we can work on gear and you can come on more raids if you want. Do you have DBM  
<Ana whispers> that would be great. Invite me anytime. What's DBM?  
<Kashi whispers> Get an add-on called Deadly Boss Mods. It will tell you when the flame wave is coming for this raid and when stuff is about to happen for all the raids and dungeons. It's a must for raiding. And get your mic working on vent to. :)  
<Ana whispers> Will do Kash, and you're the best.

I typed goodnight into guild chat, still smiling from the raid. Several guild mates typed "nite Ana," but more importantly so did all the OS raiders. I went to sleep excited about my research and proud of my accomplishments in *WoW* as a player. And although I forgot to get DBM, I did get my microphone working. Everything was going exactly according to plan.

Or so I thought. Kashi continued to schedule raids and send out invitations via the calendaring system built into the game. I was running instances in the evening with my friends on the guild and meeting some new players along the way. Jousting was a regular start to Ana's day in Azeroth and provided me with enough reputation to become exalted with all the Alliance factions. I finally got the Frostsaber mount that Arres and Quilz had and my Tailoring profession reached the maximum level and I created a flying carpet. During the raids I occasionally got a new piece of gear and was almost ready for the final raids inside the Iron Crown Citadel (ICC).

IC was not logging on as much and word got around the guild that he had a new job that was keeping him away. The guild had 384 members, (toons, not players) and moratorium was passed down as an edict from IC. Officers were stepping up to lead as

needed in IC's absence. One evening in late September IC logged in and said that he had an announcement to make. After all the usual hellos:

<Icarus>: Hi, I have an announcement for all ears  
 <Arres>: You're coming out?  
 <Amos>: ok with me, I could use a small break  
 <Icarus>: you wish  
 <Sakana>: lmao  
 <Ronniiedk>: uh oh  
 <Griah>: <CHEERS>  
 <Arres>: lol. G.  
 <Icarus>: touche' F@&\$@r  
 <Griah>: well thats not why im cheering lol  
 <Icarus>: ;)  
 <Icarus>: wtf.. yeah bad timing  
 <Sakana>: spit it out already  
 <Ronniiedk>: yeah I am sitting on the edge of me seat  
 <Sakana>: IC?  
 <Icarus>: So in light of current events, new ideas in guild, raid set ups and overall fabulousness of being, I feel the need to set up a promotion here, one which i never thought I would add to, originally  
 <Icarus>: But lately, been noticing that I indeed need to correct that thought :)  
 Kashi has gone offline.  
 <Griah>: omg  
 <Icarus>: this fabulous being, deserving of said title, would be none other than  
 Icarus has promoted Kashi to Co GM.  
 <Arres>: I knew it!  
 <Griah>: OMFG  
 <Arres>: Grats!!  
 <Griah>: she went offline.  
 <Sakana>: grats Kash!!!!!!  
 <Fierce>: she's dc'd  
 <Arres>: lol  
 <Sakana>: lol  
 <Molar>: grats  
 <Icarus>: LOL  
 <Arres>: Demote her until she gets back online  
 <Amos>: That's wonderful and well deserved!  
 <Hammy>: Very Nice!!!! Congrats  
 <Griah>: demote again  
 Icarus has demoted Kashi to Lieutenant.  
 <Icarus>: lol  
 <Arres>: lol

<Solsta>: gratz Kash  
<Icarus>: haha, u guys kill me  
<Solsta>: lol  
<Molar>: lol  
<Icarus>: lemme know when Kash comes back, Fierce  
<Icarus>: no telling!  
<Fierce>: she saw it; she was standing over my shoulder  
<Icarus>: SUNUVA  
<Icarus>: > fired  
<Fierce>: i guessed what it was and told her to read the screen before you said it  
<Ronniiedk>: Hey IC you know there is a way for you to tell if people are online  
<Icarus>: she was still online tho when i did it Ronnie  
<Molar>: brb  
<Griah>: no she wasnt  
<Icarus>: even tho she wasnt  
<Icarus>: her name went offline afterwards  
<Icarus>: scroll ;)  
<Icarus>: well thats gonna look odd in the logs  
<Icarus>: lol  
<Ronniiedk>: well regardless Congrats Kash  
Kashi has come online.  
<Icarus>: oh, hi Kash  
<Icarus>: nothing going on here  
<Griah>: lol  
<Icarus>: go about ur business  
<Icarus>: dont read the logs  
<Icarus>: ever  
<Kashi>: lol  
<Icarus>: =)  
<Icarus>: so uh.. yeah.. well then  
<Kashi>: lol  
Kashi to Co GM.  
<Icarus>: BOOM  
<Griah>: GRATZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZZ KASH!!  
<Roma>: congrats Kash!  
<Icarus>: haha  
<Arres>: GRATS!!!!!!!!!!!!!!  
<Amos>: Congrats Kash  
<Kashi>: omg WoW ty. I feel honored  
<Solsta>: gratz !!  
<Zimek>: YAYZ!!!!!!!!!!  
<Hammy Whispers To Kashi>: Yey, You really deserved that! ;)  
<Kashi>: \*bows\* I will try not to be a evil ruler. ;- ) j/k  
<Kashi whispers to Hammy>: thanks

<Arres>: You should be Kash. Do you realize the things I had to do just to become a Lieutenant?

<Fierce>: i can guess

<Griah>: lol

<Roma>: rofl

<Icarus>: I am still not coming out Al

<Icarus>: no matter what you did. or tried to do for that title

<Fierce>: Kash actually hearthed before all that happened

<Fierce>: you guys wanna dance?

<Kashi>: you know all you have to do to get lt. is flash some cleavage...

<Arres>: lol. I don't have much of that.

Fierce bursts into dance.

<Solsta>: lol

<Kashi>: well that's your problem

<Arres>: Or any really

<Griah>: i dont either...

<Arres>: lol. G.

<Fierce>: prove it

<Kashi>: you work it well G

<Zimek>: G WILL NOT BE PROVING THAT

<Icarus>: too late

<Icarus>: <emails Fierce>

<Arres>: He was talking to me

<Griah>: LOL

Ronniedk bursts into dance.

<Icarus>: oh these are pre-Zim days

<Fierce>: either one of ya, i don't care

<Icarus>: its ok Zim

<Icarus>: my personal collection

<Zimek>: IC....

<Zimek>: OMG

<Zimek>: FIRED!!!!

<Icarus>: thats what she sed

<Icarus>: well , until u sed fired

<Fierce>: i'm thrusting my crotch at Amos and nothing

<Icarus>: poor Amos

<Fierce>: he's not moving

<Fierce>: mesmorized maybe?

<Icarus>: lol

You burst into dance.

<Ronniedk>: so IC if I flash you some cleavage I get to be an LT

<Icarus>: i've seen ur Fb pics..

<Molar>: lol

<Fierce>: ok since i'm getting no tips i'm gonna hearth

The preceding exchange serves as a wonderful demonstration of guild life. The tone is playful and there were a lot of insider jokes and jabs embedded in the announcement that IC would share the reins of power with Kashi. An ongoing guild jab was that IC was a homosexual, as seen in the “coming out” reference at the beginning of the exchange. Although he never admitted to a sexual preference in guild chat, these jokes were an ongoing part of daily guild life. Another one was Kashi’s joke to Arres about showing cleavage in exchange for a promotion in the guild. And most of the female toons, including Ana, displayed prominent cleavage.

Guild promotions were commonly granted, allowing competent and involved players to move up the ranks to officer status. But this was the first time someone received Co-GM status. Kashi now held the guild authority to do anything short of firing/kicking IC. A common joke amongst the officers was to demote or kick a friend and then laugh as they attempted to find someone with the power to invite them back. We all got a good laugh as they returned and proceeded to tell their freak-out moment story of discovering they were guild-less. Kashi never played jokes, although she had a great sense of humor and we laughed our way through scores of dungeons together. As a leader, her focus was serious about the raids and progression in the game. She and Fierce spent a lot of time researching the raids on various game-related websites. They carefully planned which guild members formed the best raid teams matched to the encounters, and the loot obtained from them.

Invites to guild raids were a big deal. The gear needed to progress dropped off the raid bosses, so in many ways, participation was the only path to advancement. Although invites were completely based on the merit of one’s gear and knowledge of the fights, I

was still disappointed on several occasions when I did not get one. We raided about three nights a week, Tuesday and Thursday were gear progression raids for the *The Wrath of the Lich King* and then on Saturdays we did legacy raids from the original game and *The Burning Crusade*. The midweek raids were the hardest to get invited to because they were 10-man raids and there were about 14 who could do it. If we all showed up, four of us would be benchwarmers. Occasionally someone raiding would need to leave in the middle or not make it to the second night so I would be called in off the bench. I would make sure to be questing or working on a profession, like enchanting or fishing while they raided, hoping someone would drop out. Slowly, my gear and ability as a fire-mage was improving.

Although I didn't get invited to every raid, my old crew of Quilz, Arres, Fierce and Kashi, continued to run daily heroic dungeons. Both Fierce and Quilz had created healer alts and quickly leveled them to 80, so we always had the necessary tank healer and three DPS. In repeating the dungeons, we discussed the strategy of the moment less because we had all learned our roles and what to do at each encounter along the way. This confidence in our execution allowed us to "play" more while we played. The instances became progressively easier and in turn a more fun social experience.

For Kashi, the Saturday raids began to produce frustration. These were usually scheduled for the afternoon and they were 25-man raids. There was never a problem getting invited; the problem was getting everyone who signed up to show up. Certain players, who had committed to be there by accepting the invitation in the in-game calendar, would completely fail to show up. Some would show up late, or very late. Raids notoriously started 15 to 30 minutes late. When not enough people would show up, we

were asked to invite anyone on our friends' list who met the required roles; we were usually short tanks, or healers. Once in the raid, new headaches emerged. After downing the boss, the loot was automatically given to the Raid leader or Lootmaster.

These rare drops from the raid bosses were highly coveted by the raiders and hash disagreements frequently developed over who should receive them. The final decision was based on the type of loot and matching it with the class of the toons. For example Ana could roll on a piece of armor if it was cloth and didn't add to my spirit statistic. If it had a bonus to spirit, and was cloth, it was for priests and not mages. Identifying which gear was designed for mages was clearer than for some of the other classes. If you met the loot criteria then you could roll for it by typing "/roll" in raid chat and a random number from 1-100 was generated. The player rolling the highest number would be given the treasure by the lootmaster. Issues of fairness were raised because some people came every time on time but never won any gear. Other complaints were that some players could take multiple roles and won too often, and at the expense of other players. Winning was a big deal and every raider knew it. Kashi had to sort it all out on the spot. But hurt feelings lasted and persisted into the days that followed. Kashi was developing a clearer system of rules but needed IC's support to institutionalize them. He was around less and less. And when he was there, he clearly did not want to be involved in loot disputes or other issues like the moratorium for new members. He would login, and respond to the procession of hellos in guild chat, and generally check-in socially with us.

In IC's absence one of the other officers, Griah, took on some the GM's role such as managing the guild bank and issuing an occasional guild invite. She and Kashi didn't see eye-to-eye on every situation, and most significantly moving the guild from a

leveling/social guild in to a raiding guild. Kashi and Fierce began to raid with another guild, WarzRus, which was far more dedicated to progressing through the raids than the Gnomes. The Saturday raids often would not make, due to people not showing up and on the occasion when IC made an appearance, he clearly was not interested in raiding. IC was happy with the guild the way it was; large and social. It was late December and I didn't realize how bad the morale for the leadership was.

<Kashi Whispers> Just wanted to tell you that Fierce and I are leaving the gnomes.  
 <Ana Whispers> really, why, OMG!  
 <Ana Whispers> I'm in shock  
 <Kashi Whispers> I know. We really like you, which is why I'm telling you and we can continue to raid. This is not public information yet so please be discrete. We got a good deal with that couple we have been raiding with. I just can't do it here, I'm not getting the support I need and I want to raid.  
 <Ana Whispers> Is it the loot stuff or the no shows.  
 <Kashi Whispers> Yeah both  
 <Ana Whispers> WoW! Big news and I will not say anything, but this is a lot for me to consider right now. I'm still in shock. Lol  
 <Kashi Whispers> It will be fine and you got a good story ☺  
 <Ana Whispers> I added you to my friends list. I'm leaving for Thailand tomorrow to get married to Iron. I'll be there a month but will try to log in when and if I can. Can I ask you more about this later?  
 <Kashi Whispers> CONGRATS to you and Iron!!!! And of course you can ask me anything. Safe trip and talk to you soon.

Two days later and half a hemisphere away, I learned that Kashi and Fierce had left and joined a raider guild. I was in air on route to Thailand when it happened but when I logged in, I learned that 10 of the best raider class players in the Clockwork Gnomes left during the fallout that ensued. There were still a few of the younger players in the guild but it was like a ghost town in the chat window. IC was hurt and most of his oldest friends in the game had left. Most went with Kashi and Fierce, but a few joined other guilds and Arres and Quilz had surprisingly remained. I whispered with Fierce and Kashi.



They were happy and told me that they were raiding all the time. I asked Kashi if I could join and she told me she could invite me anytime I wanted to join. I told her that I want to tell IC before I did that and she said she understood. And I would wait until after I was married and returned back to the States. Understandably, this time with my wife was to be cherished and I didn't log back in for the next two weeks.

