University of Wisconsin Milwaukee
UWM Digital Commons

Theses and Dissertations

December 2019

Looking for Group: Sociality, Embodiment, and Institutions in World of Warcraft

Christopher J. Cooley
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

Follow this and additional works at: https://dc.uwm.edu/etd

Part of the Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons, and the United States History Commons

Recommended Citation
Cooley, Christopher J., "Looking for Group: Sociality, Embodiment, and Institutions in World of Warcraft" (2019). *Theses and Dissertations*. 2295.
https://dc.uwm.edu/etd/2295

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by UWM Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of UWM Digital Commons. For more information, please contact open-access@uwm.edu.

LOOKING FOR GROUP:

SOCIALITY, EMBODIMENT, AND INSTITUTIONS IN WORLD OF WARCRAFT

by

CHRISTOPHER J. COOLEY

A Dissertation Submitted in

Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in Anthropology

at

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

December 2019

ABSTRACT

LOOKING FOR GROUP: SOCIALITY, EMBODIMENT, AND INSTITUTIONS IN WORLD OF WARCRAFT

by

Christopher J. Cooley

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2019
Under the Supervision of Professor Thomas Malaby

This ethnography examines the varying degrees of conflict between multiple stakeholders involved in the massively multiplayer online role-playing game *World of Warcraft* (WoW). The game's designers, like many software developers in the contemporary world, tend to be guided by an ideology influenced by classical liberalism, but also inspired by a utopian view of technology in general. That ideological position has directly affected many aspects of the game, from the largely unregulated in-game economy, to the strong emphasis on individual mastery of the game's systems to progress through the complete content of the game world. *World of Warcraft* advertises itself not just on its narrative and combat mechanics; it also entices players to participate because of its very nature as a multiplayer game. The structure of WoW encourages players to join together in tight-knit communities ("guilds") not just to overcome powerful opponents, but to socialize as well. In this way the game exists for many players as a significant social outlet in their everyday lives.

However, players, guilds, and designers exist in a state of tension due to the ideological and architected constraints of the game. Due to the classical liberal bent of WoW promoting in-

dividual achievement through the game's many obstacles, players oftentimes find themselves having to break away from close friends they game with in order to follow the primary goals of the narrative. This leads to an environment where players are constantly weighing the social bonds they establish and/or maintain through play against the concerns of software programmers intent on directing them to endgame content above all else.

© Christopher J. Cooley, 2019
All Rights Reserved

To Christina,
of course.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures	vii
Acknowledgments	viii
Chapter	
I. Introduction	1
The Stage Is Set	1
My Life As a Night Elf Druid	12
Yet Another Magic Circle Discussion	16
Central Argument	21
Games As Architected Spaces	23
Data Collection Techniques	30
Work Overview	34
II. Embodiment and Bodiliness	37
Clothes Maketh the Man	37
Embodiment and Game Immersion	47
Bodiliness and Embodiment	51
Bodiliness In World of Warcraft	56
Games As Rituals	62
III. Amici et Familiae, a History	68
The Family That Slays Together	68
IV. Insulting the Meat	98
Ideology and Software Design	104
Warcraft Guilds of the Kalahari	113
Emergent Play In MMORGs	116
Meritocracy, Subversion, and the Project of the Self	119
V. “git gud,” Get Banned, or Get Mods	121
Night (Elf) School	122
Cheating	140
Design, Learning, and the Player As Platonic Ideal	150
Addons	156
VI. Conclusion	164
Gaming and Power Relationships	179
Embodiment and Virtual Reality	181
Closing Remarks	186
Works Cited	193
Curriculum Vita	204

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: A map of the game world, Azeroth. 6

Figure 2: WoW user interface. 8

Figure 3: My virtual representation in WoW. 14

Figure 4: An aerial view of Stormwind. 15

Figure 5: Suramar. 15

Figure 6: Character panel in WoW. 57

Figure 7: An example of a transmogrified weapon. 59

Figure 8: Screenshot of a typical raid boss battle. 63

Figure 9: Leveling map of the continent of Kalimdor. 90

Figure 10: Shades of Wacquant. 130

Figure 11: Default action icons for a druid character. 152

Figure 12: Customized action icons for a druid character. 152

Figure 13: Homepage of the CurseForge website. 157

Figure 14: An example of a Oculus Rift “home.” 185

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks go first to a student of mine many moons ago, Miriam Winter, who pointed out to me that someone really should do an ethnography of *World of Warcraft*. She got the ball rolling, so to speak.

Of course, I must also thank my dissertation committee members Thomas Malaby, Kalman Applbaum, Benjamin Campbell, and Ingrid Jordt for their suggestions, constructive criticism, and extreme patience as I wrestled this work into its final form. Thomas Malaby was my advisor, and provided invaluable insight, support, and advice without which I would doubtless still be struggling to even begin writing. It almost goes without saying that this work would be much the poorer without his constant assistance.

A round of thanks go to my comrades-in-arms Laya Liebeseller, Krista-Lee Malone, and Josh Rivers. It is oftentimes helpful to have people to bounce ideas off of, however ill-thought out, and these three deserve special commendations for letting me dribble off at the mouth when I needed to most. Some of those dribbles eventually turned into a significant chunk of Chapter 2, which would not have happened without their input.

Extra special thanks to all of the gamers who shared their time with me, allowing me to ask them odd questions, aim video cameras at their faces, and record raid nights for my research.

I also thank Brian Randolph, wherever he is. Cliche aside, you were right, Brian — it took me a while, but I did it.

I am grateful to Lynn Ollswang for helping me to stay sane and to stay focused on what needed to be done to complete this dissertation at long last.

Another round of thank-yous go to my parents, Jan and Jon, and my brother Alex. All three managed to avoid incessantly asking me the one thing you should never, ever ask a dissertator: “So, when are you going to be finished?” Thanks for being supportive without being overbearing, guys.

While not offering gratitude necessarily, I offer acknowledgments to my feline companions Banshee and (the late, lamented) Siouxsie. Both took extraordinary interest in my handwritten notes, along with a keen fixation on my computer screen and keyboard while conducting fieldwork and writing. Banshee in particular was a close companion on my headrest while engaged with *World of Warcraft*, offering silent but pointed advice on playing a feral druid.

Finally, I offer my eternal thanks to my wife Christina. She more than anyone else showed a breathtaking level of patience and love while I completed my degree. Grad school is a homewrecker, and I’m grateful that she stuck with me through the entire process.

As one is always required to say in instances like this, all of the aforementioned people contributed to my success in some way, shape, or form, but I take full responsibility for the following work, and any mistakes or catastrophes are mine and mine alone.

Chapter 1: Introduction

The Stage Is Set

"I have to get things ready for him," eight-year-old Vince said, referring to his younger brother Henry. I observed as the boy pulled a child-sized easy chair in front of the family couch with a sense of solemnity, facing the large flat-screen television in the cluttered living room.

It was a formal process, this preparation, with a familiarity of movement that suggested this was something that he was used to doing on a regular basis. Vince indicated my guess was correct when I asked him. After arranging the chair just so, he pushed a small end table to its right. Then came a couple of large pillows, placed in front of the chair.

"Is that a foot rest?" I asked. Vince nodded in confirmation.

Next came the final step; the boy placed a Playstation game controller on the end table. Ritual complete, his six-year-old brother was now ready to begin playing Batman: Arkham Asylum*. Calling him over once finished, Henry sat in his chair, looking like nothing so much as a pajama-clad king with his older brother acting as trusted, dutiful advisor behind him on the couch, both staring with rapt attention as the game began to load that Saturday morning.*

World of Warcraft (WoW) is the most successful computer game in the massively multiplayer online role-playing (MMORG) genre. At its height of popularity in 2008, the game commanded the attention of some 12 million players, a remarkable feat given that not only does the base game cost US$50, but access means an additional fee of US$15 per month. Going live in 2004, as of 2019 subscription numbers are no longer released publicly by Blizzard.

Unconfirmed numbers as of this writing place current subscribers at roughly 2 million (Gadgets 360, 2018), but WoW still has more players than any other MMORG by an order of magnitude. WoW is perhaps unique among other games of this type, given its longevity and total number of active player accounts.

WoW demands a great deal of time and money from its players. The ongoing subscription fee has created a goldmine of profit for Blizzard owing to the millions of players worldwide — roughly US$30 million each month by itself, if we assume US$15 per 2 million active players. However, players must also invest a tremendous amount of labor to progress in the game with their characters, as well. Up until recently, it would often take months if not years of time to see all that the game had to offer. To reach that point, players report putting in as much time weekly as a part- or even full-time job. Journalist Julian Dibbell (2006: 289-290), in his account of the earlier MMORG title *Ultima Online*, pointed out that the effort involved playing the game well blurred the lines between "play" and "work," involving repetitive, tedious tasks that lacked an immediate sense of enjoyment.

Like many other popular cultural phenomena, WoW enthusiasts have generated a large subculture parallel to the game itself. Part of this is promoted by tie-in merchandise produced by Blizzard (t-shirts, novels, comic books, and even a feature film), but most fan activity is internet-based. Blogs, news and rumor sites, fan-created fiction ("fanfic"), art, and videos contribute to the definition of a distinctive community devoted to all facets of the game.

In spite of all this attention given over by the general population of the United States — let alone the rest of the world — to digital gaming, anthropology has been relatively quiet on the subject. In fact, only one major book on MMORGs has been written by an anthropologist:

Bonnie Nardi's *My Life as a Night Elf Priest* (2006). Cultural anthropologists have instead written primarily on the topic of social media (see Miller and Sinanan 2017, Ryan 2012), and to a lesser extent non-game virtual worlds (see Boellstorff 2008, Malaby 2009). MMORG scholarship, like that on digital gaming more broadly, has been the playground primarily of those from media studies, sociology, and the field of communications.

For approximately a year and a half, I spent time examining the playing habits of digital game players, both console and computer. The ultimate goal of this research was to study the complex interrelationships between institutions and American participants in these types of recreational activities. My interest was in the way that game companies — as a form of institutional infrastructure — both guide the embodied practices of their consumers acting as players, and the way that the design goals of these companies are in some cases subverted by the interests of those same players through embodied action. The aims of both parties at times overlap, and at others directly conflict, leading to a problematic, ambiguous connection between the two. Central to the concerns of both game designers and players is a particular ideological orientation that has emerged over several decades from classical liberalism in contemporary America regarding the importance of identity management.

My argument herein is that *World of Warcraft* is the site of tensions between multiple types of institutions (software companies, voluntary player communities ["guilds"] within the game, and pre-existing social groups like families). The experience of playing the game is structured by affordances designed by Blizzard. That design is based on assumptions about what players want in MMORGs, originating in an ideology that goes back at least as far as the 1960s (and which owes a great deal to philosophers of the 17th and 18th centuries). This ideological

position of software developers conflicts with the social emphasis of WoW, placing progression in individual development as a player over that of relationships between players. My dissertation explores the way in which intimate relationships between people playing WoW together are alienated due to the capitalist market forces that are inscribed into the architecture of the game by its programmers.

I use the concept of classical liberalism in the same way as Thomas Malaby (2009) in his examination of governance within Linden Labs, developers of the virtual world *Second Life*. Specifically, he discusses the concept of "technoliberalism" as it applies to software programmers. Technoliberalism, as an outgrowth of the classical liberal ideals of free economic markets and the value of the individual, is an ideological outlook that emphasizes a suspicion of hierarchical political organizations, trust in technology, and "faith in the legitimacy of emergent effects" (Malaby 2009: 27). This outlook informs much of how tech companies great and small are governed, as well as the architecture of the software they produce as commodities.

For my research, I concentrated on the social and practical aspects of playing *World of Warcraft*. Developed by the game company Blizzard, WoW is a digital computer game inspired by traditional tabletop role-playing games, most notably *Dungeons & Dragons*, where a group of players take on fictional heroic personas and work together toward various goals. Rather than sitting around a dining room table together, WoW players interact through the medium of a computer game instead. As in *Dungeons & Dragons*, players create characters defined by a "race" (human or other humanoid species) and "class" (an occupation such as warrior, priest, or mage), the combination of which provides a set of abilities that grant affordances within the game world. Like many other role-paying games, most of these abilities are combat-oriented.