On my return, I knew what I needed to do and did not look forward to it. My position was awkward, but I couldn't miss this opportunity to explore a different guild, a raider's guild. Two weeks later, I finally had an opportunity to talk to IC, who was logging in even less frequently since the exodus. It was a painful discussion and he questioned the loyalty of all who left and he told me how he had added most of them to his ignore-list (the opposite of the Friends-list, it prevents any incoming chat for anyone on the list). I told him that I wanted to leave Hammy with the Gnomes and that Iron would also stay. He agreed, but I could tell that he was not pleased with my decision. 24 hours later, I sent a whisper to Kashi.

<Ana Whispers> I'm ready if I can still come over.

<Kashi Whispers> Hey Ana, Ok!

"You have been invited to WarzRus" I click accept.

<Solsta Whispers> Why did you leave the guild?

<Ana Whispers> I needed to leave for some research I'm doing. I talked to IC about it yesterday and he's cool.

<Solsta Whispers> Ok I just wanted to make sure none of the Gnomes pissed you off.

<Ana Whispers> Oh absolutely not everyone has always been great to me.

<Solsta Whispers> Ok cool.

<Solsta Whispers> I just looked you up on *WOWHEROES* and can't believe you joined them! Jeeeeeez! ☹

I didn't respond to her. In between my whispers with Solsta were a few welcome to WarzRus messages, but noticeably fewer than when players had joined the Gnomes and

even fewer than when I first joined the Gnomes. This was a new guild with new etiquette and I was the new kid at a new school, again.

### **Part Three: Raiding Culture**

#### *Defining Raid (Level 80)*

"Leading a raid can be like herding cats, but by the graces, they're your cats." - Stylean Silversteel, TCG [from <http://www.WoWwiki.com/Raid>]

In order to begin to understand the culture of raiders, a definition of a raid is needed. Technically, a raid is simply a way to group more than five-and up to 40- players to play collectively. Generally in PVE, a raid team adventures their way through a difficult dungeon instance. The raid instance is designed for a group of players who have all reached the maximum level (80 at the time of this study). During *The Wrath of the Lich King* expansion, the current endgame content during my study, groups were optimally set up as either 10-man, or 25-man, raid parties. Some raid level instances by design may be completed within a single play session, while others such as the Icecrown Citadel (ICC) required multiple sessions, taking months to learn and finally complete.

As a game term, raid is simultaneously the group, the instance, and the activity. Raids are planned events; researched in advance by one or more raid leaders. The leader, through an in-game calendaring system, sends invitations to potential raiders. If invited, the calendar blinks notifying the player of an invitation and the player then selects one of three responses to the invitation: accept, reject, or tentative. When accepted, leaders occasionally request that the raid group individually watch a video or read a website detailing the particulars of the upcoming raid encounters in preparation of the event. All this planning and scheduling was simpler to arrange within a guild as opposed to

scheduling members from across multiple guilds, but that happened as well. When well-planned, the competencies of the invited raid members collectively equate to the potential for a successful run so groups of raiders inevitably, are grouped together in guilds in order to receive frequent invites or better yet to be on a regular raiding schedule. And this is where the conception of raiding guilds resides.

Conceptually, a distinction between social guilds and raider guilds is completely artificial. In terms of the mechanics and structure of a guild there is no difference between them. The only distinction between guilds is the players' commitment to exploring as much of the designed endgame content in the game as possible through organization, research and scheduling. Some content is out of reach for players in terms of its level of difficulty. For example, I did not find any children involved in raiding throughout my study, although I'm sure there are exceptions.

In a discussion of these 'social versus raider' player distinctions with Arres, I asked him about the nature of raiders, which I referred to as end-gamers. He explained that many players never get to the end game content, but instead become content with exploring, running dungeons, and leveling their professions. He referred to this population as "dead-enders" (not pejoratively), and that these type of players constituted a majority in *Warcraft*. Apparently, there was no single form of proper involvement with the game. Players freely choose the sort of play comfortable and enjoyable to them in much the same way as attending a theme park. Some folks go solely for the roller coasters while others are content with the bumper cars, having no interest in riding on coasters.

Guild leadership does shape, and to a degree, define the guild's range activities, which may or may not include raids. If raids aren't scheduled then they don't happen in a guild. The Gnomes' for example did a few raids but raiding was not central to guild life and finding enough interested and capable players was a challenge, and often a frustration for Kashi. Alternatively, players could always try to find a group of strangers who needed to fill a particular role, usually a healer or tank. Joining a raid in this way, or finding a missing role is called a PUG, or Pugging, meaning it was a pick-up-group.

WarzRus was on the other end of the spectrum from the Gnomes, demonstrating a clear commitment to raiding by scheduling many raids on the guild calendar, some by invitation only, while others were free for anyone to signup. A raiding guild might then be defined by the frequency and centrality of raid scheduling and participation within the guild. I suggest a consideration of a continuum of guild's orientation ranging from a social-leveling guild on one end to hardcore raiding guilds on the other may serve to loosely define them. I would come to find that WarzRus leaned towards raiding but there were certainly other guilds on our realm that were far more dedicated to raiding and the officers and leadership wanted to move the guild further in that direction. As the saying goes "birds of a feather flock together" and participating in raids, successful ones anyway, requires a team of committed players who can adhere to a weekly schedule for continued progression through a series of raid encounters. WarzRus was looking for more of these type players and quick to kick out individuals that did not comply.

This was the atmosphere as Ana entered the guild. Additionally, I had left Hammy with the Gnomes so monitoring two guilds was now possible. Guild chat in the Gnomes was nearly non-existent, like a ghost town; the exodus had taken the majority of

core players. And in fact, I came to find that several of them had joined WarzRus only to be kicked out, or quit, finding the atmosphere too competitive and intense. “They’re just jerks over there,” I was told by a few of these Gnomers. Ana would need to be on the top of her game if she wanted to be successful in Warz.

It was surprising to me that Arres and Quilz did not leave during the exodus and when asked, Arres said that he just had not gotten around to it. Quilz’s sister was one of the earliest members of the Gnomes so I figured that must have something to do with it. IC, on the other hand, felt deeply betrayed and was still quite devastated about the exodus. Shortly thereafter he announced his retirement from the game and made Sakana the GM. Later, I was told by Sakana that IC was planning on returning after the next expansion, *Cataclysm*, was released. Curiously Sakana made Hammy the CO-GM, the position once held by Kashi. This promotion had little relevance since there was really no one around anymore to lead. However, I did invite a real life friend to the game and used my status to invite and promote him. I made a healer named Minx and he made a warlock and we began to level together, occasionally joined by Iron.

#### *Getting Geared (Level 80)*

Concurrently, Blizzard, in a sense the gods of this virtual world in their perpetual tinkering, made some significant changes to the game. Patch 3.3 introduced a new feature called the dungeon finder. This allowed players the ability to run dungeons with matched players from across realms. Clicking the dungeon finder button and selecting a role of damage, healer, or tank, placed a player in a queue waiting to enter a dungeon. Sometimes the wait could be up to an hour. When all five roles were filled, players were teleported into the dungeon and could run the instance together. This feature allowed

players to run instances as often as desired and removed need to find four other players from their guild or realm for that matter. At first I was a little intimidated by this new feature, since I knew how Fierce and Kashi did things and didn't want to embarrass myself in front of strangers, but quickly realized that the dungeon finder was fantastic for earning not only gold and gear but more importantly emblems. Emblems were a type of currency that could be amassed and eventually exchanged from an emblem vendor for superior gear, the type of gear necessary for raiding.

The dungeon finder did not inhibit one from running with friends. In fact I would frequently find Fierce during the day and we would group up and get in the queue together. My time waiting in the queue was much shorter with him since he selected the role of tank, which was apparently in the shortest supply across all the realms. We would wait a few minutes and do the run with three other random players from across all the realms. And then do another, and another. He explained to me that in order to get on to a regular raid team in the guild, I had to get a set of tiered-gear, which could only be obtained with the emblems, received in raids or heroic level dungeon runs. I would save up the emblems and buy the tiered gear I needed from special vendors. Over time my gear would be good enough to run ICC.

He also showed me how to look up my level 80 toon on a website called *WoWheroes.com*, which displayed my comprehensive gear score, the metric used to determine my readiness for participation in the various raid instances. Another feature of the *WoWheroes* site allowed me a convenient way to see if all my gear was properly enchanted, and when possible, gemmed. Some high level gear would have a slot where a gem could be inserted and players with the jewel crafting profession would cut gems that

could improve certain stats. In my case I needed gems to increase my spell power, in order to do more damage, or my haste statistic that allowed me to cast spells faster, thus doing greater DPS.

Fierce and Kashi taught me all the tricks for improving my game, in essence training me and preparing me for the raids to come. They informed me that I needed some additional add-ons, most importantly DBM, deadly boss mods. This add-on would offer some advance notice of what bosses were casting during an encounter in order to make the necessary and correct reactionary moves. Without it I would most likely be killed and potentially cause the raid to wipe. In addition to DMB they instructed me to get Recount that displayed my DPS output in relation to the raid. Kashi told me to watch it closely and to find ways to continue to improve my damage output. As a mage that was my primary concern, to do as much damage as fast as possible, and to stay alive. Dead mages do zero damage. For the next couple of months I worked on increasing my gear score and my damage output.

Also, I was familiarizing myself with the new cast of characters in WarzRus. Some of them I recognized as former Gnomes, but many were new. The GM was Caprista, assisted by her husband and Co-GM Sircat. I had met them during my first experience raiding in OS, but they didn't remember me and unlike in the Gnomes there were no personal introductions. I knew that I needed to disclose my intention for conducting research here and was nervous about their response. This guild was much more serious and humor in the guild chat was far less frequent, causing me to miss the friendly casual atmosphere of the Gnomes. I wasn't making bags for the guild here; I was just another player trying to get geared for raiding.

Here the chat mostly centered on where to go for what gear or how much damage someone did to a particular boss. The dungeon finder also was allowing for some critical humor as guild members found themselves in failed runs with repeated wipes blamed on an inexperienced tank or healer from some other realm. These tales of failure were frequently described in guild chat as a source of amusement for the online members. One day I asked Caprista if it would be ok for me to conduct my study here. Kashi had made it clear prior to my invitation to the guild that she would not breach this subject for me with the leadership. Understanding her position, I had finally mustered the courage to do it. Caprista said she would talk to Sircat and get back to me. They were always busy but this time Sircat was quick and asked me some questions and said it was fine and that he and Cap would help if asked. I was relieved and relaxed. This was great news and I somewhat expected to be promoted to officer at that point but that never happened. I wanted to sign them both up at that moment but they jumped in a dungeon run and were unavailable.

After that, word got around the guild that I was a researcher, which was fine with me because I did not want to seem deceptive to anyone. Mostly the guild members just ignored the fact, but a few contacted me with sincere interest in my work and to inquire about participating. I eagerly signed them up. Everything was going smoothly and then my world got briefly turned upside down by a few words from Sircat.

<Sircat Whispers> Ana, you know Fire is not a raiding spec for mages.

<Ana Whispers> OK really? What should I be?

<Sircat Whispers> Well currently Arcane is best for PVE raiding and Frost is best for PVP

<Sircat Whispers> You need to change to Arcane if you want to raid with us. OK?

At that moment I felt like a grade school kid sent to the principal's office.

<Ana Whispers> Ok I will try it.



<Sircat Whispers> Talk to Hirez if you have mage questions or need help. He's our mage expert in the guild.

<Sircat Whispers> I send you a raid invite for Thursday since Grouchy can't come. Good work on getting your gear score up.

<Ana Whispers> Ok thanks and see you Thursday

Being invited was great, but relearning everything about how to play my role as an Arcane mage made my heart sink into my stomach. And had Sircat been watching my gear score this whole time? Some questions were never answered and this was one of them. Although, I think Fierce or Kashi had talked to him about me after announcing I wanted to research the guild. It was Tuesday evening, raid night for the regulars. This meant I had to forget my year's worth of fire mage training and lean to be an arcane mage in the next 48 hours. Seeing my calendar blinking, I opened and accepted my invitation to ICC 10-man for Thursday and noticed that I was invited to the 25-man ICC for Saturday and accepted that as well. Excitedly I sent a whisper out to Kashi.

<Ana Whispers> Hey Kashi, I got invited to ICC for Thursdays

<Kashi Whispers> [DBM]Kashi is busy fighting Sindrogosa 10/10 alive

<Kashi Whispers> One sec

<Kashi Whispers> Hey, I saw your name on the list, Grats Ana!

<Ana Whispers> Yeah sorry to bother you I didn't check to see if you were in raid. But I need to know where is the best place to learn about Arcane mages. I need to change specs and learn it for the raid.

<Kashi Whispers> Hum...? I would google popular arcane mage builds and see what you find. Then respect to that build. Next find a good arcane mage rotation and you should be good. Try to practice while you do your dailies and then run and random and see how you do. I think Hirez is our mage expert so you may want to ask him too. Good luck, you will do fine. ☺

Locating the most popular arcane mage build online was easy and there were numerous sites dedicated solely to arcane mage rotations, glyphs, potions and elixirs and what gear was considered best. Back in-game I went to the mage trainer and was faced with a decision to spend 1000 gold (a lot), on Duel Talent Specialization and take arcane

as a second spec while keeping fire or dumping fire for arcane. I spent the money, reluctantly. I had been saving up to buy flying in Northrend (5000 gold) but that would need to wait. I wanted to be a regular raider and hopefully get on the team with Kashi and Fierce. Thursday was my big break! I trained harder than Rocky and my Recount DPS data proved it. The Arcane spec did a lot more damage than I had ever done with the Fire spec. Next I downloaded DBM. Then, referencing the arcane research conducted earlier, I proceed to properly upgrade all of Ana's enchantments. At the auction house I purchased and equipped all the suggested arcane mage glyphs, better gems for my gear, and potions that would increasing my spell power for one hour and would even persist through death. Proudly my *Warcraft* homework was completed and I had prepared, like a Boy Scout before an over-night, for my role as an arcane mage. By Thursday I was ready to raid.

It was 8:30 on Thursday and I was excited. From the floating capital city of Dalaran, on a personally hand-sewn magic carpet, Ana flew and waited at the entrance to the Lich Kings Citadel at the southern edge of Icecrown for the raid to begin. The activity in guild chat always increases prior to raid time, and then an eerie silence sets in once it starts. In guild chat, there were multiple discussions going on at once, but I was well used to piecing the conversations together in my head by this point. One was deciding which of two helmets was best. Several members were chiming in on the merits of one over the other. Another conversation was about obtaining necessary consumables, like potions or food from the auction house. This topic caused some of the night's raiders to put in a grocery order for things they needed from the Auction house but had not picked up yet.

And then others announced that they were bringing some of the requested items so it was not necessary to buy them. Then came the message I was waiting for.

<Caprista> Ok guys, I'm sending out raid invites in five. Start heading that way.

Ready and waiting, I was sitting on top of a giant dilapidated wooden catapult in front of the instance beside a powerful troll shaman who kept waving at me and then dancing. I ignored him. Beneath us there was a lot of activity. There was an NPC battle occurring between some giants and the Alliance forces stationed here. There was also an ongoing battle between several horde and alliance players who were set to PVP mode and killing each other. Raiders from a number of other guilds had gathered around a magic obelisk to my right and summoned their party members and then ran into the citadels long dark hall, disappearing into the portal at its end.

I get a message on my screen that Caprista had invited me to the raid and I click accept. I get a message from Fierce.

<Fierce Whispers> Go in the portal and wait for me at the end of the hall don't talk to the NPC's in there some of them are not friendly.

<Fierce Whispers> Hey Fierce, Ok.

<Caprista> Everybody get in Vent

<Raid Leader> Caprista: Vent Info

<Raid Leader> Caprista: IK2.Seetvent.com

<Raid Leader> Caprista: port 3857

<Raid Leader> Caprista: pass WRU10

I open my Ventrilo application, enter the specifics, and click connect. "Hey Ana" a soft female voice says and I can see that it is Caprista when a microphone icon appears next to her name as she speaks. "Hi everybody" I say. Then the familiar voices of Fierce and Kashi say "hey Ana" nearly in unison. Someone named Jacob says, "Ana's a guy!"

followed by a series of LOLs in the chat. “Yep,” I say. Caprista quickly ends the introductions and takes command saying “Ok everyone, take the telepad up to Deathbringer's Rise we are starting were we left off on Tuesday at Saurfang. I know some of you don't know this boss so I will explain the fight while we all get well-fed and buffed.” I can hear a flurry of spells being cast as everyone in the raid is buffed by each other's beneficial spells. I use my arcane brilliance spell to increase everyone's intelligence. Silverwings puts down a fish feast on the floor and everyone sits down and eats for 20 seconds until they get the well-fed buff.

“Ok Ana use your focus magic on Hirez and vice versa.”

“OK” I say.

“Ok here are the healing and tank assignments.” She proceeds to issue instructions to the Tanks and Healers, most of which I don't understand. More importantly they do. “Ok the ranged players need to stand back here and spread out in a circle around the stairs. Use your range checker to make sure you are all 10 yards apart, so all of us don't get hit by his blood nova spell. It does 10,000 damage to everyone in the area so don't make this harder for the healers than it needs to be. Next he summons adds (adds are new monsters summoned by the boss). The adds are two Blood Beasts that will come out every 40 seconds and the ranged guys must use your abilities first to slow them down and then burn them down (Kill them) as fast a possible. Melee players please don't use AOE attacks when the blood beasts are out. We want them off the stairs.”

<Fierce Whispers> type /range 10 and your range checker will open showing you who you are too close to.

<Ana Whispers> ok

Following his instructions, a box appears on my screen. When I move within ten yards of another player their name appears inside the window. I see Jacob behind me so I inch forward until it disappears off my list in the range checker. Caprista continues speaking while I set it up, concerning me that I missed something important while my concentration was shifted. But I don't say or type anything. A ready check appears on my screen and I click yes. Ok everybody's buffed and ready. It will be a minute while the dwarf talks to him before we start.

Saurfang stands on the platform and the raid tanks and melee are in position around him. The healers and ranged DPS players are in a semicircular formation around the bottom of the steps. A NPC dwarf appears and the encounter begins with an audio and text conversation.

Muradin Bronzebeard yells: Let's get a move on then! Move ou...

Deathbringer Saurfang yells: For every Horde soldier that you killed -- for every Alliance dog that fell, the Lich King's armies grew. Even now the val'kyr work to raise your fallen as Scourge.

Deathbringer Saurfang yells: Things are about to get much worse. Come, taste the power that the Lich King has bestowed upon me!

Muradin Bronzebeard yells: A lone orc against the might of the Alliance???

Muradin Bronzebeard yells: Charge!!!

Deathbringer Saurfang yells: Dwarves...

Deathbringer Saurfang immobilises Muradin and his guards.

We all begin attacking Saurfang. Caprista is calling everything out in Vent with the calm control of an orchestra conductor. She would say things like "Taunt off to Fierce," which instructed all the tanks to pass the boss's aggro to the next tank. She would say "blood beasts in 5" which warned us that Saurfang would summon the adds that I was instructed to slow and kill. Two of these purple demon dogs would appear and my job was to kill the one on my side along with the help of the hunter Rodeus to my

right. Behind us Sircat, a druid, was casting heal over time spells as the blood beasts charged us. Casting my slow spell followed by three arcane blasts and then arcane missiles and whatever Rodeus was throwing at him, the beast was slowed and down to half his hit points when it got to us. I cast frost nova and moved back. Now I'm too close to Sircat, and Saurfang's blood nova spell damages the three of us for 10,000 points. Caprista calls out "Blood Beasts in 5" and our Blood Beast is still up and now chasing Rodeus. The other side kills the second Blood Beast and begins attacking the one on our side. As it dies, two more come charging in. "I'm down," Fierce calls out on vent. Caprista replies, "Wipe it up guys this is over." As she says this, the charging Blood Beast kills me and everyone retreats back to a flying boat behind us.

Sircat resurrects me and everyone begins buffing and another fish feast is put down on the floor. Everyone eats for 20 seconds and moves back into position. Sircat says, "Ok what went wrong. We can't get hit by the blood beasts heals Saurfang or we will never keep up so Ana use your frost nova to freeze them in place or Ice block yourself to avoid getting hit by them". Sircat address Crisco (a warlock on the other side of the steps from me), "use your teleport to get away."

"Rodeus, you put down a frost trap before they come up and that might help." After everybody's buffed, Caprista issues a ready check. The whole scene starts again including the dwarf's conversation with Saurfang. I watch the DBM count down to when we can start our attack. On the second try, we down (kill) the first set of Blood Beasts much faster and go back to attacking the boss, Saurfang. When the second set of Blood Beasts come out, one of the melee players casts an AOE (area of effect) on the ground and both Blood Beasts are pulled onto the steps and attack everyone currently focusing

on the boss. Caprista calls out “I’m down, it’s a wipe.” I turn invisible and everyone still alive runs back to boat pursued by the Blood Beasts who eventually disappear as the encounter resets.

Caprista in an irritated tone says “Who AOE’d? You guys gotta watch that or we wipe.” Tongo, a paladin says, “Sorry I used my consecrate spell by accident.” We are all buffing, eating again, and then moving back into our positions. It starts again. We go through three sets of blood beasts and have Saurfang down to five percent of his health. Caprista calls out “blood beasts in 5” then, as if instantly reassessing the situation, she says “burn down the boss. Ignore the beasts. Use everything you got guys.” The blood beasts charge and kill both Crisco and me. Dead on the floor I can still see the action as the survivors fight onward. Two percent, One percent and Saurfang is down. A few of us get achievements and a few guild “grats” scroll past in green chat. Sircat resurrects me, again, and I rebuff. Caprista say ok we got a caster necklace [Soulcleave Pendant] and some tank bracers [Gargoyle Spit Bracers]. Roll on main spec, that’s Crisco and Ana only.

<Raid Crisco> Crisco Rolls 20

<Raid Ana> Ana Rolls 84

“Ok Ana wins the necklace” Caprista says, and it appears in my backpack.

<Raid Kashi> grats Ana

<Raid Crisco> gratz

<Raid Martini> Grats

Other verbal grats come across vent. I’m smiling ear-to-ear in-chair and quickly put on the necklace in-game. It was considerably better than my old necklace and had a much higher item level than any of my other gear. They proceeded to roll for the tank

bracers but I was too excited about my new necklace to notice exactly who won it. “Good job everybody” Sircat says.

With Saurfang’s death, we could now pass through the giant stone door behind him; it had transformed into another portal. One by one we pass through. On the other side we are in a hall and every few seconds, frost blows from the sides creating a barrier. I watch the players in front of me time out this trap and run through and I follow. Beyond this frost trap are three more just like it and all ten of us carefully sneak past them and arrive on the other side where there is another teleporter and a very large open round area to our right. Everyone groups there and buffs and eats again. Seeing two flying creatures looking like white female angles flying a patrolling pattern and blocking our way I was ready for more. But that was it.

“Sorry guys Silverwings needs to leave and we don’t have a replacement healer so I’m calling it for tonight. Good job on Saurfang” said Caprista. Silverwings speaks up “Sorry y’all I have an appointment in the morning.” “No problem SW, see you guys next time” says Crisco. Sircat asks, “Ana could you put up a portal to Dalaran for us?” “Sure will,” I say and conjure a portal back to the city and they all walk through it.

<Ana whispers> Kashi, that was awesome, thanks so much for inviting me here. And tell Fierce thanx too.

<Kashi whispers> NP and I will. I knew you would like Raiding. I have to put the little one to bed now. See you soon.

<Ana whispers> Nite Kashi

We all logged off and I was more tired than I had realized. It’s 11:15 and I go to bed hoping to raid a lot more in coming days. Little did I know that the leadership was already devising a way to create a third 10-man raid team by dividing up some of the players on the two current teams. Ana and a handful of newer raiders, mostly former



Gnomes, were being phased in across the three teams and trained up. Their longer-range goal was to have at least 30 skilled raiders in the guild and to create a consistent 25-man raid schedule that thus far had to be pugged with a few outsiders each week hampering their progression through 25-man ICC.

*Hackers, Patch Changes and Why I Hate Tuesdays (Level 80)*

The scariest aspect of Warcraft is not monsters, or the claustrophobic disorientation experienced inside caves and dungeons, or even death. Its (1) hackers, (2) the incessant tinkering by the developers at Blizzard (paradoxically which also keeps the game fresh) and (3) the ability of the add-on developers to keep up-to-date with all of Blizzard's changes. Without add-ons, raiders can't raid. They rely on add-ons like DBM, Healbot, Pallypower and a host of other class-based display altering tools. If these add-ons fail to work properly then the party wipes; it's just that simple. But hackers are by far the worst. Hacked accounts prevent the real player from logging in and then rob the player of the time that they put into developing their toon(s). Stolen toons are virtually stripped down like a stolen car and ultimately the account is sold online through services like eBay. Additionally, if the hacked player had high-level guild privileges, the hacker can potentially empty a guild bank as well and then send all the gold or loot to other toons on the realm. After the stolen gear is distributed, it's then sold through the auction house. Detecting this activity is difficult as it occurs but there are signs.

Arres had finally joined Warz and started raiding with us. We had become more than in-game friends and were emailing each other a little outside of the game. Quilz didn't come with him, instead remaining with her sister in the Gnomes. And for a short

while Arres, Kashi, Fierce, Quilz, and I ran heroics together again just like we had in the “old days” and it was great playing with my original gang.

In Warz, the raid teams were still being sorted out and I was hopeful that I would be placed in a team with my old friends. One morning around 9:30 I logged on to run my dailies and checked to see who, if any, of my friends were online. Fierce and Arres were on, so I said “good morning” in guild chat and no one replied, sigh. My next effort was sending out personal messages.

<Ana Whispers> Morning Fierce  
 <Fierce Whispers> Morning Ana  
 <Ana Whispers> Morning Arres.

I waited and waited and still no reply. That’s odd, I thought. Arres always says hello. Over the next thirty minutes the guild chat showed Arres logging on and off as each of his alts. Every so often I sent him a new message. “Hey” I said and no reply. “Stand still for a minute” and still no reply. “You Ok?” ... no reply. Finally I sent another message to Fierce.