Before delving into my research, it is important for readers to understand the nature of *World of Warcraft* — what the game is about, how it is played, and what events occur within it — so as to avoid confusion while discussing the particulars of players' experiences. Once a character is designed and named, the player can begin exploring the fictional world of Azeroth, the game's primary setting (see Figure 1). WoW's environment resembles a cartoon-like interpretation of Middle-Earth from the Lord of the Rings novels, a medieval-style fantasy realm with knights on horseback, orc tribespeople, and dragons in cavernous lairs. WoW eschews the realism of the Lord of the Rings film adaptations in favor of a design aesthetic emphasizing exaggerated proportions and features. It is, for lack of a better term, "cute." The game world is also extremely big, encompassing two large continents and several smaller island regions, and can take hours of real time to fully traverse.

Characters in Azeroth are members of one of two main factions, usually locked in an elevated Cold War-like conflict. The more traditional Middle-Earth-style races comprise the Alliance (humans, elves, dwarves, gnomes, etc.). Their competitors are members of the Horde, represented by their more monstrous counterparts (orcs, minotaur-like tauren, trolls, undead, etc.). Players can join either faction, with the caveat that they are unable to communicate in-game with the opposition. Certain areas of the game world are even reserved for PvP (player versus player) combat — thus the "war" in *Warcraft*.

It should be noted that these factions constitute a particular cosmological orientation. The Alliance are interpreted as "the good guys," with membership made up of those groups that are traditionally given heroic roles within popular fantasy media. Voice actors for each Alliance race depict them with accents that are Western European and American, and for the most part

Figure 1: A map of the game world, Azeroth.

sound "white." Humans sound like white Americans, dwarves have gruff Scottish brogues, and night elves sound vaguely English. The Horde, however, can be taken to represent "the bad guys." Their member races are clearly "othered" in comparison to the Alliance, and are usually cast in villainous roles in other fantasy games, along with novels and films. Distinct from the Alliance, spoken accents tend to be those from non-European backgrounds. Trolls in particular are portrayed with black Caribbean accents, with references to voodoo. As another example, tauren are explicitly coded as Native American in terms of clothing and dialect.

Besides faction, another important affiliation in the game is membership in a guild. Guilds are player-organized social communities that have built-in infrastructure support within

the game. They generally have some sort of hierarchical structure composed of a guild leader, guild officers, and a pool of regular members. Guilds are the major social component of MMORGs in general, and WoW is no different. They set up a support network for players in which resources can be shared for mutual benefit, and guilds also provide a ready-made pool of players to call on to take on tasks that are beyond the ability of solo characters. For most people, guilds are also the social glue that keeps them involved in the game, and many players report creating long-time friendships with other members — some even meet romantic partners and future spouses through their guilds. At their core, these communities create a network for reciprocal exchanges of various forms of capital, and I will be discussing this aspect of guilds throughout the course of this work.

Players experience the game via a third-person perspective in which they can see their character centered on the screen in front of them (although it is possible to zoom in to gain the equivalent of a first-person perspective instead). This point of view is important tactically in battle, as it provides better information on a character's location relative to opponents (whether controlled by the game or by other players). Surrounding the periphery of the screen is the user interface for WoW, essentially the same as a heads-up display in a fighter jet (see Figure 2). In the upper left corner is a portrait of one's character, along with their health and energy points (used for various special abilities). The upper right corner contains a mini-map for navigation, and will highlight points of interest to players. The bottom of the screen has rows of icons that correspond to attack forms, defensive actions, and other activities. These icons can be rearranged by the player according to their preferred tactics in battle, and can be tied to keyboard commands instead of relying on the mouse for selection. In the lower left corner of the screen

Figure 2: WoW user interface. An example of a typical interface layout highlighting the major aspects of the display.

sits a text box which can displays both a running log of combat information as well as a separate tab for text chat between players. Finally, the right side of the screen can be used to display additional icons controlling more character actions.

As will be discussed in a later chapter, this interface is highly extensible, and an entire cottage industry for free addon software exists to augment or alter nearly aspect of it. Hence, what one sees in the screenshot provided is not necessarily the same for every player. Movement and actions of one's on-screen character is controlled by a combination of mouse and keyboard commands.

WoW shares a number of traits with traditional tabletop RPGs. You create a character, and by defeating monsters (referred to as "mobs," short for "mobile"), succeeding in quests, and accomplishing other goals that character earns experience points. Once a certain threshold of

experience points is reached, that character "levels up," gaining a new experience level which unlocks new abilities and access to more powerful gear (weapons and armor). Higher levels also allow the player to explore new, more challenging regions in the game world; most regions are "gated" according to level, and if one strays into regions rated for levels significantly above that of one's character they will not survive combat with the mobs located there.

Quests are the most common form of activity in WoW, and are best thought of as relatively short missions offered to players by non-player characters (NPCs) controlled by the game program. Usually, a monetary reward is given in return for completing the quest. Dungeons and raids (both called "instances") are longer adventures that involve defeating a succession of NPC opponents more powerful than those encountered on quests. Dungeons are explored in groups of five players, while raids usually have a minimum of ten, and in the past could have as many as forty players involved. Raids are considered the "endgame" of WoW, and have the toughest NPCs "boss monsters" as well as the best rewards for victory. They are also reserved for characters that have reached the maximum experience level — at its inception WoW topped out at 60, but currently the level cap is 120.

Someone new to MMORGs may ask what the ultimate goal of a game like WoW is; what does its win-state look like? The fact of the matter is that WoW offers a vast number of things to do, according to individual preference. The game has had a number of updates over its history, and each one of the expansion packs has a similar central plotline involving a world-threatening foe that players must band together to stop. This narrative is reinforced by certain key quests, some of which are connected to dungeons and raids, that build up the storyline leading to a final

raid in which the main enemy of the expansion is (hopefully) defeated. Completing this storyline may take many months to accomplish, however.

In the meantime, besides these aspects of play players concern themselves with gathering raw materials from mining and harvesting, manufacture gear for themselves or other players (using an auction house system for the in-game economy), and other like practices. PvP arenas make up what amounts to a separate game running parallel to the main one, and a few players I spoke with completely ignored the main narrative in favor of this PvP component. Another area of focus is on earning “achievements.” These are in-game goals set by the game designers that involve a non-quest activity that requires a great deal of time investment and/or skill (defeating a difficult raid boss with no fatalities, petting one of every single type of squirrel in the game world, etc.). Characters have an achievement score that raises with each one earned to reflect their efforts. The most obvious win-state would be completion of an expansion’s central storyline, including victory in the end-game raid content. That constitutes the primary focus of the game at any given point. However, given the breadth of activities included in WoW, as described above, success in any of them could also warrant being labeled “winning.” Given that one can continue to play and work on a number of other objectives away from the main story, WoW parallels D&D again in not having a final end — at least not until Blizzard decides to halt development and shut down the game’s servers.

Being multiplayer-oriented, WoW provides multiple modes for communicating with others. The most commonly used method is the text chat system mentioned above. That system allows for different channels, divided according to in-game geographic proximity or use case (trading goods, recruiting guild members, defending against the opposing faction). Players have

access to a channel for general chat that is public, but there are also channels reserved for communication between guild members only. Further, the game has a "whisper" channel that provides a one-to-one chat channel akin to private text messaging. WoW also has a system that operates like an in-game email program, wherein the player clicks on a mailbox located in cities and towns, and can then send an email along with attachments of gear and/or gold (the in-game currency) to any other player in their faction. In practice, players tend to use this solely for transferring items as opposed to using it as a communications medium.

Finally, there is voice chat. For much of WoW's history, players relied on third-party voice chat programs to verbally interact, but in more recent years Blizzard has included a built-in voice option. In either case, voice chat is seen as vitally important for coordinating raids (and to a lesser extent, dungeons) given the necessity of split-second timing of actions in those frenetic instances. Many guilds make voice chat a requirement for participating in raids, and those lacking microphones tend to be sidelined or at a distinct disadvantage during play. Aside from the strategic importance, the social impact of voice interaction is obvious. Being able to hear other people speak to you reinforces the bonds that connect guild members together, and plays a key role in establishing camaraderie and a shared identity.

Besides the chat windows, there are additional limited affordances for communication in the form of emotes — verbal and/or nonverbal behaviors that can be used to express emotion or perform a gesture. These emotes include laughing, cowering in fear, pointing, and making (non-obscene) rude gestures, and are triggered by typing in a text command in the chat window. A popular emote that is frequently used is the /dance command, which causes one's avatar to perform a looped dance routine. These dances are unique to each race and sex, and among other

things are used as a way to pass the time with other players while waiting to begin dungeons or raids. They also seem to denote a certain level of social intimacy, as a form of mirroring behavior between players who have gamed together for a significant length of time.

My Life As a Night Elf Druid

My first experience with WoW was watching over my younger brother's shoulder as he played through various quests and dungeons while I was visiting my family. Alex was a seasoned expert by that time, in a successful raiding guild after having played since the game was still in beta-testing. He tried to convince me to pick up WoW to start playing online with him, but I balked at the suggestion, seeing it as a time-sink that I wouldn't be able to put down. This was the same excuse I used to avoid playing MUDs (text-based multi-user dungeons, a precursor to MMOs) in the 1990s as an undergraduate. I finally caved in a year or so later a few months before the first expansion arrived for WoW. The reason was a combination of my brother's insistence and several conversations with a couple of undergraduate students of mine who were dedicated WoW players like Alex. While I was initially skeptical of the depth of gameplay MMOs offered, they described the various forms of formal and informal player interaction that went on — formal in terms of intentional affordances designed into WoW such as auction houses for trading goods for gold currency, informal in terms of role-playing characters and continuing conversations and plots outside the game itself. At the time, I was unaware of any published anthropological research on the subject, and went with the suggestion that perhaps I should take a closer look. I no longer had a Master's program to be distracted from, so it seemed safe to indulge my curiosity. After all, this was for *science!*

After looking at the documentation online provided by Blizzard and various fan websites, I decided on my first character: a night elf druid (see Figure 3). The druid class had a nice mixture of features, being a sort of jack-of-all-trades; one could deal damage, take hits for the rest of an adventuring party, or provide healing magic, all by shape-changing between a panther, grizzly bear, and the "native" elf form. A major draw for me was also the stealth feature, something that was otherwise limited to the "rogue" class. Stealth meant that my character could in essence turn invisible, stalking in panther form, allowing him to sneak past opponents that other classes would have to fight. This talent, along with having access to magical healing sold me on the class: a survivor, someone who could manage without depending on other players for that survival. As for choosing a night elf, that is more a carry-over from me typically playing elves in tabletop *Dungeons & Dragons*. I always found humans boring, didn't have the temperament for dwarves, and thought the gnomes in WoW overly cute. Astute readers may note that I was only looking at Alliance characters, whereas the Horde faction allowed (at the time) taurens (bulky anthropomorphic cattle), trolls, orcs, and undead. While taurens seemed interesting and agreeable, none of the other races appealed to me aesthetically, and the undead race just seemed out-and-out evil. In the end, I'm apparently a goody-goody, and chose Alliance instead.

For people who have never played an MMO, or even participated in a large virtual world like *Second Life*, the enormous scale of these places can be difficult to grasp at first (see Figure 4 and Figure 5). I had some familiarity with the concept when I began playing WoW, and had dabbled with the *Warcraft* single-player strategy games on a friend's computer years before, but even I was taken aback early on. The moment I realized just how large the game world for WoW

Figure 3: My virtual representation within WoW. Note that those are armored shoulder pads, not actual wings.

was happened a few weeks into playing, as my druid left the forested "island" starting zone of Teldrassil and moved to the Darkshore region across the bay by boat to continue various quests. I had travelled relatively far inland and finally needed to return to the capital city in Teldrassil, which I did by taking a "taxi" — meaning a flying mount in the form of a half-eagle/half-lion griffin — much more efficient and faster than travel on foot.

I flew over all the areas I had spent a couple of weeks running about in from high above, and was astounded at the vast scale of just this small pocket of the game world. Reinforcing this sense of wonder was my experience flying over numerous other characters battling monsters and realizing that each one of those animated figures was controlled by another human being, playing through their own personal stories in the same landscape I had occupied. This line of thinking was punctuated by my view of Teldrassil as I approached it coming from the opposite direction,

Figure 4: An aerial view of Stormwind. Founded by humans. this is the capital city of the Alliance faction within WoW.

Figure 5: Suramar. A bucolic yet dangerous region found in one of the later expansion packs.

and noticing with a jolt that it wasn't an elevated steppe-like island as I had thought when I first began playing — I had actually spent a couple of weeks running around on top of an unthinkably enormous, thickly-forested tree stump (something apparently already known to players of the Warcraft strategy games). It's quite an experience coming from single-player games to find that those far-off vistas that are normally unreachable, can — in WoW, at least — be visited and experienced up close and personal.