<Ana Whispers> Is Arres hacked?  
 <Fierce Whispers> yeah gotta be  
 <Ana Whispers> I agree he has not responded to any of my chats.  
 <Fierce Whispers> He logged on at 8 and took as much as he could from the guild bank. I demoted as many of his toons as possible.  
 <Ana Whispers> That sux! I’m going to send him an email and let him know what is going on. But first I want to send one more to him  
 <Ana Whispers> HEY HACKER YOU SUCK!

No reply. I sent an email to Arres explaining the situation that Fierce and I had witnessed. Sadly, it was several months before I received his reply. He told me that he and Quilz were absent because they had moved in real life due to a lack of employment during the economic downturn. He explained how Blizzard recovered his toons, gear and gold, and the gear taken from the Warz guild bank was returned to the guild, finally that

said he and Quilz were also leaving our realm. They were in the process of transferring all their toons to a different realm where Quilz's sister had gone after IC had left the Gnomes.

Transferring toons is a service that Blizzard provides for a fee, along with some other similar services such as changing name, race, gender and even one's faction between Alliance and horde changes are possible. In addition to paying for the realm transfer, they had also paid for the faction change, which converted their toons from the alliance night elves to blood elves the horde equivalents. How much had being hacked played a role in their decision to leave this realm? Arres suggested it was none, but I still wondered. Or was it the collapse of the Clockwork Gnomes, or some combination? During this period a lot of accounts got hacked and some of them were professional players like Caprista and Grouch. I wondered if I would get hacked.

Some players thought that the hackers were exploiting the recent login change from the original *WoW* account to the new *Battlenet* accounts that would allow chat between players in all the Blizzard online games. Others believed the hacks were due to exploited add-ons service accounts, like curse.com. The only way that would be possible was if someone used the same name and password for both the game and add-on service. There was also some phishing activity in the game's trade and whisper chat. These were chat messages designed to lure players with game rewards to external sites similar in design to common email scams. So, there were several avenues for hackers to exploit players. But why would a hacker want to exploit a game? Were they players seeking more in-game wealth and power?

When Caprista, the guild's leader, was hacked the guild bank was pillaged severely. Blizzard resolved the issue recovering her gold and gear as well as the losses to the guild bank, but the process took nearly a week. For Caprista it was a week without raiding, and a week without progression. While she waited for Blizzard to restore her toons, she created a new toon in order to stay connected to the community and proceeded to secure guild resources from future attacks. Towards this effort, member privileges were ratcheted down limiting the number of items a player could withdraw from the guild bank. She also drastically reduced the privileges held by players' alts.

After Grouch was hacked, I asked him about the ordeal and his interest in the game. He had been playing for a year and a half and enjoyed the game's intellectual challenge, particularly optimizing his toons' characteristics and the Auction house where he used a spreadsheet for determining the mean square and standard deviations on gem prices. He was a math-head and not afraid to say it. He had returned from a business trip when he discovered that he was locked out of his account. He emailed Blizzard and they froze his account. Caprista called him to let him know what had happened with the guild bank, but he was already aware of the situation. He called Blizzard and was told the more developed toons are, the longer it takes to restore, so he knew that this process would take awhile. He was also told that three of his toons were already transferred and sold to another account. Three days later he was able to login.

His stuff was returned not intact with his toons but in a series of 50 in-game mail messages. Curiously, what he received back from Blizzard via the in-game mail was not identical to what he had lost, but he felt what he received more than compensated, stating he lost 52,000 gold and received 67,000. Given that Grouchy was such a math-head, I

felt confident in his calculations. Ironically, he put many of the items he didn't need into the guild bank and another officer, Silverwings, was hacked and it was all stolen again. The guilds' reaction was supportive to his ordeal and several players offered assistance while he regrouped. Other players teased him and playfully welcomed him back while calling him a noob. It's the kind of hazing that says you were missed by the guild. Grouchy also mentioned that his wife had offered to buy him a new account, which he thought was really cool on her part.

Grouch speculated how the hackers accomplished their nefarious work and how the toons eventually ended up on *EBay*. Toons as developed as Grouchy's could sell for between 600 and 800 dollars and raid-ready tanks and healers were selling for around 1200 dollars. So now it was clear that the hackers were not players. This was purely a criminal business cashing in on a players time spent developing a toon. And virtual loot was easily converted into tangible cash. In usual Grouch fashion, he entered his calculations into our chat, demonstrating to me how the hackers had made five thousand dollars off all his stolen virtual items. I asked him about the *EBay* buyers and he explained that they lost everything, money and toons. So there was a lot a player could lose inside this virtual world, money, time, friends and toons. And I was still sad about Arres and Quilz leaving my realm.

Not only were they the friends who first invited me into a guild, they were my two best in-game friends. After being involved in so many adventures together, bonds formed and now they were gone. The virtual world can surprise you in how fast it changes. Some of these changes are good and others are terrible. In *Warcraft*, change usually comes on Tuesdays.

Shortly after Arres and Quilz transferred, a new game feature was implemented that opened cross realm discourse. Patch 3.3.5 included a new chat feature called “Real ID” allowing for chat across realms between friends and groups of friends. Arres, Quilz and I all linked up as Real ID friends and could see when we were online and occasionally chatted with each other prior to respective raiding schedules. The addition of the “Real ID” feature caused some controversy in the *WoW* community about player privacy since it was dependent on the exchange of real email address. And it created an additional and major concern for me.

The problem was that my chat capturing add-on, *Elephant*, was not designed to record Real ID content. In reality I was very fortunate that the Real ID patch did not completely disable my chat capture add-on. This was a close call but this type of fear was not new to me and occurred almost every Tuesday when the servers would be down for three or four hours of “planned maintenance.” Usually this was simply an inconvenience for playing, but occasionally the maintenance included a patch update. A mild panic would set in for me as these updates installed. What changed this time? I wondered with each new login if my set up would continue to work. I became increasingly fearful that *Elephant* would cease to function, leaving me sans data. Fortunately, *Elephant* continued to work as expected until late in October when the first patch for *Cataclysm* came out. Then two weeks later *Elephant*’s update released, so I was now able to capture everything including the Real ID chat. These amateur software developers are truly amazing. They are an essential aspect of the game and fail to get the credit their contribution deserves. But like the hackers they are mysterious, designing, continuously improving, and finally sharing the tools that all raiders used.

*Geared, Raiding, and Learning About Teams (level 80)*

The hacker incidents had me a little spooked but daily life in the guild continued with little mention of it. The guild leaders moved forward with their plan, selected members secretly in the officer's chat and in a special channel for officers in vent, created three 10-man raid teams. The three team leaders, Newb, Jacob and Caprista, issued invites to fresh runs of Icecrown Citadel. Checking my blinking calendar, Ana was invited to Jacob's team. He was the newest team leader and I didn't know him. In fact, there was no one on my team that I knew, and only one name on the list was familiar. Kaz was one of the former Gnomes and we had not had much interaction in the past. But at least he was a former Gnome, I thought. The others assigned to my team were all regulars in the 25-man Saturday raids, but basically unknown to me.

When you are raiding, when you are really doing it, it's not social; it's active. It's common to have little to no interaction with fellow raiders during a 25-man run. Like soldiers in a battle everyone does his or her job, the leaders are talking and everyone else is usually quiet. Social interactions in raids occur between battles or after a wipe. Most of the interaction happens while the group is waiting for someone to join the raid or waiting for someone to return from getting their armor repaired, things from the auction house, or guild bank. During these times the avatars dance, joke, talk strategy, brag about gear, and make small talk. During these times, and over a period of time, you get to know the people raiding beside you.

All the players that I did know were led by Caprista, and included her husband, Sircat, Grouch, Kashi and Fierce. They were the A team. Newb lead the B Team, which from the start was plagued by no-shows, and lasted only a week or two. The three-team

idea was short lived and teams B and C were fused into a single 10-man team. The players who were most active and punctual to the previous raids were invited to the second team, and the others found themselves left out. Those left on the bench were not happy and a few quit the guild because of it.

Having seen the raiding behaviors in the Gnomes I knew to always show up early and ready every time. Because of this prior experience I was able to secure my spot on the second team. In many respects, one's ability to adhere to a schedule is the most important aspect for raiding. With some effort, everything else needed for raiding can be learned or earned. Finding a team of ten who could adhere to a schedule across months was rare and from my experience finding 25 raiders was near to impossible.

Jacob was new to leading raids, but was being trained up by Sircat and Caprista during the 25-man runs on Fridays. The first few times we raided, we wiped a lot and Jacob's thick Mississippi accent sounded noticeably frustrated at each wipe, but he regrouped quickly, regaining his composure and issuing tempered adjustments to our tactics. There are 12 boss encounters in ICC and we began to methodically learn each one, failure by failure.

Jacob's leadership ability emerged after a few weeks and he had an uncanny ability to synthesize each failure with a better approach. He learned to offer praise and to point out the raid's stupid mistakes more softly and often used the whisper chat to send helpful hints saving players, like me, from frequent embarrassment. I did not like his all-business leadership style in the beginning. Over time, his style matured to carefully balance morale issues and progression issues pushing the team further to success, and he earned my respect.



Raiding became the consistently fantastically frustrating fun beginning at nine o'clock and lasting to midnight every Tuesday and Thursday, week in and week out. My part, my role, was easy. I just showed up on time and blasted stuff which most basically meant pressing "2" four times stacking arcane blast then "5" for arcane missiles and repeat. There was more than that but I did that the most. The role of mage, as a ranged DPS, allowed me to sit back, press the buttons, and watch the action. This was not the case for the tanks, like Winna, Kamakazi, and Goldbeard or for the Healers, Jacob and Cain who received frequent detailed instructions on each new encounter. In reality, the DPS players like me got instructions too, usually stuff to avoid on the floor or when to run to a new spot, but all in all it was not too hard after learning what to watch for and where to move.

The leader of the defunct B team was a Canadian warlock named Newb. We discovered that he was Canadian when he refused to play with us on Canada Day and the American players gave him a hard time about it. We would play on the Fourth of July we said. Newb did the most damage but also died most frequently, which was the topic of many jokes and jabs. Newb was anything but a Noob. Like Grouchy, he took some pride in having a name opposite his nature. With his extensive game knowledge, he helped with the leadership of the team, as did the paladins, Silverwings and Goldbeard.

They both had real life acquaintances on the team as well. Silverwings' brother in-law was Rodeius, our hunter. And Goldbeard's roommate, Cain, was our healer paladin. They all knew the game well enough to help suggest alternative methods to take down the bosses we got stuck on as we progressed through ICC. Goldbeard had a soft-spoken leadership style while Silverwing and Newb tended to get the angriest when

mistakes were made. Their painful assessments were usually correct and the mistakes and often-repeated mistakes were more costly to them because their plate armor costs more to repair. Occasionally, on very tough encounters like the dragon Sindragosa, they would disagree with one another and a tension in the raid would mount. This is where Jacob shined; he could bring us all back together through decisive action, some of which worked.

Regardless of outcomes we were all learning the boss fights and having fun progressing. There were frustrating weeks where we would be stuck on the same boss to no avail. When that occurred, and after countless failures and lowered morale, Jacob, on multiple occasions, decided we should start from the beginning of ICC again and do as many as the bosses as we could. Those that were once hard were now easy and quickly we would get back to spot where had been stuck only to then move past it. We repeated this pattern of getting stuck and starting over from the beginning. Within a few months we could defeat all the bosses from Lord Marrowgar through Sindragosa and finally arrived at the final battle against the Lich King. Bosses who had stymied us for weeks we now defeated with little effort. There were no more instructions given and most of the vent and raid chat was the sort of long running jokes shared between old friends, and usually making fun of Newb.

The A team had taken a different approach. They had managed to get past a few of the harder bosses months prior and arrived at the Lich King before our team began. They locked their raid on the Lich King and were stuck there for months. Finally, their team fell apart. The remnants of the team, with some new additions started from the beginning. Their progression was slowed by having to become acquainted with a new

team. They had to relearn the mechanics for the fights they glossed over originally and take time explaining the encounters to the new members. Our team was now equally geared with the A team. Jacob's plan of running back through all of ICC each time meant we got all the raid gear that dropped off the bosses we killed each time and we had done them all so many times that the whole raid was now highly geared and more importantly we were a well-oiled machine; we were "really" a team. I don't think I ever really knew what belonging to a "team" meant before this experience and now this word "team" holds a very sacred place for me, one not to be taken lightly. Everything was going exactly according to plan. Ana's team was successfully progressing through the 12 ICC encounters, ever closer to their inevitable epic battle against the dreaded Lich King.

*Breaking up is hard to do, again (Level 80)*

Tuesday night an hour prior to raid time, Ana logs in and checks her bags for flasks and fish feasts. I'm surprised, but not shocked at first, to see "Sircat has been removed from guild" scroll across the chat window. The Gnomes' officers frequently pranked each other by kicking a member out of the guild then re-inviting them a few minutes later. But Warz didn't do that sort of thing.

<Caprista> hey guys.. im sorry to tell you this, but i have to cancel ICC tonight unless you guys wanna go on your own

<Caprista>Sircat and i broke up.. he packed up and shit and left and i have a whole bunch of stuff to deal with

<Lipton>:why he get kicked out?