This is all very well for an overview of what a particular computer game is like, but as this is a dissertation intending to share research pushing — how ever amateurishly — the boundary of human knowledge in cultural anthropology just a hair further, it still begs the question of what value studying digital games brings to the discipline. For many people, scholars included, games in general have been viewed as epiphenomenal relative to other aspects of being human. Digital games arguably push this perspective still further, given the nature of the experiences lacks a direct tactile quality, and in many cases even co-presence with other people, unlike — for example — a syncretic cricket match played by Trobriand islanders. In the first case, the argument must be made that computer games, in a word, *matter*. This brings us to a nagging concept that continues to nip at the heels of research on digital games: the "magic circle."

Yet Another Magic Circle Discussion

The magic circle model derives from *Homo Ludens* (1949), Huizinga's ur-text for the field of game studies. Huizinga put forward the argument that play generally and games specifically occur within a "magic circle" that clearly demarcates them as apart from everyday

life. His position was based on the observation that while participating in a game, players will conduct certain practices that only are meaningful within the context of the game itself.

This idea — that games and non-games are clearly differentiated from each other, and that meanings and practices in one instance do not influence those of the other — has been very influential on early scholarship in the field of digital game studies. Many authors explicitly or implicitly treat it as given that activities on a screen are "just a game," and have no bearing or relationship to other activities (see Castronova 2005). This attitude was also commonly echoed by numerous WoW players.

In their influential overview of game design, Salen and Zimmerman (2003) make a case in favor of the magic circle model, citing Huizinga as a key influence. Of note is their reliance on highly structured, abstract games as examples: tic-tac-toe and Tetris in particular (Salen and Zimmerman 2003: 94-95). The formal and stylized design of these games, they argue, clearly distinguish game from non-game. However, they then proceed to discuss how games can be interpreted according to different frameworks, in which the degree of separation between game and non-game varies considerably between completely closed to outside sociocultural factors (such as with tic-tac-toe) to open games which have a great deal of interaction with the ambient culture (derogatory Native American stereotypes as sports team mascots), inadvertently implying that the boundary between games and everyday life is not as clearly defined as the authors would perhaps prefer (see Salen and Zimmerman 2003: 96-97).

More recent work has been explicitly challenging this limited notion of the relationship between games and everyday life, and demonstrating that especially with MMORGs the line between the interior and exterior of the magic circle is highly permeable (Boellstorff 2009:

245-246; Kaneva 2007: 68; Lehdonvirta 2010; Pearce 2006). With regards to WoW, members of the same guilds will often call each other on the phone to organize gameplay while logged off from the game itself (Malone 2009: 302). Gold farming and power leveling (see Consalvo 2007: 103; Nardi 2010) also demonstrate problems with a strict division between game and non-game. These activities are commercial endeavors by entrepreneurs who set up businesses employing men and women to play WoW for up to 12 hours per day in order to "mine" the game world for items that can be turned into in-game currency. This reserve of currency can then be sold in exchange for real money by legitimate players who wish to by-pass the long grind of working to earn such wealth in the game. In my own research, I found that players in the same guild will sometimes log in to WoW at work, not to play the game on the clock, but instead just to use the in-game text chat to converse with their friends.

In his discussion of the intra-player economy within the MMORG *Everquest* (EQ), economist Edward Castronova also offers a critique of Huizinga's position. Instead of a fixed barrier, Castronova (2004: 147-148) likens the magic circle to a porous membrane through which game and non-game flow into each other. As one example, he describes the way in which magic items and gold coins in EQ are sold on eBay between players exchanging real-world currency as payment. The value of something in a virtual gaming realm influences and is in turn influenced by capitalist notions of value and trade from outside. Given these exchanges, it is therefore reasonable to conclude that gold coins gathered in EQ are just as real as dollars used to buy them on eBay (Castronova 2004: 149-151).

T.L. Taylor (2006) points out the inadequacy of the magic circle to account for the complexity of experiences surrounding digital games. Taking a position from earlier scholarship

in internet studies, she argues that there is a great deal of messy overlap between digital games and other aspects of mundane living. Like Castronova, Taylor says that people are constantly bringing with them their own cultural practices into virtual environments, and hence no cleanly drawn dividing line can be made. The fact that MMORGs in particular transgress so many assumed boundaries between real and not-real, game and not-game, are the aspects of the genre that entice people so much as players. Just as there is no simple way to delineate religious practice from politics, economics, kinship, and other social categories, one cannot easily extricate games from the larger cultural context. (Taylor 2006: 152-154).

Thomas Malaby (2007), in his analysis of play and games, takes this approach still further. In his discussion of past anthropological scholarship, he makes the point that ethnographic descriptions of play simply can't empirically support the notion of a magic circle demarcating a fixed barrier between game and not-game. Games can have serious material effects at stake, going far beyond the basic pleasure of engaging in diversionary play. Malaby's own fieldwork revealed how men gambling in modern day Greece stand to lose social respect of their peers along with surrendered wealth. Being willing to put oneself up against the vagaries of blind chance becomes a culturally important aspect of masculinity in the communities he studied (see Malaby 1996). As Taylor states before him, games lack fixed boundaries separating them from the rest of daily practice.

The time I spent talking with and playing alongside gamers brought into sharp relief the way that digital games are deeply embedded within the web of individuals' everyday activities and personal relationships. One concern of this study early on was the way that players use games like WoW as a means of maintaining close social connections with others. Parents play

with their children, spouses and unmarried couples play with their romantic partners, friends and co-workers play together as well — all with the intent of reinforcing the sociality that is preexistent within their lives. These are not transitory relationships that last merely for the duration of a boss battle or PvP battleground, limited to the domain of the game itself. Given these circumstances, does a game like WoW affect these relationships in a practical, embodied manner?

The contemporary political landscape in America provides perhaps the most cogent example of why the magic circle argument falls flat. As more members of traditionally minority groups in online gaming environs (women, non-whites, non-heterosexuals, and transgender individuals) make their presence known amongst a community that is perceived as white, heterosexual, cis, and male, the last few years have stood witness to the mainstreaming of misogynistic, racist, homophobic, and transphobic discourse. The social phenomena of GamerGate is a particular example of this spillover from games into other areas of life. Beginning first as an attack on independent game developer Zoe Quinn, a semi-organized group of male gamers began targeting women both within the game industry and academia (notably Anita Sarkeesian, who recorded a series of videos critiquing female representation in digital games) for harassment. These attackers resented the presence of women in the perceived male space of the gaming community, and also resented so-called “politically-correct attacks” on their hobby. While much of their vitriol took place on social media sites, “GamerGaters” ramped up discourse by making direct threats that they would rape or murder these women as retaliation for questioning the way in which women and girls were depicted in games. GamerGate spread outside of blogs and social media to the extent that Quinn was forced to flee her home for fear of

violent reprisal, and other women such as Sarkeesian had need of security protection at public appearances to defend against potential physical threats.

Slurs and narratives that were previously only present in places seen as the dark underbelly of the internet, such as the /b and /pol boards on the discussion site 4chan, have become increasingly featured front and center on major gaming site discussion comments, as well as on mainstream news sites and social media. The end result is that a distinct current of online discourse and sociality has become present in a practical form outside the internet, and physically manifested in the form of regressive political rallies and public speaking engagements, casting a pall of menace, threat, and actual physical violence over the "real world." One has only to look at the way in which symbols and discourse that originated within niche online spaces (Pepe the frog, incels, "ironic" racism) have become established concepts that arguably contributed to the present political climate, perhaps even indirectly influencing the 2016 presidential election. The virtual world may be made up of nothing but ones and zeroes, but it would be a mistake to say that it exists in a bubble utterly divided from the rest of human activity.

Central Argument

More and more of everyday life is being experienced digitally, as more of our interactions, transactions, and general information make their way online. Games make up an increasingly important component of internet practices, and their presence has become a major part of people's experience. The sheer economic importance of digital games is one factor in this, since as of 2018 revenue in this arena actually surpassed that of the film industry's box

office sales globally, and this figure will likely continue to increase over time (Schieber 2019). The popularity of digital gaming reflects the fact that they are not limited to stereotypical "gamers" — mouth-breathing, slovenly young men living in their parent's basements. While this image has never been the norm, even since *Pong*, the gaming demographic now more than ever cross-cuts gender, age, race, and even income. More and more women play digital games today (depending on which types of games are counted there is an equal split between male and female players), and older adults have been increasingly involved as well. A recent survey by the Entertainment Software Association (2019) reported that women make up 46% of digital game players, with an average age of 34 for women and 32 for men. Arguably, much of this demographic shift is a result of the increase in so-called "casual games" that explore premises other than traditional action/adventure fare. Regardless, digital gaming has become an important facet of American culture, and demands serious attention by cultural anthropologists.

When I began my research, I was initially drawn to the way that people used games, and MMORGs in particular, to express pre-existing social relationships, whether defined by kinship or some other category. Gaming in this way can be seen as reflecting sociality and its accompanied meanings. As work progressed, I shifted my focus instead to the way that sociality amongst players intersected with the larger institutional concerns of the companies that design these games as commodities. It became increasingly clear during the analysis of my data that WoW is a locus of friction between multiple stakeholders — game developers, guild members, and pre-existing social groups. The game is designed with the goal of completing endgame raiding content, but reaching it means that many players must leave behind others who are not in a position to begin that portion of the game. The liberal ideology guiding the developers

encourages social alienation between players, which is at odds with the purported importance of sociality in a MMORG.

This change in perspective was inspired by Thomas Malaby's (2009) ethnography of Linden Lab, developers of the virtual world *Second Life*, and also from T.L. Taylor's (2006) analysis of the MMORG *EverQuest*, a precursor to WoW. In essence, WoW can be interpreted as an artifact produced by a community of programmers enculturated with a technoliberal ideology valuing individual achievement and meritocratic hierarchies. That viewpoint in turn informs the game design itself, encouraging a specific set of practices for players while at the same time — knowingly or unknowingly — discouraging other types of activities. In effect, the designers reproduce their dominant ideology within the context of the game, and players are embedded within the same liberal worldview through their embodied practices. My primary hypothesis became concerned with whether or not this relationship between designers and players, and between players themselves could be seen within the context of WoW.

Games As Architected Spaces

Computer games in general, and WoW in particular, are designed environments. Unlike the physical world, a product of billions of years of geological and biological processes, digital landscapes are created through the intentional will of the game developers. Game designs are predicated on a certain number of features. Regarding MMORGs in particular, such architecture usually involves some sort of quest system, a tactical combat system for battles, and a system for organizing player social interaction and communication. The fact that MMORGs are expressly designed with multiplayer interaction in mind makes them categorically different from single-

player games in terms of structure (Zagal, et. al. 2000). The manner in which game developers address features has tremendous impact on the latitude that players have in their practices within the game. The organizational practices of a development company may also carry with it an ideology that influences the form that the final product takes on (see Malaby 2009 for a discussion of this in relation to *Second Life*).

For the most part the structure of a video game's set of rules are inherently rather rigid; there is no way to negotiate with WoW itself over a shortcoming of the game as one might with the player taking the role of banker in a tabletop game of Monopoly. With WoW, as in other games, the programming code is the rule (Mortensen 2008: 204-205). Given the constant updates and patches to this code, however, rules are subject to change, and are therefore flexible in ways similar to social norms of behavior in the physical world (Mortensen 2008: 207).

The basic structure of gameplay in WoW is based around the quest, a mission given to players via a non-player character in the game. Due to the architecture of the game, quests tend to be organized on two principles: deferral and repetition (Rettberg 2008: 168). Quests are marked by deferral in the sense that rewards are not given to the player for completing a task until after the task is finished. Quests are marked by repetition in terms of the goals of the quests. The most common form of quest in the game is to kill *n* number of monsters, either for some possession of the creatures in question (hides, weapons, etc.), or because the targets are threatening a quest-giving NPC in some way.

The nature of game design is that there is an inherent imbalance of power between the developer and the player (Kaneva 2007; Smith 2007). The end user license agreement (EULA) that players must agree to or forfeit their opportunity to play WoW or any other game brings an

implicit statement to the fore reminding players that they are in a subordinate position relative to the producers of the game (Smith 2007: 17-19). In spite of all this, as de Certeau (1984) discussed at length, there are always avenues around obstacles, chinks in the walls, that allow people a certain amount of agency even when dealing with the most authoritarian of regimes. One of the things that designers of the early graphical virtual world *Habitat* found was that there were limits to this power as well (Morningstar and Farmer 1990). These limits came down to the basic element of relative unpredictability in anticipating human practice, as two of the developers discussed (Morningstar and Farmer 1990):

> Again and again we found that activities based on often unconscious assumptions about player behavior had completely unexpected outcomes (when they were not simply outright failures). It was clear that we were not in control. The more people we involved in something, the less in control we were. We could influence things, we could set up interesting situations, we could provide opportunities for things to happen, but we could not predict nor dictate the outcome. Social engineering is, at best, an inexact science, even in proto-cyberspaces. Or, as some wag once said, "in the most carefully constructed experiment under the most carefully controlled conditions, the organism will do whatever it damn well pleases."

There have been a number of works published looking at the design of MMORGs, and WoW in particular, to determine what design elements work best for a successful game (success in terms of “fun”) and what new elements should be implemented to improve the genre (see Bartle 2004; Salen and Zimmerman 2003). Qualitative ethnographic engagements with MMORGs are also growing in number, and provide valuable fine-grained data and analysis on the “street-level” of games like WoW and *EverQuest*, along with more general virtual worlds like *Second Life* (see Boellstorff 2009; Nardi 2010; Taylor 2006a). Oddly, however, while MMORGs create a great deal of potential quantitative data via server logs and other electronic bread crumbs

left by players as they progress through a game, only recently have researchers begun to explore this approach to the subject matter. Ducheneaut, et. al. (2006) came up with a novel way to track large-scale player movements and activities, along with demographic information, amongst the WoW gaming population by employing software programs within the game world to track behavior. The large amounts of data that resulted tracked more than 200,000 characters, recording their names, race (human, orc, dwarf, etc.) and class (warrior, druid, shaman, etc.), guild affiliation, and location coordinates within Azeroth.

What the authors found was that there was a sharp divide in player behavior before and after reaching the then-highest experience level of 60 (120 is the current level cap with the release of the latest expansion set). Once a player achieves level 60, they begin looking towards the endgame content of WoW, high-level dungeon environments that are designed to require large groups in order to overcome the antagonists occupying these areas. Unlike the rest of the game, playing in groups is required, and this makes guild membership critically important to advance any further and acquire the powerful, rare rewards that these raids as they are called give out.

Upon hitting level 60, there is a significant spike in grouping with other players, and a related spike in guild membership (Ducheneaut, et. al. 2006: 308-309). This would seem to indicate that the game suddenly becomes much more social for players upon reaching the end of experience advancement. To determine what relationship might exist between these level 60 players and participation in the endgame raiding content that was limited to these highest-ranked characters, they looked at raiding behavior during a single month for their sample. They found (Ducheneaut, et. al. 2006: 309-310):

> In the month of January, we tracked 223,043 characters. Of these, 11,098 (5%) spent time in high-level raid content. The majority of these were Level 60 (as expected)—99.4%. The remainder were levels 56 to 59 (0.06%). Of all the Level 60s, 30% have spent time in raid content. On average, characters who spent time in raid content spent 310 minutes (about 5 hours) over the month of January in raid content.
>
> Pushing our analyses further, we also note that of those who spent any time in raid content, 28% spent less than an hour in it. In other words, only 72% of these characters spent more than an hour in raid content. Thus, 3.6% of all observed characters spent more than an hour in raid content over the month of January.

This data had important implications for the design of WoW. Blizzard essentially divides the game into two sections: the leveling up portion as one advances from a level 1 newbie to a level 60 conqueror-about-town, and the endgame portion fixated on raids with the promised reward of "epic loot" (the most powerful arms and armor in the game) for those who complete them. At the time this study was carried out, no expansion packs had yet been released (as of this writing, the seventh expansion pack, *Battle for Azeroth*, has since reached store shelves). Blizzard was then pouring most of their planning and development into producing content to cater to endgame raiding-oriented players. A minor backlash occurred against the developers by members of the WoW player community, accusing Blizzard of short-changing the lower-level portions of the game because of this raiding focus. The quantitative study reveals that there may have been more than a grain of truth to those accusations, as it appears only a small minority -- although large in raw numbers -- actually engaged in raiding to any serious, dedicated extent.

Mateas and Stern (2010: 184-185) point out the importance for game studies scholars in understanding some element of the underlying technical design aspects of games. Without having a grasp of how the code works, it is too easy to fall into the conceptual trap of seeing games as "black boxes" (Mateas and Stern 2010: 184), and overlook the rhetorical aspects of

programming code. Code rhetoric makes up an important part of the interconnections between developer, game, and player.

To a certain extent, games are structured in order to generate a feeling of empathy with the protagonist. The immersiveness of a game contributes to this empathic response. Frasca (2006) argues that designers can make use of this aspect of games in order to simulate various sociopolitical issues. Games can place the player in the role of one or another person in relation to a conflict, and by forcing the player to see things from an alternate perspective, a deeper understanding of the problem at hand is generated (Frasca 2006: 93).

Storylines for most non-puzzle games tend to be rather inflexible. The single entry point into the game results in a small handful of endings (at least two, to account for winning and losing, however defined). While playing may result in multiple final results, there are only so many alternate endings or storylines a game narrative may follow,. This is primarily a product of budget, time, and technological constraints. A game offering a complete simulation of an environment in all its complexity would be near-infinite in the size of the code, and require near-infinite storage capacity to play. This shortcoming places limits on the amount of agency players are given. There are ways around this shortcoming, however; WoW for example offers a variety of character combinations in terms of species and occupation to play, and there are multiple options for locales in which to level up characters rather than a strictly linear progression. The open-ended nature of WoW, and the fact that one has multiple paths one can take as one's character progress in power and ability might perhaps give a certain amount of autonomy to players in creating their own unique interpretations of meaning within the game, similar to studies of open-world "sandbox"-style games such as the *Grand Theft Auto* series (see Squier

2008). One can also use innovative design techniques to give the illusion of depth far greater than that actually present with regards to player options. The graphics and text-based game *Facade* (see Mateas and Stern 2010) incorporates a procedural design model that attempts to account for the participatory practices of players within an immersive social environment with two non-player characters (NPCs) at a small dinner party.

Just as in the world outside of games, architecture has an impact on the manner in which human behavior is put into practice. The code determines how much latitude is given to players, and structures how that latitude is expressed. Game architecture even structures the discourse used by players within the game (Steinkuehler 2006). The game design provides objects which compose the syntax particular to a given game title. The goals provided by designers for players to fulfill create the context within which the discourse refers. The need for rapid communication during battles in MMORGs leads players towards using textual shorthand to refer to in-game practices, locations, and objects.

Games have a strong spatial aspect to their design, and it is not uncommon for the geography of a title to be produced prior to finalizing the story and characters (Jenkins 2006: 121-122). One could therefore study game "architecture" in its most literal sense, which few writers have actually done. Of particular note is MacGregor's paper (2006) comparing the architecture of the real-time strategy game *Battle for Middle Earth 2* with WoW. As Lastowka points out (2007), MacGregor's assertion that each game's approach to architecture is inherently different is nothing terribly earth-shattering, but he is very good at analyzing how architecture operates in each game, and why designers implemented structures the way they did for both. On the subject of WoW, MacGregor notes:

> *World of Warcraft* privileges architecture as a spatial experience. It is concerned with the ability to move through space, constructing architecture as a series of solids and voids. When we interact with the architecture we are alternately channelled and impeded. The architecture encompasses us, organizing our activities into discrete zones and structuring the way in which we move between activities. In Ironforge [the underground dwarven capital city] I go to the auction house to sell things, the bank to deposit items for storage and the inn to buy food. This is a spatial architecture that mimics the ways in which we use architecture as containers for specific purposes in the real world. The architecture has what architects call program, so that Ironforge can be divided into circulation space and activity space. This is space that works on a personal level, an intimate experience, where we guide our avatar through the intricacies of the game world looking through their eyes.

This legibility of the landscape, the ability to pick out specific landmarks as aids to navigation are very deliberately placed in the game world by Blizzard, but in a manner which one is not necessarily conscious of as a player.

Data Collection Techniques

The community I studied was limited to an overwhelmingly American group of game players. To be frank, the main reason for this was purely economic: it was much cheaper to conduct fieldwork within the United States than to go abroad. Another pragmatic concern was that there would also be no need for me to learn fluency in a foreign language. Finally, having always felt a certain level of sociocultural dislocation in everyday life, I tend to find Americans just as baffling and interesting as a population as other colleagues might for Taiwanese or Norwegian gamers. While I intended only study American consultants, I compromised in three instances when interviewing and engaging in participant-observation with three Canadian WoW-playing consultants. One was a long-time acquaintance in the main guild I studied, and was also

a significant personality in that guild's social life, and the other two were leaders of guilds I spent some time with playing through dungeons and raids.

My work is primarily based on results from participant observation of consultants, using either videos of raid and dungeon runs within WoW or in-person recordings of people in their homes. During play, I also kept a paper notebook at hand in order to jot down notes and comments. For recording footage of WoW game sessions, I employed two screen-capture programs, Screenflow and then later Open Broadcast Software. With the Screenflow recordings, I converted the resulting files to MP4 video format using the video conversion application Handbrake in order to condense file sizes for archiving.

The in-game footage was used specifically to aid with participant observation of behavior during gameplay between guild members while I participated with them in dungeons and raids. Having those recordings was critical for my work. While I was able to write short notes as prompts to elaborate on after finishing play, there was almost no opportunity to write while in the middle of harried raid battles. Hence, I often would simply write down the time when something interesting occurred, in order to review the actual event in detail later at my leisure for more detailed notes. Video records also proved important for ensuring I precisely quoted players in notes and my later write-up.

On-site video recordings were made using an iPad and between one and three iPhones (depending on coverage needs) running the Filmic Pro iOS video app at a resolution of 720p. This was a compromise between visual detail and the storage capacity of each device. 720p was sufficient to capture nuances of facial expressions, along with bodily gestures and comportments. Having multiple cameras running had the unanticipated positive effect of providing redundancy

of audio recordings as well, which was a benefit in situations where one camera or another failed to pick up softly spoken utterances due to background noise. In the future, a separate shotgun microphone would be a significant boon to field recordings like this, but the audio capture was good enough to gather the data I needed for my work. Each recording device was mounted on a tripod, and camera angles were never altered unless necessitated by the subject(s) leaving the shot.

Because each device could capture about an hour of footage, multiple recordings were made during the course of each visit. Each shot from a single camera was then edited together into a single file using a MacBook Pro running the video editing program iMovie, and then converted to MP4 files again using Handbrake in order to save space and ensure long-term compatibility.

Completed video files were then imported into the audio/video analysis application ELAN for coding, wherein I made use of the video synchronization feature in order to have multiple video recordings running at the same time for each event. This ability allowed me to inspect each coded event from multiple angles.

Originally, I had intended the in-person videos to be used as a data set for studying power relationships between players in situ. The intent was to key in on behavior that implied relative levels of dominance or authority exercised within social groups. Consequently, when coding initially, I paid attention to who was providing who with instructions or advice during play, instances of interrupting the speech of other players, and any physical actions that implied differences in power among observed players.

Post-fieldwork, during the late analysis phase and as I began writing, it became clear that the real concern of my research should be on social learning of game mastery in relation to structural pressures built into WoW. I therefore did a second pass through the collected video footage, this time focusing on instances of instruction between players concerning how to play a given title. That re-examined footage then provided a supplement to data collected in interviews and in-game observation regarding training.

I interviewed 65 consultants on their experiences with WoW or other online digital games. Two people were interviewed in-person, and were recorded using the built-in Voice Memos app on an iPhone. I spoke with the rest using Skype, FaceTime, or other voice chat programs. These conversations lasted between 45 minutes and two hours, depending on the consultant's availability and talkativeness. While I tried to limit interviews to respondents in the United States, as mentioned above three Canadians were interviewed due to their important standing in the guilds I was observing. I also had the opportunity to talk with a European national who was a member of Blizzard's customer support team for their European-based game servers. That respondents' information was not entered into my data set due to lack of relevance. Although I did learn a great deal about certain aspects of Blizzard's inner workings, that information was, sadly, given off the record. Most interviews were audio-only and were saved as MP3 files for the sake of storage space and archiving long-term. The handful of video interviews I recorded were again archived as MP4 files.

Needless to say, all names other than my brother's have been replaced with pseudonyms, including the names of the guilds I worked with. I have also taken steps to anonymize identities by obscuring certain lesser details that may be used to trace actual individuals. While WoW

players are usually only known by their character names, it is still possible to look those up in online character databases and track player movements online. This could then lead to harassment or embarrassment for players within the game, at the very least. Hence, it was necessary to provide an additional layer of obfuscation on top of preexisting aliases.