<Caprista>sorry if it seems weird and too personal, but Sircat and i broke up.. he packed his shit and left today.. i know he seems like a sweetheart and everyone loves him, but he's a real dick to be honest. he's cheated on me, done alot of terrible crap, and recently started hitting me. so today he packed up and left cause he "was afraid he's end up killing me" if he didnt

<Mihiley> im so sorry

<Grouchy> Sorry Cap

<Caprista>: im fine, nothing happened today.. im telling you guys this cause i know everyone thinks he's a great guy and i dont want people to feel like it sucks that we broke up, so he's the one that has to leave  
 <Ana>: Do you have friends or family near by?  
 <Jacob>yeah that would be a lot better for you definitely  
 <Caprista>i have family.. he packed up his car and left  
 <Jacob>it wouldn't be a bad idea to stay with some family for a few days. people can be pretty unstable after things like this  
 <Caprista>he's not coming back, but he might end up starting his own guild and i wanted u all to know that he's really NOT a nice guy.. so please dont leave us for him! lol  
 <xarco>:I think he will join the Gnomes  
 <Caprista>lmao  
 <Caprista>:so anyway, im really sorry to make things so personal and uncomfortable, but im tired of lying for him.. and people were asking why i was booting him. lol  
 <xarco>:its ok Kar, I hope u are ok  
 <Kashi>:likewise, I hope you are okay..  
 <Caprista>:ok, guys... ill be back later on... feel free to do ICC if u guys wanna raid lead it... im not sure if ill be able to get around to setting up another one this week  
 <xarco>:take care

I hoped she was safe. I also hoped none of it was true. There was a lot of whispering between guild leaders, which I could not see. I certainly was not expecting anything like this to happen during my study. I made a note in my log that this might be the beginning of the end of this guild. And I didn't have plan B. The next day Caprista told her story again.

<Caprista>:sorry to get personal or repeat this for anyone who's heard, but Sircat was really bad to me... cheated, sent me to the hospital a few times when he hit me, etc and last week he set up a secret checking account and took off. He moved down to Alabama since he figured he'd know some people down there. In his defense, he said he was leaving because he didn't wanna hurt me anymore, but he really wasn't a nice guy, so i know this feels like your parents got divorced and you guys got stuck with mom instead of the cool dad... but he really wasn't such a cool dad in real life... so if he starts up his own guild and asks anyone to go, I just wanted to let you guys what he's really about anyway.. he transferred Sircat so far to another realm, but not his other toons yet.. he couldn't afford to do it all right away.. so idk if youll see Tobor or bradz or anyone around, but Sircat is on a diff server now. I'm really sad.. it sucks and i know i shouldn't be with him, but its still kinda hard and he left me with a lot of shit to clean up financially and all

anyway, sorry to drag people into this, i know its personal and uncomfortable, but i don't wanna lie anymore for him either.. like be one of those "i fell into a door knob" chicks. So that's it... you guys can spread the word if people ask that arent on... im gonna try to keep raids rolling and everything, but i just need a little patience with stuff for the next week or so

Six days later, Caprista tells us that Sircat locked her out of the Ventrilo server.

She tells us that he wrote a message saying "this is my fucking vent i pay for...thanks for fucking me over." She explains, "I have no idea what he thinks i did to him or wtf is going on, and he's supposed to change it to our old account so i pay for it." The officers of the guild rally around her. Silverwing provided a new Vent server and Jacob built a new website for the guild. And then two weeks later as these things sometimes unfold Sircat, as one of his alts, Tobor, is invited by Caprista, back into the guild.

<Tobor>:I would like to address an issue that may keep some of us from working well together and having fun like we used to...Some of you know more about my personal life then I'd like you to but what will be will be. I understand how some people would react to what they heard; I had the same reaction to someone that said something similar in a church I went to. In regards to what you've heard... it's a sucky thing... that I did. But every man makes mistakes and I am moving forward I hope we all can too

<Caprista>: we had some problems and i was really upset and i let some people into what went on between us. i shouldn't have brought that drama into the guild... but you guys were my friends and i needed support and i wanted people to understand why i was gonna be offline a lot

<Tobor>:but if it's gonna be a problem, then walk now.

<Kamakazi>: no we had enough people walk last night

Several guild members had grown tired of the ongoing drama and left the night before. Sircat had transferred his main toon to another realm and Caprista now followed him there with her main. She made a new toon on our realm named Caprista and I didn't even notice the switch. The other guild leaders did notice, since she could no longer join

the raids. Grouchy described this situation to me in business terms. Basically an absent leader can't lead, he said. He was correct and the other leaders did their best to fill the void. Apparently their action made Caprista jealous of their growing power and accentuated the lack of her own on the server. A growing interest in PVP play had started and some members mainly in my raid group were considering starting a new PVP guild. Caprista felt threatened by this plan and discussed potentially kicking Jacob from the guild with the other leaders. They advised her that doing so would be disastrous as many were currently considering leaving the guild and this could cause an exodus.

Someone privy to that discussion tipped off Jacob. During our normal 10-man, Jacob tells our team what is happening. He wants our group to stay together no matter the guild outcome so we exchange Real IDs. He also tells us that we would all be welcomed in his new guild. The next day Caprista defiantly kicks Jacob who leaves and starts his new guild Zeno, and within 24 hours, Ana witnesses the second guild exodus.

Fierce sends me a whisper explaining that he and Kashi are leaving WarzRus and that I'm welcome to join them in their new guild Swords of Eternity. They created this guild to serve as additional bank space and would now use it for a refuge from the drama and to regroup. He also tells me that Grouchy is joining them as well as a number of the former Gnomes. I'm faced with the choice of joining Jacob and my raid team in his guild or moving with Kashi and Fierce. After further discussion with Fierce, I decided that sticking with them might be the best option. Fierce suggested that joining Jacob's group may be more conducive to raiding but he and Kashi would support any decision.

That night Kashi posted a brief message in the guild chat saying goodbye. And with that, they quit the guild. I followed and joined Swords of Eternity. One by one,

others joined the guild. Fierce and Kashi were scrambling to assign ranks and officers as the exodus from WarzRus continued. They also began sorting through all the items in their guild bank and organizing it for guild use. As more players filed over many of them, including me, made donations of gold to the bank. I donated 500 gold, which was a lot, but in line with the others. I was a little startled that I was not made an officer but it was most likely an oversight as everything was in the process of becoming solidified. The new guild members chatted jubilantly as most were pleased to have escaped the drama. The establishment of the new guild continued as we moved closer to Tuesday's raid.

I began to question my decision, thinking that Jacob's guild was more serious about raiding and their entry into PVP play, an aspect of the game that I had not yet investigated. I discussed this consideration with Fierce and again he suggested that, for my study, I should join them and observe. Both he and Kashi were supportive of my dilemma, stating I could return at anytime and would always have a home with them.

During the raid Kaz asked me when I would be joining Jacob's guild, which he was already in and was one of the first to leave after Jacob was kicked from WarzRus. I discussed it with Jacob and he, like Fierce and Kashi, was open to whatever I decided. I explained that I was interested in the PVP aspects and he and Kaz were happy to oblige me. At the end of the raid I typed my goodbyes to the Swords of Eternity and joined Zeno. I was welcomed warmly since my entire raid team was in the guild. I was made an officer and given full rights to the guild bank. We continued with our progressive ICC 10-man raid with new zeal and there was a noticeable change in the group's affect. There was more humor and playfulness than there had been under WarzRus. Although little had

changed for the group there was a sense of doing it for our own enjoyment and not under a watchful or competitive eye. The negative drama was lifted, replaced by a sense of playful purpose.

Our raids continued and I began to be invited into the world of PVP in the way of a new challenge called battlegrounds. In a battleground, a number of horde players are pitted against a number of Alliance player in short goal-oriented competitions. These could be described as virtual variations of capture-the-flag type scenarios, although each has slightly different objectives. Playing against other human players was very exciting, but I did die a lot. With the new guild there was more discussion in guild chat about our established raid team and the final challenges of ICC required us to be assigned homework prior to raid. This was generally watching a video of the upcoming fight against the Lich King. We were also instructed to read strategy guides about the encounter and Jacob informed us that we would lock the raid and focus all our energies to down him and finally receive the coveted title of King Slayer. We were all excited about this and I wondered what would happen to our group after the Lich King's defeat. I was also excited that my wife would soon arrive for a month-long visit.

*Vegas Versus The Lich King (Level 80)*

We had locked our raid group to the Lich King fight so we didn't have to fight our way through everything each time anymore. The routine was the same, log in at nine, group up and fly on my magic carpet to ICC. I would meet up with everyone inside. From there we ran to the spire portal and teleported to the upper reaches of ICC. At the center, a portal leads to the Frozen Throne and the final ICC battle against Lich King. We would repeat this fight, discussing and then altering our tactics after each wipe until our



raid time ran out around midnight. Ending in frustration, Jacob would encourage us to continue the next session by praising the improvements, however slight. Newb and Silverwing, in typical form, critiqued our efforts more harshly. Thick skin was often required to endure their rough and individualized assessments, but they were usually correct. I was always amazed by their presence of mind; how they could perform and observe the actions of nine other players simultaneously. They should be air traffic controllers, I thought.

Apisata's visit was nearing and we had full itinerary of events with family, friends, and work. Her stay culminated in a five-day honeymoon in Vegas including a highly-anticipated visit to the Grand Canyon. Meanwhile, the team was really getting close to killing the Lich King and I so hoped we could down him before I left. We didn't. I knew what would happen while I was away. They would have the title of "King Slayer" and be done with ICC and I would still be plain old Ana. That's how it was and there was nothing I could do about it. My wife so sweetly, in understanding my predicament, said I should take my laptop with me. But that was out of the question, this was my honeymoon for God's sake, not to mention the fact that my wife was briefly non-virtual.

The trip was brilliant. For five days research and *Warcraft* were put aside. Really! Vegas was amazing, the Grand Canyon awe inspiring, an experience of a lifetime shared with the woman I love. As we flew home, my mind wandered to my fellow raiders and I wondered if they had done it. Had they killed the Lich King in my absence after all that time spent as a group getting there? Was it over? Or on the other hand, perhaps they had another frustrating week of wiping over and over and I missed nothing. The reality is that

the *World of Warcraft* keeps spinning and waits for no man. Once home I went straight to computer, ignoring email and blinking phone messages, launched *Warcraft* and logged in. Jacob was online.

<Ana Whispers> Did you get him?

<Jacob Whispers> Yep

<Jacob Whispers> After we killed him we all talked about how it sucked that you and Kaz missed out on it.

<Ana Whispers> No worries pal, raiding with the team is good enough for me

<Jacob Whispers> It's easy now, so we can go back and get you guys the title.

<Ana Whispers> Thanx pal, but really it's no biggy. I was just so happy to be with my wife and Vegas is awesome! HUGE GRATS to you and the team. Y'all rock!

We chatted on a bit more and Jacob was sincerely empathetic to the fact that Kaz and I were absent for their monumental occasion. But honestly, and surprisingly, I was ok. My real existence trumped my virtual existence. I realized something very important about the place the game held for me in relation to everything else in a way that I previously had not. Many people in both my worlds, real and virtual, asked me about my feelings about missing out on the Lich King's death and not receiving the King Slayer title, but my feelings never wavered. I felt liberated from choosing between existences. They can co-exist. My virtual life was certainly important but not all consuming.

#### *King slayers and Cataclysms (Level 80)*

My wife left for Thailand the day before Halloween and our online-only disembodied relationship returned to being just that, online only. Sadly, we rarely play *WoW* together anymore, both becoming increasingly busy with our respective labors. It remains a sad and painful reality, but hopefully only a temporary one.

As my data collection neared completion, new insights emerged as *Cataclysm* fever swept across the realms. Players were involved with a new yet unseen fervor in preparation for its release. There was a lot of renewed activity on the realm, a sort of excited anticipation, a hunger for completely new content, and the fresh start that companion the release of a new expansion. I kept one foot in the game to continue member checking with the study's key informants as I began to analyze the data set. I played, but without the vim and vigor. I continued to raid with my team on Tuesdays and Thursdays from nine to midnight, but ceased running the daily quests or heroic instances.

Internally the guild, and especially the leadership, was increasingly excited about *Cataclysm*'s release due out late November. I received a message from Kashi that she and Fierce finally killed the Lich King. She and Fierce deserved it. They had such bad luck with finding a consistent team. She was aware that my team downed him as well and that, unfortunately, I was away when it happened.

Jacob and the other guild leaders vigorously researched the new *Cataclysm* content becoming available on the fan sites and contemplated new raid teams. Similar to WarzRus, they actively recruited new members into the guild and desired to split our ICC team into two teams in an effort to develop the necessary 25 experienced and geared players to support a regular 25-man raid team. The new guild was growing fast but was still small enough to be that nice mix between a social guild and a raiding guild. And in this guild, I was an insider and an officer.

Personally I didn't like the idea of dismantling our steady group and was a little disturbed at the thought of not raiding with the usual suspects. The team had become something more like a family than just a bunch of online friends; we had essentially been

through war together. We knew our collective schedules and how our personalities meshed. We had learned to work together and so, patiently but still persistently, solve any challenges presented. We matured together and the idea of tinkering with something that worked was bothersome for me. I was alone in my thinking as the others favored the two-team expansion. They reminded me that change and progression are at the core of this culture's ethos. Never sit still and never be content.