Work Overview

In the next chapter, I introduce embodiment theory in the context of virtual worlds, in particular Thomas Csordas' contributions to this perspective. Embodiment theory overlaps nicely with work by Gordon Calleja analyzing the experience of game immersion, providing a grounding in the practical experience of playing a digital game — especially one with a strong social component such as *World of Warcraft*.

Chapter 2 presents my primary community of study, a WoW guild known as Amici et Familiae. Here I discuss the history of this particular player organization, some of the relationships involved, and a few of the major personalities. This chapter also presents a major point of tension within the guild and within WoW more broadly, that of the pull between social bonds and the need to progress in individual achievement, a product of the game's basic design given the ideological perspective of its developers.

In Chapter 3 I highlight a significant incident during my fieldwork. An inadvertent faux-pas on my part lead to my understanding of a major site of fracture in the game — the conflict between the designed structural limitations of the game itself, and the social interests of players. My social misstep serves to highlight the way that players manage this conflict to attempt to

preserve the existing social order within guilds, and also provides further context for the social tension discussed in Chapter 3.

The fourth chapter delves into greater detail the practical, embodied nature of playing WoW. Here I discuss the process most players take in gaining competence with the game. Competence in WoW is indicated to other players by markers like earned titles ("Slayer of Dragons"), powerful gear, and collectible mounts for their characters to travel upon. These signs can be earned through effort, but some less-scrupulous players turn to cheating using addon programs, another topic covered here.

I finish with a synthesis of the preceding sections, along with discussing potential avenues for future research in the context of digital gaming. It is my hope that this work adds meaningfully in some small way to the ongoing scholarly discourse about how digital games are situated in everyday life, as well as suggesting one direction for future work in this area.

The field of cultural anthropology tends toward Luddism when it comes to studying topics related to digital gaming, as can be seen by the small amount of published research on the subject. However, for better or worse, more and more communities worldwide are participating in the online world, whether through social media, games, or other endeavors. There is a small but growing number of ethnographers who have been taking greater interest in this area of study, focusing on the cross-cultural aspects of the internet, and social media in particular. My research is intended to help spur greater focus on the area of online gaming in the United States.

Games are designed objects as well as virtual environments, and they are created according to the explicit and implicit ideology of the institutions of software companies that create them. However, like any other created object, games are also subject to the subjective

meanings and practices of players. What players actually *do* in the spaces provided to them by programmers does not always match up with the assumptions developers have for what constitutes "fun" or equates to the ultimate intended goal of the game. In observations and interviews, I found over the course of my fieldwork that Blizzard's design for *World of Warcraft* both supported and undermined the social aspect of the game that drew so many players as a compelling element to the game. Before I go into detail about the push and pull connections between designers and players, I first want to discuss how the concept of cultural embodiment relates to digital games, as that concept is one that is influenced by the ideological positioning of game companies like Blizzard.

Chapter 2: Embodiment and Bodiliness

Clothes Maketh the Man

I hurry to put on my costume (reminiscent of something out of Zeffirelli's Romeo and Juliet*) in the changing cubicle of the costume shop just inside the renaissance fair's main gates, the din of the morning crowd in the background. Getting dressed in men's 15th century clothing is more complicated than one would think. The stretchy woolen hose has to be tied to the hem of my jacket-like doublet (also wool) using laces called "points," elastic not being a thing in the 1480s. Onto my feet I tug on a pair of turnshoes, which are basically leather slippers lacking any padding save a thin layer of boiled leather. Hats are a requirement for this time period, so I went all out and wear a chaperone, which looks something like a thick padded wool donut with a long draped scarf attached. The doublet is an approximation of English styles in the late 1400s: no leg-of-mutton sleeves as in Burgundy or Italy. The tight-fitting cut of the hose indicates skilled tailoring, and in combination with the style of doublet and the chaperone suggest a middle-class gentleman, maybe a merchant or administrator. And needless to say, the codpiece on the front of the hose announces my gender in a rather direct manner.*

Later, as I walk around the fair grounds with my wife and friends, I'm struck by the effect my clothing has on staff and entertainers. The fact that, frankly, I'm better dressed then most of the people working here is not lost on them, and it's fascinating to witness the channel switching as a shopkeeper goes from awkward Queen's English with T-shirt- and jeans-clad patrons to regular speech with me. At one point, away from the stage a well-known performer in a sword-fighting act drops character and strikes up a conversation with me on a footbridge, telling me

how he has a Bachelor's in psychology, but switched to the fair circuit instead. I gradually realize I'm accepted as "one of us," distinct from the usual fair patrons by virtue of my costuming efforts, in much the same way that five hundred years ago this same outfit would have granted me a certain degree of social capital within a late medieval English community.

But it's not just what these items of clothing represent to outside observers and how it affects them; my clothes also affect me *as well. At one point during the weekend I purchase a set of reproduction Elizabethan-era playing cards at a gaming shop, and accidentally drop my credit card on the floor. Given that my pants are essentially tied to my jacket, I realize that bending sharply at the waist as I normally would to pick the cards up will be extremely uncomfortable, so I end up bending at the knees into a squatting position instead to reduce the stress on the points (narrowly avoiding a gruesome self-inflicted wedgie).*

Throughout the day I'm also reminded of the difference in footwear I'm wearing, as every rock, stone, and twig on the ground is painfully noticeable as our group strolls around the fairgrounds. Coming down heel first also results in a hard impact that reverberates up to my knees, and after a couple of hours of this I begin to feel the stress of that force on my feet and legs. I eventually realize that the most comfortable way to walk wearing turnshoes is actually by adopting a dancer's step — toe first, and coming down more gently on the heel. The arches of my feet absorb the initial impact, and this method of stepping also allows me to feel out the ground surface for painful stones and other debris before committing to setting down the rest of my foot. After another couple of hours I find myself able to walk around without having to consciously think about how *I'm walking, and settle into a newly acquired habit.*

One of the primary foci of this work concerns the practical aspects of embodiment within digital multi-player games. While “embodiment” has been explored by a wide-range of authors within both anthropology and game studies, there is a lack of specificity over how to define it and apply it to case studies. Thus I will first make explicit what I mean by “embodiment” before going further. This is especially important given that embodiment — especially in the context of game studies — is often used as a synonym for “bodiliness,” another concept that while related to embodiment is not the same thing.

My use of embodiment here is based heavily on the work of Thomas Csordas, and it might be helpful to more fully present its conceptual background. Perhaps the most succinct way of thinking of embodiment in the literature is that it is a form of “somatic mood” (Campbell and Garcia 2009: 2), but embodiment has its origins in the work of Marcel Mauss and Marcel Merleau-Ponty. Mauss first noted (1973: 70-73) that every society has unique variations on how the body is used, in this case in terms of certain arrangements of physical comportments. These physical actions (“techniques”) were those used for everyday activities whether general (walking, sitting, swimming), or specialized (soldiers marching in formation, digging ditches). Mauss stressed that the social act of observing others engaged in these activities was critical to learning and imitating them. A key concept that he points out (Mauss 1973: 86) is that "the basic education in all these techniques consists of an adaptation of the body to their use." Mauss invokes the example of learning to sleep upright while mountaineering, but the same could be said of any cultural activity, including learning the best way to manipulate a character onscreen using a keyboard and mouse while playing a computer game.

Also of particular note, it is here that Mauss (1973: 73) coins the term “habitus” to refer to these movements of habit that are picked up through social observation; the idea of the habitus would play a significant role later in the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1977) in his influential work developing practice theory. Csordas (1990: 11) explains that Bourdieu -- in presenting his elaboration on the habitus -- makes plain that the socially informed body is the central organizing principle of the habitus (Bourdieu 1977: 124). This principle incorporates humans’ five senses, along with an awareness of the subjective socio-cultural context in which bodily dispositions are situated.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty is best known for his contributions to phenomenological philosophy (see Merleau-Ponty 1962), but this work is also important to the subject of embodiment in an anthropological context. Perception is a key focus of Merleau-Ponty’s writing, in terms of how the body has awareness of and interprets objects in the world around it, as well as situating itself within that world. In essence, the body exists as part of a tripartite relationship which includes perception and the world of objects (Merleau-Ponty 1993: 103-104).

Merleau-Ponty (1993: 120), in a direct challenge to the traditional split in the West between body and mind, instead collapses these categories, arguing that they are tightly interrelated, in the same way as language and meaning are inextricably tied together. While Rene Descartes implied that it was possible for the mind to separate from the world, and viewed the body as another object within a world of objects — and by extension, that the self is something that is pure subject — the ability to perceive the world requires the self to also be within the world. Merleau-Ponty’s counterargument states that because the self requires a body, composed of tissues and chemicals operating according to complex physiological processes, to

conduct the act of perception it must also be considered both an object in the world as well as an observing subject. We are embodied in the sense that we as humans are objects in the world, and at the same time our subjective state is predicated on the fact that we as biological organisms exist as objects in the world.

The key difference between bodies and other non-living objects such as this document you are reading is that bodies possess intentionality. This intentionality, however, need not be based on deliberate, conscious decision-making. Merleau-Ponty explains that what we do as embodied beings is “pre-objective” (Merleau-Ponty 1963: 281, Csordas 1990: 9), referring to the idea that objects are a result of perception rather than past modes of phenomenological analysis which began with objects. Csordas (1990: 9) puts this in anthropological terms thusly:

> If our perception "ends in objects," the goal of a phenomenological anthropology of perception is to capture that moment of transcendence in which perception begins, and, in the midst of arbitrariness and indeterminacy, constitutes and is constituted by culture.

Embodiment was brought to the attention of anthropologists via Bourdieu’s (1977) work on practice, which elaborates on Mauss’ habitus concept. His ultimate aim is to determine the role of human agency in the creation and maintenance of cultural activity. Where Mauss defines the habitus as all of the techniques of bodily comportments one learns socially as part of a cultural system, Bourdieu (1977: 72) goes much further, saying that it is constituted of

> systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively "regulated" and "regular" without in any way being the product of obedience to rules, objectively adapted to their goals without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary to attain them and, being all this, collectively orchestrated without being the product of the orchestrating action of a conductor.

Csordas (1990: 11) distills this verbosity into a more manageable definition by saying that the habitus is a system of enduring "dispositions which is the unconscious, collectively inculcated principle for the generation and structuring of practices and representations." This system of dispositions is generated according to the central principle of the socially-informed body which I spoke of earlier (Bourdieu 1977: 124), and structured by the material aspects of existence. Following Merleau-Ponty, Bourdieu invokes the habitus also as a method of rejecting Descartes' division of mind from body (Csordas 1990: 10-11).

Building on these authors' prior work, Csordas (1994: 12) crystallizes the definition for embodiment as "an indeterminate methodological field defined by perceptual experience and mode of presence and engagement in the world." This is in contrast to the body as a biological object. His main argument is that embodiment serves as a central paradigm for studying human culture. Merleau-Ponty is a major influence on Csordas' deployment of embodiment as a tool for analysis.

In order to move beyond an anthropology that limits bodies to being representational, Csordas (1994: 10) uses the phrase "being in the world" to better demonstrate the embodied self. Being in the world should be understood as

> a term from the phenomenological tradition that captures precisely the sense of existential immediacy to which we have already alluded. This is an immediacy in a double sense: not as a synchronic moment of the ethnographic present but as temporally/historically informed sensory presence and engagement; and not unmediated in the sense of a pre-cultural universalism but in the sense of the pre-objective reservoir of meaning outlined above. The distinction between representation and being in the world is methodologically critical, for it is the difference between understanding culture in terms of objectified abstraction and existential immediacy. Representation is fundamentally nominal, and hence we can speak of "a representation." Being in the world is fundamentally conditional, and hence we must speak of "existence" and "lived experience."

As examples, Csordas draws from his extensive ethnographic background studying charismatic evangelical fundamentalist Christian denominations, focusing on those congregations that perform various “gifts of the Spirit.” This primarily includes faith healing and the casting out of evil spirits (see Csordas 1990, 1997, 2002).

There is a pre-objective element for church members who experience having an evil spirit or demon driven from their bodies. This is due to participants not having any idea going into the ceremony what effect the exorcism will have on them physically; their reactions are felt to be spontaneous, without preplanning or discussion amongst congregants. However, Csordas points out (1990: 15-16) that members of a church all share a similar habitus, which places limitations on the range of actions an individual will take during this ceremony. Certain commonalities of action during exorcisms are associated with certain types of demons and spirits (eye rolling, shrieking, collapsing to the floor, throwing one’s hands in the air), and these are a function of shared understandings about the way in which certain supernatural beings would make their presence known through the bodies of their victims (Csordas 1990: 17-18). While a member’s actions are pre-objective, they are still influenced by culture. This is further demonstrated by the fact that clergy describe exorcisms in terms of releasing a parishioner from the thrall of a demon, rather than expelling it from them, derived from American cultural traits placing value on the idea of personal control and responsibility. Being possessed is seen as an explanation for drives and desires that represent a loss of control to the individual. The exorcism ritual in effect frees them from this bondage, allowing them to reassert control over themselves once again (Csordas 1990: 16; 1997: 78-79). The practical indeterminacy of embodiment enters into play in this context when it comes to discerning how angry or lustful one has to be in order for it to be

recognized not simply as normal sins of the flesh, but rather as being due to occupation of a man or woman by an evil spirit representing those vices (Csordas 1990: 17).

Faith healing rituals in charismatic churches operate similarly, and Csordas documents such rituals within a charismatic Catholic church. Rather than releasing evil spiritual entities, the ceremonies involve absorbing divine power (see Csordas 1990: 19; 1997; 2002). Clergy announce that they sense via "the word of knowledge" that some members of the congregation are experiencing some sort of illness or discomfort, and call out for them to identify themselves so that those congregants around them will lay on hands and pray over them. Ailing members are asked to self-identify by raising their hands in the air in a gesture of prayer (Csordas 1997: 168-169). Contact with divine power is described in specific somatic terms (tingling, warmth) that establishes a set of bodily techniques (referencing Mauss) that are references for the ritual context. Examples of religious ecstasy such as uncontrollable laughing and crying, or falling backward, are perceived by participants as the result of contact with God's power when those behaviors are considered non-standard and out of the ordinary.

As congregants come together to pray, they are responding to the announcer's call which invokes culturally shared knowledge of not only the body but also its common ailments. Announcements of ailments are spontaneous acts, and generalized enough — for example, "someone is feeling pain in their lower back" — that almost always someone comes forward with a matching complaint (Csordas 1990: 19-20). Csordas (1990: 22) emphasizes in his analysis that the internal visualizations of a malady, emotional responses of sufferers, and the kinesthetic responses of the church members when believed to be touched by the power of God are not collectively a representation of some sort of abstract internal experience. Instead, these

phenomena “objectify and constitute an embodied healing” based on a particular American habitus. The tactile element of these healing rituals is also important (Csordas 2002: 31-32). Laying on hands with a congregant breaks down cultural divisions that define people as separate individuals, and touch is also recognized more directly for its therapeutic aspects in medical treatments.

In the context of embodiment and religion, Csordas (1990, 2002) also discusses glossolalia, “speaking in tongues.” Drawing again from Merleau-Ponty (1962), he points out that speech is not equivalent to thought (although thought requires speech for purposes of communication), it is in fact gestural and thus positioned within the world. Members of Pentecostal churches who practice glossolalia do, however, perceive it as language. By removing the veneer of meaning with which languages normally operate, glossolalia demonstrates that language is grounded in the body as a system of dispositions. “Glossolalia reveals language as incarnate, and this existential fact is homologous with the religious significance of the Word made Flesh, the unity of human and divine” (Csordas 1990: 25). Speaking in tongues, then, demonstrates the collapsing of distinctions between mind and body.

It is important to remember that embodiment as I have just discussed it directly challenges long-established notions in Western cultures about the nature of the self. The Western tradition has portrayed humans as composed of two (at times) opposing categories: body and mind. This distinction is derived from the writing of Descartes, which is in turn derived from Judeo-Christian theology (see Blanchette 2011: 1044). The spiritual conflict between the sinful, ephemeral flesh and the immortal soul described in the Bible mirrors Descartes’ juxtaposition of the rational human mind and the instinct-driven body. This dualistic view of the nature of

humanity has been extremely culturally influential, whether or not Westerners are aware of its origins. However, scholarship relating to embodiment gradually has moved away from this conception of the self; while Mauss still saw a division between mind and body when writing on bodily techniques in the 1930s, Merleau-Ponty ends up collapsing the distinctions between these categories, and Bourdieu builds from this conclusion while solidifying his conception of practice (Csordas 1990: 7-8).

Embodiment within the environment of a digital game could be said to occur in two overlapping fields. On the one hand, there are the bodily comportments of the player while playing the game. By this, I refer to the position of the hands while holding a game controller, or a keyboard and mouse; it also includes the manner in which one positions oneself in front of the display, whether a television or a computer monitor. Another aspect of player embodiment comes in the form of "mods" (add-on modifications) for a game like WoW. These mods alter the interface of the game in many instances in order to streamline or simplify certain actions, and generally add user interface elements to invoke those actions. The hardware itself creates a certain kind of momentum toward a particular set of comportments based on the ergonomics of the controller used. Mice and keyboards assume a certain twist of the wrists, a placement of individual fingers and thumb, an optimal seated pose — the same goes for a gamepad. Competency as a player is a result of socially learning which comportments are decided on by community consensus to be "the best" in order to assure efficient, successful performance.

Beyond the bodily comportment of the player, there is the embodied aspect of the game avatar itself — the player's representative within the digital world of the game. Embodiment here is influenced according to the perspective of the player within the game. A first-person

perspective through the "eyes" of the avatar presents a very different experience than that of a third-person perspective where the player can see the avatar fully within the environmental context of the game. Certain games such as WoW allow players to adjust back and forth between first- and third-person views, depending on personal preference or because of game features (switching in a *Star Wars*-themed game from first- to third-person when wielding a lightsaber, for example).

Beyond the immediate point of view of players, embodiment is further experienced in terms of bodily comportments of the avatar itself. In many games it is possible to jump or crouch, walk or run, pick up and manipulate objects within the game, and so on. Multiplayer games like WoW also provide "emotes" — gestures and actions that provide somatic communication to other players. These emotes include things like dancing, laughter, waving, nodding, and shaking one's head. What may appear to non-players as simply a set of gimmicks actually are important signifiers that are used to communicate non-verbally with other players. These emotes contribute to the social glue that generates a sense of camaraderie amongst WoW players.

Embodiment and Game Immersion

Gordon Calleja (2011) provides a potential method for linking Csordas' implementation of embodiment to digital gaming in his research on the experience of game immersion, a player's subjective experience of feeling as though they are actually inside the game. Calleja (2011: 182) describes this experience as "the merging of virtual spaces into actual ones […]" that are a result of game design that implicitly or explicitly invokes socio-cultural meanings linking the player to

the game's geography. Immersion, he argues, is better understood as an aspect of a broader phenomenon Calleja (2011: 189) terms "incorporation," defined as:

> […] the absorption of a virtual environment into consciousness, yielding a sense of habitation, which is supported by the systemically upheld embodiment of the player in a single location, as represented by the avatar.

This concept is composed of six dimensions of player involvement: kinesthetic (control of game avatars), spatial (exploration of the game environment), shared (interaction with human or computer agents), narrative (absorption with story elements), affective (emotional stimulation), and ludic (making choices with consequences) (Calleja 2011: 43-44).

The mention of embodiment in Calleja's definition is especially noteworthy, as the six dimensions upon which incorporation depends map rather well onto Csorda's conception of embodiment as a combination of practice and perception regarding being in the world. Both authors seem to be referring to the same subjective phenomena. The major difference is simply that Calleja is limiting the discussion to a digital game player's subjective experience of play, rather than the all-encompassing nature of Csordas' approach. Given the commonalities between embodiment and incorporation, this suggests embodiment is something that can also be experienced while guiding an avatar within a digital game or virtual world.

Timothy Crick (2011) posited just this point in an article combining film theory with Merleau-Ponty's work in order to analyze embodiment within digital games. Some film scholars argue that cinema involves a "film body" that represents the subjective view of what the camera sees, and which in turn provides the view that the audience sees. This film body then is "the subject of the film's moving images, a body that enacts perception in an equivalent way to a

human viewing subject" (Crick 2011: 260). Because most contemporary first- and third-person 3D digital games involve levels of detail, lighting, framing, and other techniques originating in cinema, they generate a subjective perspective on a virtual world that approximates that of cinema. Crick (2011: 261-262) argues that this suggests the existence of a "game body" analogous to a film body, offering a virtual camera that follows the player's character in a virtual landscape, and at the same time is also the source of the player's subjective perspective in the game.

Although comparable, there are certain differences between a game body and film body. For example, a first-person game might still have a visible shadow or reflection cast by the player's avatar, demonstrating how — unlike in cinema — the player is an actor within the game world rather than simply acting on it. This also draws a distinction between the game body and the body of the player's avatar within the game (Crick 2011: 264).

Crick (2011: 266-267) develops this line of thinking further by stating that the game controller (and by extension, a keyboard and mouse), like any other tool, serves to augment the body of a player, in order to provide agency within the world of the game. Through repetition and effort, a player will over time develop a certain level of competency in the controller's use, allowing for success during gameplay that does not require active thought on specifically how to engage with the controller. It becomes an extension of the player's body which they use pre-objectively. Thus, with practice, individuals gain an embodied expertise playing the game.

Given the above description of incorporation and embodiment, one may initially draw parallels with the concept of "flow," as defined by Csikszentmihalyi (1990). Flow in this case refers to mastered repetitive practices creating a trance-like state wherein the division between

human and tool falls away. Csikszentmihalyi discusses flow at length in terms of everyday practices, rather than the context of digital games, but a number of scholars have applied flow specifically to game studies (see Friedman 2015; Golub 2010; Malaby 2007; Salisbury and Tomlinson 2016; Snodgrass, et. al. 2011). A workplace example of flow might be the experience of a cashier at a grocery store ringing up a purchase. Scanning barcodes on each can and box, entering produce codes into the keyboard — after a while an employee falls into a state of mind in which there is no need to consciously think about what they are doing, they simply *do* it. WoW players sometimes can also experience flow during repetitive combat situations wherein they are tasked with killing a certain number of low-powered mobs to complete a quest or other objective. The attack pattern is such that it is easy to master each fight, and thus players enter the same hyper-focused state that a cashier does. All other concerns fall away, and the individual in both cases experiences a sensation of satisfaction with the completion of each task, done as efficiently as possible.

While flow is something that players frequently experience, there are a couple of things to note about its application in game studies. For one, Malaby (2007: 107) points out that Csikszentmihalyi makes flow a key element of play (see Csikszentmihalyi and Bennet 1971). In essence, flow in games is based on the mixture of a contingent environment based on the chance of failure inherent to play with the planned environment of the games overall structure of rules and affordances. Play enters a flow state when a player's subjective experience is a balance between the extremes of boredom and anxiety. Calleja (2007: 256) discusses flow with regards to digital games in particular, and while there may be a temptation to associate flow with incorporation, he argues that these are two entirely separate subjective experiences. Flow

describes immersion in a type of activity (repetitive, mastered), while incorporation is concerned with "the internalization of a virtual environment's spatial qualities which flow does not account for."

Bodiliness and Embodiment

Scholars have written repeatedly regarding online communities concerns the way in which players associate their identity with that of their avatar (see Argyle and Shields 1996; Behm-Morawitz 2013; Bessiere, et. al. 2007; Black 2015; Boellstorff 2011; Ducheneaut, et. al. 2009; Osborne 2012; Taylor 2002; Yee, et. al. 2009). This is particularly true of virtual worlds, in which users tend to have a greater level of control over the visual appearance of their digital representative. Virtual worlds such as *Second Life* provide a seemingly overwhelming amount of control over an avatar's appearance, right down to details of individual facial features. That diversity can be further increased through the creation or purchase of additional outfits. Most MMOs also grant a certain degree of personalization. WoW, for example, allows players to choose from a preset number of faces, hair styles, and/or facial hair. Some non-human species also allow a selection of horns, tusks, or facial tentacles (just go with it, folks). The implication is that designers intend players to create a game identity that feels unique to themselves.