In patch 3.3.5, the final update to *The Wrath of the Lich King* expansion, Blizzard included a new raid instance, The Ruby Sanctum. We raided there while eagerly awaiting *Cataclysm*'s release later in November 2010. Ruby Sanctum was difficult in comparison to ICC, a sign of what was soon to come with *Cataclysm*. Repeatedly, we wiped on the dragon, Halion, the last boss in the instance who must be killed from two dimensions simultaneously. Half the raid team attacks from one dimension and the other half attacks from the other. The real trick is that the damage from both dimensions must remain perfectly balanced and we had not mastered that. Demoralized, but with familiar persistence, we pressed forward each week.

Our collective spirits were raised by the surprise return of Kaz, who had not logged in over two months because his real world of school and work had become too demanding for raiding. On Kaz's return to the game, Jacob announced that instead of continuing in Ruby Sanctum that we should return to ICC for Ana and Kaz to kill the Lich King and earn the title of King Slayer. That night our well-oiled team reentered ICC. We downed the twelve bosses, each on the first attempt, and never wiped. The once supreme ICC instance was conquered in a little less than two hours. It was a testament to collective persistence. From the hot summer when we first entered ICC to now five-

months of learning, training, working and playing together, we are ready and awaiting the coming *Cataclysm*. I am Ana, the King Slayer.

## CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

### **Summary of the Study**

The purpose of this exploratory study was to investigate and examine the socio-technical dimensions of deep involvement and enduring commitment from within the massively multiplayer online game, *The World of Warcraft*, (*WoW*). Although, the game has existed for only six short years since beginning in 2005, its tremendous growth in membership, currently 12 million subscribers, is matched by the growing academic interest it's generated across an array of disciplines such as psychology (Yee 2008), anthropology (Nardi, 2010), economics (Castronova, 2007), computer science (Corneliussen & Rettberg, 2008; Bartle, 1996), media studies (Pearce, 2009) and the learning sciences (Barab, Thomas, Dodge, Carteaux, & Tuzun, 2005; Gee, 2003). Curiously, leisure studies has been slow to join the ranks of scholarly inquiry into *WoW*, or these types of games (MMOGs) more broadly, and potentially could offer considerable insight to this nascent academic discourse.

In order to conduct a study exploring the culture and development of enduring involvement in *WoW*, I began by investigating the origins of this form of interactive computer-mediated entertainment. A situated history of MMOGs was developed describing first how, mythology, folklore, and fantasy literature, influenced the creation and design of tabletop role-playing games, like *Dungeons and Dragons*, and then how technological advancements in server and desktop computing networks provided an ideal

distribution and computational platform robust enough to allow millions to participate in these persistent virtual world games on demand.

My investigation looked to the relatively small body of scholarship devoted to this modern form of interactive entertainment. As the study progressed, it became increasingly difficult to stay current with the literature as a flood of publications was released concerning MMOGs and virtual worlds. Additionally, supporting literature on play, games, enduring involvement, flow and serious leisure was reviewed (in chapter II) setting the stage for this study and its design.

Robert Stebbins' (2007), Serious Leisure Perspective (SLP) was selected as a theoretical framework for this study. The framework is an activity-based taxonomy separating activity types broadly into casual, serious and project-based leisure pursuits. Stebbins identified six criteria for determining serious leisure pursuits. 1) a significant personal effort, 2) perseverance, 3) an analogous profession to the activity, 4) strong personal identification, 5) a unique ethos surrounding the activity, 6) and durable benefits. All six criteria were identified in the participants observed during the course of this study and described in the following section.

An ethnographic approach was determined to be the best mythological fit for investigating *Warcraft's* "culture of commitment" and for describing the experience of playing it on a regular basis. The roots of ethnography were forged in exotic locales such as Mead's early work in Somoa (1928), and exploring *WoW's* fantasy setting from a similar "exotic" positioning seemed a natural extension. Additionally, the performance-based qualities of playing the game matched quite well with Denzin's (2003) notion of

performance ethnography and Goffman's (1954) dramaturgical approach, given the way that players assume the role of an avatar on a designed virtual stage developed by the game's producer.

The two primary driving questions for the study were derived from the original and broad inquiry concerning player commitment and the deep involvement observed in *WoW* participation. The first question focused the researcher's attention on the experience of participation while the second asked what role or impacts the social structure, guilds, has on the experience. Prior studies (Nardi, 2010; Peirce, 2009; Taylor, 2006; Yee, 2006a) traversed the game space through their respective methodologies, venturing into the real lives of players in order to better understand who participates inside virtual worlds. So, a third, "real world" question was conceived which would take advantage of study's naturalistic constraint of remaining immersed in the game allowing for the examination of what players revealed about their real lives during the course of play. The following are then the three questions driving this study's inquiry:

- 1.) What is the experience of playing *WoW* on a regular basis?
- 2.) In what ways do guilds impact participant involvement?
- 3.) What do participants reveal about their real lives during play?

In pursuit of these three lines of inquiry, an account was created for access into *The World of Warcraft*. A player-versus-environment (PVE) game server was randomly selected from a list of possible servers. Across a two-year period, multiple avatars were created and developed in order to provide a variety of experiences and platforms for observation within the game. The primary data collected consisted of over 2000 pages of chat-text by means of an add-on application to the *WoW* software called *Elephant*. Other



data and artifacts were collected in order to crystallize the analysis and interpretation of the findings (Richardson, 1994). They included 25 pages of field notes, 348 screen-capture images, and additional information from external Internet-based game sites such as wikis, blogs, websites, and YouTube videos. After reaching the end-game activities, it was necessary to capture *Ventrillo*'s Voice-Over-Internet-Protocol (VOIP) audio chat during raid sessions. 98 hours of digital audio were collected using *Wire Tap*, an audio-stream capture application.

The data were transformed into manageable chunks by recompiling the chat into chat type categories such as whisper, guild, raid, and party. For convenience of analysis these were printed and bound in addition to maintaining digital version for rapid access and retrieval needs. Following data transformation, analysis of the data began with the creation and further refinement of an experiential timeline. The timeline allowed the researcher to visualize and synthesize the sequence of events illuminating significant moments and turning points across the two-year study. Using the field notes, chat-logs and occasionally image or audio files, significant events were crystallized using the thoroughly time-stamped dataset.

Three primary phases of involvement emerged from the analysis marking the typical trajectory of avatar development. The first phase served to orient the player in the game world, its narrative, and to the graphical user interface. I referred to this phase as "Getting Started." This phase consisted of avatar creation, becoming oriented inside the game, and questing and leveling.

The second phase is the continuation of avatar's development up to achieving the maximum level allowed (level 80 during this study) and entry into the social aspects of

the game, primarily experienced through the socio-technical construct of guilds. I referred to this phase as “The Social World.” Although players were not required to join guilds, the vast majority I observed had joined one or more guilds over the course of their involvement with the game.

The final developmental phase is achieved when a player has leveled an avatar to the maximum level (80), allowing access to the end game content known as raids. At this point the player’s primary goals change from questing and leveling to the acquisition of better gear (equipment such as armor or weapons), which continues to increase proficiency and potential for success when engaging with the game’s most challenging content. In order to participate in raid activities and to acquire the necessary gear, teamwork is required with other players who have similarly achieved the same status and share similar goals. I referred to this period as the “Culture of Raiders.”

The final written product for this ethnography was the creation of a *trptych* of detailed narratives. The narratives follow my primary avatar’s trajectory through the three developmental phases. This approach allowed for ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973) of the most salient aspects of each phase and the experiences unique to my investigation. Taken as a whole, the triptych represents the gestalt experience from ingress to egress of the activity and its culture.

Member-checks of my interpretations occurred during the course of the study in a naturalistic, anthropological style concurrent with the events as they unfolded. Additionally, in an effort to truthfully and accurately portray the community and its culture, I asked several key informants to provide a member check by reading and commenting on the narratives for accuracy, errors, or omissions, as they were developed.

Their enthusiasm and willingness to reflect on their own experiences in relation to the written narratives was essential to the success of this study. The following section offers my interpretations of the findings of this study. It is organized around the three research questions in relation to the three phases of participant involvement and avatar development in order to account for the evolution of a player's experience.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

#### *Individual Involvement*

What is the experience of playing *WoW* on a regular basis? If chosen freely, without coercion, the experience of "getting started" in *WoW* is filled with curiosity, wonder, and anticipation. After an arduous installation, the decisions involved in designing a character are paradoxically joyous and mildly stressful. Who will you be? The participant's involvement begins with this single inquiry. The question itself is rather monumental, offering an individual a rare opportunity to a fresh start, a new beginning in a new world. However, deciding 'who to be' requires a pause for consideration while wading through a sea of possibilities each of which has lasting implications. The fun begins with the exploration of possibilities within the game's many choices and combinations of character classes, races, and appearance decisions to consider and eventually select. This process concludes by naming the chosen avatar. Some names I encountered were obviously selected by the built-in random name generator. Other names, however, demonstrated extremely clever and thoughtful forms of self-expression through derivatives of pop-cultural and literary references. Sadly, a degree of this richness was lost in the creation of pseudonyms for the purpose of protecting the participants' identities.

One click of the mouse after character creation, the player's attention is again captivated, as they are willingly pulled into the fantasy world of Azeroth through a polished cinematic video that sets the stage and offers the player their motivational purpose. Conflict is established through the mythos of an epic struggle for the control of Azeroth between the forces of the Orc-led Horde against the Human-led Alliance. Accepting the first quest propels the player into action, beginning an ongoing feedback loop between the player and game. The player progresses by completing tasks and receiving rewards in a process described as similar to a virtual Skinner-box (Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell & Moore, 2006). The player receives clear visual feedback of their progress. Numerical attributes define the avatar, and increase when the character advances in level or receives better gear by completing quests and slaying monsters. In turn the player, via their avatar, becomes more capable at positively affecting the environment and the cycle continues and repeats.

As the player advances in levels, the quests become progressively difficult, following closely with Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) model of optimal experience, or *Flow*. This compels players to improve their skills, as the challenges require more time and effort to accomplish. At this early stage a player may only hold a casual attraction to the game, what would be called "play" in terms of the SLP framework (Stebbins, 2007), however, as more episodes of flow occur the player's orientation may deepen over time, moving their orientation from play to the serious leisure classification of "hobby."

As the difficulty of the quests increase, they also require the avatar to travel further from the quest-giver geographically, causing the player to explore new topography and become gradually oriented to the world. Several players stated that

exploring was one of the most fun aspects of the game. Curiously, “Explorer” was one of Bartle’s (1996) archetypes for players who enjoyed playing multi-user dungeon games, an early non-graphical predecessor to modern MMORPGs like *WoW*.

This graduated process of exploring, questing, learning, and understanding is carefully designed to hold the player’s attention in two regards. The first is developing a familiarity with the usage of the avatar’s abilities optimally in specific situations and the second is becoming acquainted and familiar with the world. The player is intended to be increasingly experimental and engaged with the features of the user interface, expanding the repertoire of abilities for their avatar. The game’s expansive interface is daunting and its use cognitively demanding. Players also reported that learning the interface features caused an enjoyable form of frustration while learning how it works. This type of enjoyable frustration may be similar to learning what the console indicators mean in a new car, or the enjoyable frustration of familiarizing one’s self with a new computer, phone or other device. Clearly this sort of novelty is not fun for all. In essence, the players were describing two forms of exploratory enjoyment in the early stages of the game, the interface environment and the game’s world environment.

As the player moves forward in leveling their avatar and becoming comfortable with the interface and game world, many join guilds at some point during that initial developmental phase and thus enter phase-two, “The Social World”. When, and if, this occurs varies from player to player. The relationship between guilds and participant involvement will be more fully discussed in the next section as the second research question driving the study.

Regardless of membership in a guild, many of the premiere activities in the game such as dungeon adventures, called “instances,” require players to group together (up to five players) and cooperate for successful completion. I call these premier activities because of their popularity within the game community. If one were to conceive *Warcraft* as an amusement park, instances would be the rollercoasters. Playing with others in the “instances” was exciting for me and, based on the wait time (up to an hour), other players enjoyed the intensity and excitement as well. Demonstrating proficiencies, helping others, and overcoming adversities as a group led to even deeper layers of player involvement. Additionally, these larger challenges offer larger rewards, but in a group setting, random chance often determines who in the group receives the reward. This is a form of gambling as players “roll” via a random number generator to win the high quality items looted (also called “dropped”) off the most difficult monsters inside the instances.

During instance participation and through questing and exploring the world, players interact and friendships are occasionally established. Players may add an avatar’s name whose company they enjoyed to a personal Friends-List. Players receive notification through the chat window when a friend logs on or off. These in-game friendships were reported as an important aspect of the game’s appeal and their continued involvement. My observation and experience was that as relationships developed through continued interactions, they become a real component of a player’s social sphere and led to more frequent participation, which in turn increases the likelihood of further expansion of more friends and positive social experiences. Edward Castronova (2007) reported some players preferred their in-game relationships above their relations in their real life context. None of my participants stated this directly, but given that the avatar acts as a

social buffer, like wearing a costume, and one's ability to easily escape an unpleasant social encounter in cyberspace, it's easy to understand why some players may feel they have more control inside this social sphere.