As will be discussed later, WoW players display a great deal of variation in how wedded they are to their onscreen characters, but there is a significant degree of interest in customization. This interest suggests that close affiliation with their digital persona is important to many players, and reflects a projection of their own sense of self into the world of the game, just as Calleja outlines in his discussion of incorporation. This idea of avatar identification has been

studied by a number of authors, although primarily in the context of virtual worlds (see Boellstorff 2011, Taylor 2002). The problem with discussions of this nature is that there is some confusion over concepts and terminology, with "embodiment" being used to refer specifically to the appearance chosen by the player for their avatar. This portrays the avatar body in essence as a text upon which the player represents themself in some way, given the affordances allowed them within the game program. As Csordas points out (1994: 10-12), this representational approach to bodies is in contrast with the more phenomenological "being-in-the-world" approach that he developed stemming from work done by Merleau-Ponty, Martin Heidegger, and Paul Ricoeur. Importantly, Csordas states that embodiment and bodiliness should not be seen as conflicting theoretical positions, but rather as existing within a dialectical arrangement instead. As established earlier in this chapter, if embodiment is (following Csordas) bodily perception of the world that pre-objectively informs practice, then the application of the term in this context is imprecise and problematic.

There are a number of examples from published works that illustrate how embodiment is used instead as a synonym for representation. Marty and Stromer-Galley (2007: 320) discuss game characters in *The Sims Online* (TSO) in this way: "[E]ntering TSO requires the visual presence of an avatar, a digital embodiment of a player." The implication in this work is that embodiment is about the player's visual depiction within the space of the game world. Ducheneaut, et. al. (2009: 1151) go so far as to explicitly spell out this use of the term "embodiment":

> But an avatar fulfills more than communication needs: it is also a visual representation of the user, a "tangible" embodiment of their identity. The choices users make when creating

> (and later when customizing) their avatar will have repercussions on their interactions with other users[.]

In a post-colonial analysis of WoW, Langer (2008:100-103) discusses player "embodiment" in terms of physical traits and racial types (human, gnome, orc, etc.) of their chosen game characters. She points out how player control over these aspects of their avatar's appearance contrasts with post-colonial studies of the body as something that is acted upon, disciplined, and surveilled. Player autonomy hence undermines traditional notions of the body as something acted upon by an outside colonizing influence, destabilizing narratives about power and control. Yee, et. al. (2009: 88-89) echo Langer's use of embodiment, this time in the context of virtual worlds such as *Second Life*. Embodiment is limited to customization options for digital avatars, "enabl[ing] a close-to-perfect reproduction of the human body in digital form" (Yee, et. al. 2009: 88).

There are also authors that use embodiment to refer to both bodily representation as well as perception of, engagement in, and being in the world. Boellstorff (2011) demonstrates this ambiguity of meaning while discussing aspects of avatars used in the virtual world *Second Life*. On the one hand there are examples of representation in several instances of Boellstorff's article:

> Avatars in Second Life are almost limitlessly customizable. You can appear as any ethnicity or gender, and by rendering parts of your avatar body invisible, folding your avatar body upon itself, and attaching virtual objects, almost any imaginable embodiment is possible [2011: 506].

> Most people, most of the time, have singular virtual embodiments that they see as resembling their actual-world embodiment, or that reflect dominant actual-world ideals of beauty and status. This often means light-skinned avatars, female avatars with large breasts, male avatars with bulging biceps, and so on [2011: 506-507].

And yet at the same time Boellstorff (2011: 507) is clearly aware of and understands the definition of embodiment referring to perception and being in the world: "…regardless of whether or not one is using a first-person perspective, a third-person perspective, or switches between them, the avatar is the locus of perception and sociality."

What these sources demonstrate is a folk use of "embodiment" taken from everyday language, a dictionary definition, rather than the more nuanced usage of Merleau-Ponty, Bourdieu, and Csordas. This folk use of the word is seen often in game studies research, unfortunately, using embodiment to refer to a demonstration of social identity via appearance rather than a framework for understanding the self's perception of being-in-the-world. While identity management in this sense is certainly a key area of study — and all of the above examples are inarguably scholarly works of importance — researchers do themselves and their readership a disservice by misusing embodiment as a label for that subject matter.

Instead, I would argue that rather than embodiment, what these authors are actually examining is "bodiliness," a concept illustrated by the work of Terrence Turner from his research in Amazonia. Turner (1995: 146-149) points out in his study of the Kayapo tribe that the body universally — depending on context — represents social actors. Bodily decorations, including clothing (or nudity), make-up, and other accessories, symbolize one's social identity. Among the Kayapo, elaborate adornments provide "specific messages relating to modes, states, and stages of development of different bodily powers, attributes, or conditions" (Turner 1995: 149). Hair length and body painting in particular broadcast a great deal of information in terms of stage of sexual development, gender, and the relationship of an individual to the community. Rituals among the Kayapo focus on the conferring of names and body decorations such as bracelets to

recipients, metaphorically tying the individual to the larger social network. Sexual initiation of girls by men, and men escorting girls and women for marriage ceremonies is done collectively, emphasizing the social nature of the body — specifically in this case in the context of reproduction. Turner's conclusion is that the Kayapo demonstrate the way in which bodies, by way of bodiliness, are socially appropriated. The implication being "the integration of body and social relations as parts of a single continuum of material activity" (Turner 1995: 168).

Bodiliness, as a key ingredient in the social construction of identity, is clearly an important topic of study, whether in the context of digital games and virtual worlds or elsewhere. The way players' avatars portray identity to other players has a significant influence on the social environment within a game like WoW. Many people go out of their way to gather rare weapons and armor simply for the aesthetics of the items because they signal their mastery of the game to others. In pointing out that bodiliness and embodiment become problematically entangled in scholarly publications, I am by no means downplaying the importance that bodiliness plays in online sociality in comparison to embodiment. By that same token, I am not attempting to downplay the importance of the research the authors discussed produced, either; these are all noteworthy works of investigation. My point is simply that in using "embodiment" to refer to both representation of the self as well as the way that bodies perceive, interpret, and interact with the world in a culturally-mediated fashion, we muddy the discourse within academia regarding digital embodiment. It is extremely difficult to have a constructive discussion about a topic of study when there are multiple interpretations of what this key term actually means.

In a sense, bodiliness comes full circle with embodiment in Merleau-Ponty's work. If the body is a perceiving subject as well as an object in the world, then by extension bodies are

objects which can be perceived by other bodies. We as perceiving bodies can also treat even our own bodies as objects depending on the circumstance. Hence, bodiliness and embodiment are distinct concepts, and yet are nonetheless closely related.

Bodiliness in *World of Warcraft*

The preceding discussion begs the question of how bodiliness is expressed by players within WoW. Like Turner's analysis of the Kayapo, bodiliness in the game also reflects social affiliation amongst players, as well as signaling certain key aspects of individual identity (see Figure 6). In the case of WoW, there are examples of character titles, gear transmogrification, and emotes.

Titles in this case refer to additional labels that can be applied to a character's name visible to other players. Normally, titles are earned by reaching certain goals that may be tied to completing a particular raid as part of the overall game narrative, or they may be gained by other activities that typically require a great deal of time and dedication as a reward. This gives the character a publicly recognized addition to their name that other players can see — for example, "Ambassador Bob," or "Greta, Defender of Orgrimmar." Titles do not bestow any direct game benefit to players; they grant no bonuses to attacks, or buff abilities. Instead, they operate as an indicator to other players that the person running that particular character has invested a certain amount of time and effort, and implicitly also possesses a modicum of skill, in order to hold a given title. They give players a certain degree of social capital in the same sense that having "Ph.D." after one's name does in the eyes of others outside of WoW.

Figure 6: Character panel in WoW. This shows what gear is being used, along with important statistics relevant to play. Note the "Archdruid" title preceding the characters (anonymized) name. Also note the "Item Level," which is an aggregate of this character's overall power in combat. An ilevel is used by Blizzard as a gatekeeper value for permitting access to higher-level instances, and is used informally by more "hardcore" players to determine whether or not someone will be allowed to join them in a raid.

Transmogrification is a cosmetic process available to players within WoW. Every item of gear in the game has a particular appearance. Whenever a new weapon or article of armor is picked up by a character, that appearance is saved to a database of forms that, upon paying a fee to NPCs capable of doing so, can then be applied to any other gear of the same type that a

character acquires later. In other words, players slowly accumulate a wardrobe of item appearances that can be used to "reskin" items to a preferred form (see Figure 7). In fact, Blizzard periodically releases gear that has no utility for combat, and is only useful for transmogrification purposes.

"Transmogs" (items that have been transmogrified) can hold the same social meaning to players as titles, depending on which appearance is assigned to a piece of gear. There are certain weapons and armor that can only be earned through repeated runs through particular raids, as they only have a small percentage chance of being provided as a reward to a player on any given run. While a player will replace that item with one giving better attack bonuses in later expansions, being able to transmog a newer item with the appearance of an old one that carries with it a great deal of cultural capital advertises to other players that the bearer is a person of competence and knowledge when it comes to WoW.

An example of this is the Alliance-only two-handed mace Verigan's Fist, an item available to paladins in the game. Players could only get this weapon by completing a long chain of quests, some of which required completing dungeons, in order to gather the materials necessary to provide to an NPC who would then create the mace. Verigan's Fist provided relatively enormous bonuses to paladin characters that made it worthwhile to carry for nearly twenty levels — quite a feat for a single weapon. General opinion among players at the time was that carrying this mace was a way of dividing "the men from the boys." However, the quest line for making Verigan's Fist was removed from WoW with the arrival of the third expansion pack (issued in 2010), *Cataclysm*, meaning that anyone beginning a new paladin character afterward would be unable to gain that weapon.

Figure 7: An example of a transmogrified weapon. This character's staff was altered to appear like twin daggers (the "Fangs of Ashmane"). This screenshot also highlights gear attributes. Each weapon or armor piece has a specific set of bonuses which contribute to the overall item level of the character. The higher the bonuses, the more powerful the gear.

Paladin characters today can still be seen wielding Verigan's Fist, thanks to transmogrification. By giving its appearance to a more up-to-date weapon, players communicate to their peers that they have been playing WoW for at least nine years, and (if attached to a level 120 character) they have invested that much time playing as a paladin. The implication to others

is that they have a significant amount of experience — with the further implication of significant skill — as a WoW gamer, giving a certain mark of distinction.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, WoW provides symbolic bodily comportments to players in the form of "emotes." By typing in a specific command preceded by a slash in the text chat window, players can instruct their avatar to perform various types of meaningful gestures: laughing, dancing, flexing muscles, and so on. The "/dance" emote was the most popular one I observed among players while I conducted fieldwork. Each race (and each gender within each racial type) has its own particular dance, modeled after dances performed by real-world entertainers (for example, male night elves copy a Michael Jackson routine, female goblins dance like Beyonce in her "Single Ladies" music video).

While amusing in and of themselves, dancing in WoW has a social role within the game not limited to individual entertainment. The most common occurrence in which the /dance emote was used was on raid nights with guilds while assembling characters to begin the instance. In order to begin a raid, the party must obviously first appear at the location's entrance. However, there is usually a wait to begin while players log on to the game, or — if already playing — make their way to the raid location. The more prompt members of the raiding group could therefore be waiting at the entrance for upwards of a half hour while the rest of the group trickles into the game to join them.

Emotes are one way of passing this time. In general, raid members would engage in avatar dancing with each other as a form of social mimicry while also engaged in conversation. One player would first click on a fellow guild member next to them, type in /dance, and the text chat window would respond with the public message "[character X] dances with [character Y]."

In a sort of call-response action, the second player would do the same. While playing with members of the guild Amici et Familiae (AeF), I noticed that often one or more players would go around dancing with each of their raid party members in turn, as a form of nonverbal greeting. Generally, dancing was not commented on verbally using voice chat; it was purely a gestural acknowledgement of the other player.

This reciprocal exchange of dance emotes seems to be common in all the guilds I played instances with, regardless of how casual or hardcore the groups were. Like Turner's description of bodiliness within Kayapo rituals, these emotes serve as a way of demonstrating a group identity as members of the same community. I never witnessed an occurrence in which a guild member began dancing with a random non-guild member who happened to be in the vicinity. On the rare occasions in which dance emotes were exchanged with a non-guild member, it was always in the context of the non-guild player joining temporarily as part of a PUG (pick-up group; a temporary association for completing an instance). On those occasions, the act could be interpreted as a gesture implying that even though technically an "outsider," that player was accepted as part of the larger group, if only for the duration of the dungeon or raid. These avatar bodies that we manipulate while playing WoW are social bodies in the same sense as the ones we possess of flesh and blood.

There is another element of bodiliness with regards to WoW, that of the ability to play with one's social identity. This topic has been explored by a number of authors (see for example Boellstorff 2008, Taylor 2006), but an under-examined aspect of identity play has been the role of virtual worlds and MMORGs in the subjective experience of transgender users (see Blodgett, et. al. 2007; Dale 2014; Griffiths, et. al. 2016; Osbourne 2012). During my research, I only

spoke with two transgender gamers (both women), but one of them described her pre-transition history playing a superhero-oriented MMORG, *City of Heroes* (CoH), as having been important in later adopting a female identity.