#### *Avatar Actualization*

The players whom I interviewed overwhelmingly stated that the development of their avatars was their primary source of enjoyment and sustained involvement in the game. The social aspect was secondary. I conceptualize this primary reason for deep involvement as "Avatar Actualization." Gee (2003) suggested that three player identities were at stake 1) the player, 2) the avatar, and 3) a projective identity, which he described as the way players project themselves into the game and additionally how it is conceived as a personal project. I suggest that these two conceptions be pulled apart.

The projection of identity into the game, I consider as the projection of one's consciousness. While playing, one's attention is directed and focused on the game, and in turn diminished in their real life context. Gee's (2003) second conception of the projective identity considers the avatar as the player's personal project. This is Avatar Actualization, or in other words, the act of being the best avatar you can be. Observing the avatar's improvement over time offers a deep sense of reward. The SLP (2007) places self-actualization as one of the durable benefits of a serious leisure pursuit. However, the duration this quality of *avatar actualization* remains a question.

#### *Serious Leisure and Specialization*

Other qualities of serious leisure were more easily recognizable, such as the significant personal effort and perseverance required for the advancement of an avatar from level one to 80. In leveling my own characters, Ana took the longest, a period of

384 hours and 54 minutes and required the most effort and perseverance. My two other avatars required significantly less time to reach level 80, requiring only 288 and 216 hours respectively, but more effort was necessary to leveling that fast. The process of leveling an avatar up to level 80 offers a player a career-like quality marking clearly identified stages of advancement, another criterion for Serious Leisure (Stebbins, 2007). Additionally the process of leveling the avatar's professions, such as tailoring or alchemy, further extends a player's notion of a virtual career inside the game.

Additional support for the importance of identifiable stages of advancement for developing enduring participant involvement has been described as *recreation specialization* (Bryan, 1977, 2000). From his study of trout fisherman, he described the process of participants moving from a general to specific orientation with an activity and their accumulation of expertise. This continuum of advancement was observable in equipment, skill, and in the selection of setting (1977). All of these have clear analogs in *WoW*, such as the gear, level, and the selection of particular raid dungeons for the purpose of obtaining superior gear.

Further refinement of the specialization theory by Scott & Shafer (2001) emphasized the *process of progression* in skill development, commitment and behavior. Their identification of the career trajectory process of specialization leading one to deeper levels of participant involvement was evidenced in my personal experience and additionally in the observations and interviews across this study. The progressive and developmental aspect of *WoW* resides at the heart of the game's design and appears to be



a primary factor in sustaining the involvement of its adherents. Most importantly, in *WoW*, this process is intentionally designed and constantly refined by the games' engineers.

The game offers clear feedback in the form of increasing that avatar's attribute scores, such as strength or intelligence. The player's efforts towards increasing these attribute scores drive their decision-making and actions during game play. Unlike the real world, this progression is extremely overt and clear and directly equates to their improved performance in game play. Clear feedback was identified as a necessary component for *Flow* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) and is commonly found and designed into leveling games such as *WoW* (Sweetser & Wyeth, 2005).

#### *Consumption and Raiders*

Moving to the third developmental phase, "The Culture of Raiders" the motivations for involvement continue to evolve. At this point there are no more levels to gain. The player may only progress their avatar through the acquisition of better gear. This gear can only be acquired in 10-man or 25-man raid instances (requiring teams of the respective sizes) or through continued efforts in the player-versus-player activities, which were limited in the PVE realm of this study.

This emphasis on gear was the most frequently discussed issue across all of the guild chat collected. Players bragged about the gear they won or earned. They requested help from other players on what particular gear to work for, and where it could be gained. This supports Bryan's (1977) observation of equipment as a demarcation for specialization, although in this case it was virtual, as opposed to physical. The virtual equipment, *or gear*, was obtained in raid "instances" or purchased through the auction

house for exorbitant amounts of gold. This obsession with these most prized in-game objects led me to consider whether or not it represented a form of conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1898) for virtual goods. Some players were clearly interested in bragging about the new dragon they purchased or showing off “the best shield in the game” to the other players. There was good reason, however, for the participants’ obsession with gear; it was essential for access into progressively more difficult raid instances and the means of determining whether someone was worthy of initiation into a raid group.

In order to obtain these sacred treasures, knowledge was required to know what was available and where to get it. This information was available to players through a plethora of external online sites collectively represented in the meta-game of *WoW*. Participants in the study reported spending between 20 and 30 percent of their overall play in these spaces outside the game. I began to consider these meta-game activities as a form of homework or scholarship required for play leading to my conceptualization of “Amateur Scholarship.”

#### *Amateur Scholarship*

I use the word Amateur in the sense that Stebbins (1979) used it, from its Latin root, “*Amare*” – to love or for the love of. I use the word scholarship in the sense that players spent significant amounts of time outside the game researching how to improve their avatars, to complete quests in the most efficient fashion, or to successfully navigate through the instances and raids. These game-related websites are developed and updated in the broader *social world* of players. This idea of a social world centered on an activity,

interest, or affinity was first identified and observed by Unruh (1980) and further developed by Stebbins (2007) as the ethos that forms around many serious leisure pursuits.

These meta-game sites are, in effect, peer reviewed by the community players and some discussions I followed often contained heated debates on best practices and approaches. The community referred to this process as “theory-crafting.” Other products of their amateur scholarship included how-to or walk-through videos, many of which had surprisingly high production values and are uploaded and available on You-Tube for player (or scholar) review.

Many players reviewed multiple sites ingesting as much information as possible in rigorous pursuit of their current inquiry. They investigated options and alternative means of problem solving. Inside the game, they asked other players from the guild and crosschecked that with what they had found online. Trial-and-error experimentation followed this research process. Finally, there was an informal reporting of the results back to the guild. All of these methods cumulatively equated to a form of scholarship performed solely for intrinsic reasons, i.e. play-based autotelic research. The question remains as to how well these research skills translate beyond the game and into other type of inquiry. Overall, I was amazed by this playful scholarship and found little difference between it and its formal counterpart.

#### *Broad appeal and product cycles*

Taken altogether, I found a litany of explanations for involvement across a diverse intergenerational community. Turning back to Caillois’ classifications of games (1962/2001) I realized that all four were clearly represented in *The World of Warcraft*’

design. *Agon* (competitive games) was found in the players-versus-the-environment, in essence competing against the game designers and against other players in PVP. *Alea* (games of chance) was represented when rolling to win the loot. *Mimesis* (mimicry or role-playing games) is the very nature of an MMORPG. And *Ilinx* (vertigo inducing or perception alerting games) was represented as players become disoriented in dungeons, caves, and when epic battles fill the screen with a vortex of colors as multiple players and monsters cast spells simultaneously. It seems reasonable that a game, which provides for such wide diversity in possible activity, would likely attract a wide and diverse community of adherents. But keeping them hooked is harder.

The designers address this problem by perpetually changing, or tinkering with the rules on a regular basis. They also occasionally add new content, such as a new instance or raid. Every few years they release a new full expansion to the game. This release adds new classes and races, so new types of characters become available to be made by players. They add new lands to explore filled with new quests imbedded in rich new storylines. And for the hardcore players there are new and more difficult instances and raids to conquer with powerful monsters and new treasures to obtain.

My study inadvertently began at the beginning of *The Wrath of the Lich King* expansion cycle and ended with the release of *Cataclysm*. Player involvement was very high when I started and dropped off in the middle as the Lich King content became stale to the community, as evidenced by the decrease in player avatars in the major cities, and also a decrease in the frequency and duration of guild member logons. Two months prior to *Cataclysm*'s release, involvement in the realm increased as players who had left returned to the game in preparation for the new expansion. Stormwind, the capital city,

once empty, was now overcrowded, making it difficult for me to talk with vendors at the inn or to use the bank. There were a lot more players logging in to the game. This enthusiasm continued to grow until mid-November when *Cataclysm* became available. The game world was like a mall on Christmas Eve with many competing for limited resources. Involvement is clearly linked to the product cycle and the producers wisely capitalize on the release of new information and content to keep players as deeply involved and invested in the product for as long as possible. The producers' goals are clearly rooted in our capitalist society and their alterations to the game world are designed to hold on to the expansive player-base. The following section addresses the study's second question concerning the role that guilds play in sustaining participant involvement.

*In what ways do guilds impact participant involvement?*

Technically, joining a guild marks the second phase, "The Social World," leaving a person nothing to report about their role during the "Getting Started" phase. However, there were two types of social encounters early in the game, which did have an impact on enduring player involvement. The first was meeting other new players and joining up with them to accomplish the early quests. If these early social encounters were positive, they tended to result in mutual additions to the friends list. These earliest "friends" encountered in the game remained in touch across the two years of the study and although they had joined different guilds, a quick greeting would often be exchanged at logon. For me, this resulted in a feeling of connectedness, history, and a feeling of "being known" within the larger world of the realm.

The second type of early game social encounter was with experienced players who enjoyed helping new players find their way. I encountered several of these players hanging around the bank and the Inn at Stormwind. Like ambassadors, they offered instructions, directions, and material help. Bartle (1996) identified this type of player as a “helper” in his earliest work in text-based multi-user dungeons games. One such “helper,” for example, enchanted all my gear and gave me several gold pieces, which were extremely useful in the early stages of the game. Curiously, while also added to my friend’s list, none of these experienced players remained in contact with me beyond the initial early game encounter.

In the second phase, “The Social World,” I was surprised to find that guilds played a significantly smaller role in sustaining participant involvement than I had initially anticipated. In fact, in some ways they served as a distraction to enduring involvement. The guilds I observed were far more fragile than I expected. Of the four guilds I joined, the two largest, oldest, and most established disintegrated during the course of the study. The two others came into existence as the result of the breakup of the second and thus were too new for rigorous analysis, except to say that smaller guilds appeared to be more cohesive and sustainable than large groups. There was, however, an excitement generated during their formation. The question remains, why do guilds fail?

The Clockwork Gnomes fell apart due to a difference in agendas for the function and type of guild. Some players desired to evolve into a raiding guild while others wanted to retain an emphasis on a social and leveling role. The second guild, WarzRus, apparently dissolved because of real life marital issues between the husband and wife, the leaders of the guild. I believe this disclosure brought too much real life drama into the

game world for some of the other members. Several key informants disagreed with this assessment, believing the guild breakup occurred because the leaders could no longer plan or implement raids. More likely, both reasons and, additionally, kicking certain players, such as my raid leader, out of the guild, all contributed to the guild's collapse. Both failed guilds continued to exist beyond the exodus, although only a few members remained. Politics and internal social grouping inside the guilds, like raid teams, determined who stayed, who left, and where everyone ended up.

Participant involvement was more associated with player loyalties and friendships. An avatar's personal friend list was more significant than guild membership with regard to the player's social involvement and interaction. Players used the list to see when their friends were online and then communicated with them through whisper chat or party chat while grouped. These types of friendships tended to have two forms. One was a preexisting online or real life friend. The other was when an avatar was added to the friend list because of a supportive deed like helping a player complete a quest or from a positive social interaction during an instance run or raid group.

Players who began the game knowing someone who already played had a vastly different experience. Their initial questions were answered and the body of external information on the web, or knowledge of its existence, was made available at the onset of play. Preexisting relationships like these appeared to have an effect that diminished the need to socialize with others. I personally experienced this while playing with my wife and again with a friend I invited to the game. Both were not interested in making online friends or the social aspects of the game beyond our personal shared experience. We planned our play sessions outside the game by phone or email and met inside the game.

We would play for several hours and generally ignore the chat window preferring to communicate by *Skype* while we played. Several player interviews revealed that my experience in using the game as a means of maintaining real life relationships was not unique. There were a number of military families using the game for similar purpose while a family member was stationed abroad. Other examples were intergenerational, such as a grandfather and granddaughter who lived far apart and used the game as a means to stay connected. Another example was a group of high school friends who had graduated and were now attending different universities. In these cases the game functioned to bridge social gaps caused by geographical distances. Playing together creates a shared experience and momentarily evaporates physical distance.

In the final phase, “The Culture of Raiders,” players seek out guilds sharing similar values and goals. They tended to bounce from guild to guild until they found a good fit. For raiders, the most important social grouping is their raid team who must consistently meet on a regular schedule. Finding consistent patterns of play between members of a raid team tended to be the rationale for joining a guild. Discussions about the best times to schedule raids were most conveniently held in guild chat. Finding a group of 25 skilled players who could meet regularly for raiding was the common, yet elusive, goal. It is difficult to get that many people together at the same time for the duration necessary to complete a raid instance.

The term “third place” was coined by Ray Oldenburg (1989) to describe spaces such as cafes, bars, barbershops, etc where civic engagement and community building occurs. He distinguished it from the home (first place), and work (second place), where individuals spend most of their time. He suggested that these third places serve an



important role in providing a context for discussions around politics and current events connecting and defining communities. But, the guilds I participated in rarely discussed the current events of the real world, thus making a direct connection between guild as a social meeting space and Oldenburg's "third place" conception problematic. The discourse collected from guild chat was more likely to focus on issues only concerning involvements in the synthetic world's politics, such as changes to the game made by the game's developers, and how to limit the threat of hackers and their ability to affect the guild, and its bank more specifically. In the sense of lacking real world locality and issues, perhaps the conception of a "fourth space" for these global online cyber-spaces may be more appropriate.

The guild chat did provide the space for discussion of excited anticipation the upcoming raid. Generally an hour prior to the raid, as team members logged on, they chatted about being "pumped" or "psyched up" for the night's events and preparation for the encounters. Similarly following a raid, players would recollect about their progress or failure and other raid teams would discuss their progress in comparison. The most guild chat activity occurred during these pre-raid and post-raid times, suggesting that the anticipation and recollection was highly valued and enjoyed by the participants.

Interviews revealed that players did not discuss their in-game experience with non-players who "didn't get it" and so expressed excitement over adventures past or yet to come was regulated to in-game and generally in guild times. For me this seemed to demonstrate a conflicted nature in personally identifying with the activity, one of the qualities of serious leisure (Stebbins 2007). The players identified internally with other players in the game, but alluded to the fact that they did discuss their involvement in

*WoW* with “outsiders.” Taken as a whole, my social experience in *WoW* was cumulative and over time the avatars and their operators became more than acquaintances. The guild was like a family, some members become friends, while others are annoying, but you are all there together and at the very least, you share the affiliation through the guild and the game.

*What did participants reveal about their real lives during play?*

Early in the game, social encounters were brief and limited to being at the same spot in a quest line as the other players. When these groupings did occur, little was revealed about the individual’s real life circumstance with the occasional exception of offering a reason for leaving or pausing the play. For example a player might say “I need a bio break” meaning they needed to use the restroom. Or a player might say he/she needed to go to work or school, have dinner, or feed the baby. These short and rather mundane utterances alone said little about who the person was on the other end of the avatar.

Guild life was similar, offering only small glimpses into the lives of the players in the form of short individual statements, but there was a cumulative effect. Over time, these short statements built a profile of a player. After being there a while I could see the players’ routines of play, how they could squeeze in an extra hour here and there around their personal obligations of school or work. Eventually, I knew if they were students or workers and sometimes even where they went to school or the type of work they did. All of this disclosure was revealed casually, and generally most often as someone logged off. At that time it was common to explain why they needed to leave. Additionally, there were a few times when the whole guild chimed in revealing personal information.

One hot summer day, a few players were complaining about how hot it was outside. Naturally, someone asked where the players lived. After divulging it was Canada, other Canadian guild members began cross-checking locations and temperatures. Other non-Canadian, mostly American, players began revealing their own weather and corresponding locations. The most major revelation during the study was the disclosure of spousal abuse and for many guild members that went too far. One could assume that players were there to play and really did not want to be involved in the seriousness and gravity of that sort of interpersonal domestic difficulty.

Similarly other topics were not discussed or revealed. During the course of this study there were several historic moments. America elected its first Black president and the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, British Petroleum's accident in the gulf, occurred and neither was mentioned in either guild or raid chat. Curiously, serious topics and current events are seemingly taboo conversations. The players want to be "Alone Together" (Turkle, 2011) in a fantasy world of play. This fact gives a nod to Huizinga's (1938/2008) much maligned "magic circle" found to be more porous and less sacrosanct (Castronova, 2007; Pearce, 2009; Salen and Zimmerman, 2004; Taylor, 2006). Perhaps Huizinga's meaning of play's "magic circle" is more deeply connected to ones deeply focused attention during play and less about the impenetrable nature of the ludisphere. As the real world may on occasion leak into the virtual world, the virtual world occasionally extends into the physical world, such as when two friends discuss game strategies on their way to school. I contend that the culture I observed at play, worked very hard to hold the real world at bay.

Personal revelations were even more prominent inside the culture of raiders. This was especially true of my raid team. One factor that is particularly relevant was the use of audio chat in *Ventrillo*. Hearing a real voice had the effect of turning heroic avatars into regular people. With only a slight chance of mistaken identity, it was easy to distinguish men from women. Deeper personality traits could also be distinguished, such as someone's threshold for frustration. Occasionally I could hear other individuals in players' households. Another factor with raiding was the frequency and intensity of engagements. Deeper bonds are built across a series of intense and often frustrating encounters. Perhaps this is similar to the "band of brothers" effect experienced by soldiers who experience combat together. After sharing these experiences, several members of my raid team opened up and shared details about their real lives without persuasion from me. This was generally in whisper chat but occasionally in raid chat as well. But all-in-all there was not much revealed. The game space is for talk of the game and to the largest extent, purposeful in ignoring everything else. Nor was there much evidence about the value of the play in an individual's life. Only the sustained and spirited participation suggested its importance.

*Serendipity and limitations of this study*

Being killed, repeatedly, by the Scorpoks in the Blasted Lands was extremely frustrating (not in the fun way) and at the time I even wondered if I should continue to pursue this research at all. When Arres and Quilz first invited me to join their party to save me from the Scorpoks, I wasn't wearing my "researcher's hat," I just wanted to complete that quest and move forward. I was experiencing inattentional blindness, (Mack & Rock, 1998) being so fixated on the Scorpoks that I temporarily lost site of the

research opportunity in front of me (a common occurrence throughout the study). In hindsight it's remarkable how many doors Arres and Quilz opened for me. They taught me to play, introduced me to the meta-game world of reference sites and add-ons, and invited me into their social world. It's sad that they left the realm, but in-game we were able to stay in touch with the Real-Id chat update patch issued by Blizzard in June of 2010.

They also introduced me to Kashi and Fierce, my virtual Sherpas and closest of online friends. It would have been easier for them to abandon me in the Gnomes during their exodus into WarzRus. I admit to a deep sense of panic when Kashi first told me they were leaving. I had planned the entire study around the Gnomes and capturing the Raider data was central to its design. A dead guild is not conducive to collecting rich data. That surprising turn of events pushed me out of my comfort zone and caused me to experience a far broader range of the game and its inhabitants. Kashi and Fierce were the most dedicated to helping with the research; they were always available, inviting and making space for me inside the culture of raiders, and providing me with member checks throughout the process. On several occasions, they adamantly stated that I was "flat out wrong" in my interpretation of motivations or events and then explained their interpretations, offering me a new perspective. For example when I felt that a player was motivated by social, ego related needs, they explained how "gear" and advancement were more central to the individuals motivations.

The study had its share of problems and my role as researcher impacted the range of my interactions with the full spectrum of players available to me. I would love to say that most of the problems were technical issues and leave it at that. However, many were

human problems with managing technology. Copying the chat out of *Elephant* and pasting it into *Word* was a major chore because there was a buffer limit and I could not grab it all in one pass, it ended up being closer to about sixty passes. Late in the study I was spending around 45 frustrating minutes copying and pasting at the end of each session. It should be clear that a level of comfort with technology is required for this type of research in addition to a high threshold for frustration. In addition to technology, this study was time intensive. Conducting this sort of study not only requires considerable time but also the flexibility to schedule one's time to strange hours. I was fortunate and privileged to have the lifestyle that allowed for the time and flexibility to conduct this study.

While the initial design of the study worked well... like clockwork, during the write up phase, I found my most challenging task was inventing new names for everything from the realm, to the guild, to the avatars. That process was far more unsavory than I had considered. The names players come up with for avatars and guilds tell a story, a story I was unable to tell. I had to come up with names that held equivalent meaning, which was impossibly Herculean. Game names are rich in meaning; they represent and inform the culture.

Capturing the situation of domestic abuse and its impact on my raid group as well as the eventual breakup of the guild certainly caught me off guard. It taught me the ethical rationale behind changing the names and protecting the confidentiality of the participants, but the loss of cultural authenticity is major. I did my best to reclaim some of the meaning lost, but fully realize that inserting my names significantly inhibits the representation of this culture. Finally, I am humbled by the process and product of

ethnography. Describing culture accurately and with integrity is extremely hard work. Using a film metaphor, a lot of interesting material was left on the cutting room floor and I intend to sort back through it after this movie comes out.

*Recommendations for future studies*

*The World of Warcraft* is ripe for inquiry. Each realm is its own social laboratory waiting for researchers and their questions. For example, there is considerable work remaining on issues of gender and the complicated relationship between players, avatars and the larger community. More leisure research attention is needed in this particular context and in cyberspace more broadly. Technologically-mediated leisure activities, or “Cyber-leisure,” continue to consume more leisure time in our modern society across multiple demographics such as age, education, race and socioeconomic status, I believe that our scholarly attention should follow this trend by exploring the impact of our relationship and usage of technology in leisure and recreation experience.

This study revealed the need for more research on the effects of group dynamics in relation to leisure involvement. Observing the major differences in involvement orientations for players who played the game solo as opposed to playing the game with someone they knew in real life causes me to wonder how relationships might alter activity involvements within other contexts. How is involvement, and more specifically enduring involvement, affected if an activity is adopted by an individual, or couples (friends or lovers), or larger groups?

One of the most fascinating aspects of this study was the meta-game world, which served as the closest representation of Unruh’s (1980) “social world” conception given that these were spaces not limited by realm selection. The vastness and complexity of

these external resources was truly striking. Who is producing them and why? The ways and reasons in which the players engaged these spaces were equally fascinating to life inside the game. Some participants suggested that they used them as just-in-time support, others cross-referenced between sites, and the most interesting was the “theory-crafting” aspects where a peer reviewed process was revealed through the series of comments on a suggested and posted “best practice” around a particular topic. Future work should explore these spaces and how they are used. This research bridges the learning and leisure divide, connecting them in the concept of *Amateur Scholarship*. From the perspective of educators, it seems critical to develop an understanding of the spaces where individuals find pleasure in learning. This is beyond simply self-directed learning but rather a form of autotelic learning, learning for the sake of learning. Curiously, in the context of this study this informal form of scholarship was all for the sake of improving an avatar.

Why is the improvement and observable progression of an avatar of such importance? What can this explain or reveal in terms of learning, development, and growth beyond MMOG contexts? Why spend the time and go through all the frustrations? I conceptualized these efforts as “Avatar Actualization.” Considering Levi-Strauss’s (1963) theories of “the self” and “the other,” where do we place the notion of avatar inside that binary? The avatar is a paradox; it is an extension of self and simultaneously it is the “other.” As I played, I was sometimes Ana, but other times I was doing things for Ana. It represents an intriguing psychological paradox. Perhaps an act of researching mage theory at elitistjerks.com to make Ana a better mage makes *me* better? Is it possible that my reading comprehension improves while doing so, or my skills in



searching and retrieving information? The big question becomes who is Ana and can my efforts to improve her in turn improve me? This is a question of learning transfer and merits attention.

### *Going Home*

I left *The World of Warcraft* in early February of 2011 and have not returned. The first couple of weeks after leaving, I felt a sense of loss. My friends in Azeroth, whom I never met, came to be an important social network for me in part because they were separated from my real life. Although I was conducting this study, my world there was simultaneously similar and different from my world here. I deeply enjoyed moving between the two. Avatar-based tele-presence is like living another life but the two realities are tethered together, like having two groups of friends in the physical world and moving back and forth between them. Each group offers something unique and through interaction with both groups a segregated fullness to one's life is maintained. Each is regulated to its own important social sphere.

Will I return to *The World of Warcraft*? I think I will but not to play with such rigor, as raiding requires, but rather to reconnect, as I do with old friends from my past. Like the occasional checking in with an old high school buddy or college roommate. Games are transient spaces and even gamers move on to new pastures as new games emerge and captivate them for a while. Time moves on, but the memory of pleasant and powerful experience persists.

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## APPENDIX: GLOSSARY OF WARCRAFT JARGON

Action bar – Customizable area of the *Warcraft* interface for the spells and abilities

Add-on – Third party software that alters the graphic user interface, (aka a *Mod* or *Modification*)

Adds – New or “additional” monsters summoned by the boss in an instance or raid

Aggro – The *WoW* term for the ‘Aggression’ of monsters or NPCs directed at players.

Drops – The treasure that is looted off dead monsters

Azeroth – The name of the world in *Warcraft*

Burn – Expression meaning to kill a monster or boss as fast as possible

Cool down (CD) – The amount of time it takes for a spell to be ready again after its use

Dagger’s End – Fictitious *Warcraft* Realm name used for this study

Grinding – A non-quest experience gathering repetitive task used for leveling an avatar

Elwynn Forest – Starting area for humans in the Azeroth

Guild – An association or group of players in *The World of Warcraft* or other MMOG

Grats – The abbreviated form of congratulations

Loot – Treasure

Lootmaster – The person in charge of distributing treasure in a raid team

Noob – A player who is perceived to be new to the game.

Northrend – A continent added to Azeroth during *The Wrath of the Lich King* expansion

Northshire Abbey – Starting point for most human classes in *WoW*

NP – Chat speak for “no problem”

NPC- Non-player character

PVE – Player versus environment

PVP – Player versus player

PUG (Pugging) - A pick-up-group

Raid – An instance (dungeon) in *WoW* available to avatars of the maximum level

Raid leader – The team leader and guild during a raid session

Realm – A server selected for play in *WoW*

Respawn - When new monsters reappear in the game after being killed

RP – A realm type in *WoW* dedicated to Role-Playing

RPG – Role-Playing game

Spamming – Casting the same spell repeatedly

Stormwind – Capital city for the Alliance in *The World of Warcraft*

*WoW*—Abbreviation for *The World of Warcraft*