CoH — now sadly discontinued — was known for providing a highly detailed character customization system that allowed for a huge amount of variety in terms of physical appearance. Opal, the consultant in question, was drawn to the game in part because of this customization feature, and found herself playing only female characters in the game. Taking on a feminine persona with the appearance of a cis woman, and having other (presumably cis male) players interact with her as if she were a woman, struck her as natural and comfortable. When I questioned her about her time playing CoH, Opal said it was this form of role-playing that helped spur her to begin transitioning from male to female. It is in this way that MMORGs can also be seen as the site of identity creation, not just maintenance.

Games as Ritual

One other aspect of digital games to keep in mind, at least with respect to MMORGs such as WoW, is the similarity shared with ritual practice. This statement may sound strange to those unfamiliar with digital games, but consider for a moment how group play in WoW is structured.

The most frequent reason that a group of players will team up together is to take part in a dungeon (five players) or raid (between ten and forty). Both instances involve battling computer-controlled opponents that are too powerful for any single player to beat themselves, necessitating creating a group of other players to join (see Figure 8). Each major battle is based around a "boss fight," wherein the adventure party typically squares off against a single monster

Figure 8: Screenshot of a typical raid boss battle. Note the green bars on the left indicating the group members' health. A third-party modification called "Recount" is located in the lower right corner that displays a comparison of damage output by each member.

that has a series of patterned attacks that can be, with practice and research on strategy guides online, anticipated and countered in order to defeat the creature and gain material rewards for their characters. To be successful, battles involve close coordination and communication among participants. Everyone needs to understand what special attacks the boss has at its disposal, and at what point during an encounter they occur (monster attacks are to a certain extent scripted affairs). Because some of these attacks affect an area of the room, rather than specific targets, placement and movement of characters is also essential for success. Therefore, boss fights involve coordinating movements and actions that are comparable to micro-practices in a ritual

setting. Actions must be performed in a certain way at a certain time to be successful and contribute to the overall group activity.

Failure to do so may result in a “wipe,” meaning that the entire party’s characters die and the battle must be attempted again from the very beginning following their resurrections (Death is — mercifully — only a temporary setback in the world of Warcraft). Depending on the relationships between party members, varying levels of sanctions may be enacted against a player who is judged to be the weak link bringing about a failed attempt, anything from jovial verbal correction to being summarily dropped from a guild. Like a Catholic Mass, there are traditional steps in order to complete a raid, and while the level of contingency can be limited with repeated experience to a certain extent, there is always the possibility of failure by way of not using the right attack at the right moment — just as there is always the possibility of an errant altar boy dropping the Host.

It is here again that Csordas’ work becomes useful as a way of connecting literature on ritual activity to research on digital games. Csordas’ analysis of ritual as embodied activity acts as a bridge between the incorporative aspect of digital games, and the embodied element of participation. His study of healing rituals and embodiment also provides an example for how to engage with MMORGs as embodied phenomena.

Analogous to religious organizations, the game industry can be seen as a kind of institutional force within society. A company like Blizzard consists of employees acting as designers that create an infrastructure consisting of the content of *World of Warcraft*. Most visibly, that infrastructure is composed of the most immediate elements of the game that players experience when they log in: one’s avatar in the game world, the landscape that one guides that

avatar through, buildings, dungeons, roads, and even the placement of mobs as obstacles in a player's path to rewards. The infrastructure of WoW also includes the game's internal economy, in the form of a largely unregulated system of capitalist exchange, with prices dictated by supply and demand on the part of the player community.

As an aside, there is a certain amount of institutional interference in what appears at first glance to be a libertarian paradise of unregulated trade. With the release of each new expansion pack, new crafting goods become available to manufacture for players, and this changes which raw materials become critical for gear-producing professions. The first expansion, *Burning Crusade* (BC), introduced jewel crafting as a new profession for characters, and in order to initially increase that crafting skill new jewelers needed copper ore (gathered by mining characters) to make their early products. Copper was very cheap at auction houses prior to BC, but suddenly demand skyrocketed with large numbers of players switching to the jewel crafting profession, and soon players with mining were making significant sums of cash gathering a fairly common ore for sale.

Returning to the idea of embodiment with regards to WoW, the game interface is designed with a certain idea of what players should be doing in the game, and how practically to do so. I will provide a more detailed discussion of micropractices involved in playing WoW effectively, but suffice it to say the physical comportments involved are a combination of institutional history of how computer games are traditionally played (using a keyboard and mouse), along with the necessity of managing the large number of possible abilities in a game possessing the complexity of WoW. As an emergent tradition, there are few references other than instruction manuals that one can point to in order to document how games of this sort are

intended to be played. While all games present a default set of controls for operating the mouse and keyboard or controller, most contemporary games offer players the option of changing those settings to suit individual preferences. WoW itself offers a wide array of options for tailoring keybindings and mouse buttons to different actions.

WoW players learn bodily dispositions through observation, practice, and explicit training, just as with any other form of activity. These dispositions then become part of the player's habitus with experience, becoming "second nature," experienced subjectively as "muscle memory." With enough practice, players may even experience raids in terms of flow, on occasion being able to exercise their comportments in an ideal manner for an optimal successful attack. This comparison between WoW raids and religious rituals should not be misconstrued as a statement that raids actually *are* religious performances, merely that they contain elements which are ritual-like. However, given the similarity in structure, one could argue that this opens up the possibility of applying the same forms of analysis brought to bear on sacred, embodied practices to those practices associated with group play in MMORGs.

The comparison between religious ritual and raiding become problematic when we look at the element of sociality binding practitioners together. Scholars have long recognized the social importance of public ritual as a way of binding communities together, at least as far back as Emile Durkheim's treatment of the subject in the context of collective effervescence more than a century ago (see Durkheim 1995) and Victor Turner's later discussion of *communitas* (see Turner 1969). To a certain extent, WoW players I spoke with indicated that friendships sometimes emerged from frequent play with others, but there is an ambiguity to the "comrades-in-arms" connections that bind players together in a guild. That ambiguity stems from the

momentum programmed into WoW's infrastructure at an institutional level by Blizzard's horde of programmers. In the following chapter, I will more closely discuss the way that this institution guides, and at time interferes with, the social relationships that draw so many people to play MMORGs like WoW in the first place.

Chapter 3: Amici et Familiae, a History

The Family That Slays Together…

We were running yet another five-man in Black Rook Hold. Sunday night is normally raid night, but again not enough people were on so we settled for a dungeon instead. Tylo was playing as tank, I was DPS as usual (barely keeping up due to a merely adequate ilevel) along with Ian and Harrond, and Aldebrandt (in a rare appearance) was on heals. Black Rook is a grueling instance: not really difficult, even on Mythic, but it was the non-stop mobs in corridor fights that wore you down more than the bosses. We all had gear better than most of the drops at this point, so going here was more about grinding rep than anything else — tedious, but getting Exalted meant shiny mounts, toys, and much-promised flight in a pending patch.

Our little group had just downed a large group of explosive trash mobs, and we're about to move on, when Aldebrandt asked to wait while he refilled his manna. While Aldebrandt popped a potion, Ian asked if anyone knew what the current score on the football game that night was. Aldebrandt brought him up to speed, as he kept one eye on his monitor, and the other on the television at home. Manna recharged, we began to move out.

"Alright, let's go do… Smashspite the Hateful," Harrond said, referring to another boss. "He's next, right?"

"Sure, Harrond," Tylo replied, as he moved forward to lead the group onto the next set of mobs.

Harrond chuckled as the tank ran off into the gloom, saying, almost to himself, "You notice how he never calls me 'Dad'?"

While my fieldwork incorporated data taken from a total of four WoW guilds, I spent the most time with members of one in particular: Amici et Familiae (AeF). This guild is a rarity within the WoW community, as it has existed for roughly thirteen years as of this writing — nearly the full length of the game's existence. Also remarkable is that the same guild leader has been in place the entire time, a software engineer who goes by the name Aldebrandt. In this chapter, I will provide a general history of this guild, highlighting significant members throughout. Just as important, however, I will also discuss the push-and-pull imposed on these players as they attempt to navigate and negotiate their social bonds with each other alongside the demands of the game itself. Blizzard as an institution assumes certain things about their consumer base, and designs the structure of WoW in response to those assumptions. However, there are unforeseen consequences in that design that create difficulties maintaining relationships through the game, which is rather awkward given that sociality is one of the stated key traits of a MMORG in the first place.

My experiences as a member of AeF parallel some of the findings by other researchers studying the social lives of guilds in WoW and other MMORGs (see Ducheneaut, et. al. 2007; Poor and Skoric 2014). While friendships between members and shared goals helped to bond participants together, as in other studies AeF's cohesion was constantly threatened by a core subset of players' need to progress further in the game, and in more recent years the guild has been shaken by the absence of any clear leadership and direction.

I joined AeF through Aldebrandt's nephew (Halion) and sister-in-law (Reikhardt) while working together after I graduated from my Master's program. Aldebrandt was based out of Michigan, while his brother's family was in Texas at the time. As I had just started playing

WoW, Reikhardt invited to me play with her and her son in order to get oriented with the game. Her husband — Aldebrandt's brother — Harrond occasionally was invited to help us through particularly difficult areas, as his character was more powerful than any of ours. In this way I joined the guild, and since I was friends with relatives of the guild leader in real life, I bypassed the usual grace period and was waved in as a full member a month or so later.

Amici et Familiae is considered by its members as a "casual" guild. As evidence they cited the emphasis on social connections rather than character advancement, and that people were more or less free to play the game however they liked rather than being required to participate in raids on a set schedule. Some members had left AeF to pursue raiding advancement with more hard core guilds, only to become fatigued with the pace or have family or job responsibilities drive them to leave. They ended up returning back to the AeF fold as a form of relief from what they saw as the stressful treadmill of constant raiding, and a chance to just hang out with a group of friends seen as more down-to-earth.

In interviews with various AeF members, and during observation of game sessions early on, it was stressed that the guild was "PG-13" and a "family-friendly" organization. Toward the end of my fieldwork, with the absence of Aldebrandt from guild dungeon and raid runs, the core group was made up of players over the age of thirty. Conversations noticeably included more profanity than in the past (although nowhere near the explicitness of Nos Simul surge [NSS]), and I would on occasion joke with my guild mates on this issue. During one instance while writing this dissertation, Aldebrandt and his (now married and father of a toddler) nephew Tylo were part of the group. I again jokingly mentioned that this was a PG-13 guild after another player used profanity while we were all in voice chat, and Tylo said not to worry — he started

playing wearing headphones so his son wouldn't hear anything untoward in chat. Aldebrandt downplayed the language issue in response, and explained that the rule was primarily in effect because when AeF was founded, Tylo was only 13 years old, and it was to protect him from explicit adult conversation. In effect, the profanity rule had come full circle over the the near decade and a half that his extended family have played WoW: Tylo is now concerned with supervising his own child.

One question I asked of my MMORG-playing consultants was what the primary draw of these types of multiplayer games was for them. In response, the common refrain was that they valued the relationships that came out of participating; friendships mostly, but in some circumstances romantic relationships as well. These statements seemed borne out by my experiences playing alongside most of these same players. In some cases, I spent entire dungeon runs or even multi-hour raids with a running conversation playing as commentary between two or more AeF and NSS members. Topics ran the gamut from football to work to family get-togethers (politics was always a notable omission). What might be described as "good-natured ribbing" occurred frequently among long-term guild members, typically in the form of unserious trash talk about the quality of guild mates' playing skill. The atmosphere of these group events gave the impression of being in the midst of a group of friends who had known each other for many years (which was the case with both AeF and NSS), and were at ease in each other's company.

There is however an inherent ambiguity with regards to the affection expressed for fellow guild mates. While members consistently spoke in positive terms about the social importance of being in a guild, there are many examples of players taking a what appears to be cavalier attitude

towards those same social bonds when they come into conflict with other concerns. Partially this has to do with the emphasis on constantly improving the power level of ones' characters structured by the nature of MMORGs like WoW. Another factor is the tension between obligations to the guild in terms of contributing to other members' successes, and responsibilities to non-players (one's employer, family, or even one's personal health). The trajectory of AeF's history as a guild reflects this ambiguous importance placed on sociality amongst players.

Regarding AeF's history, everything started with Aldebrandt. He had begun playing WoW since almost day one — "My wife says it was the worst Christmas present she ever gave me." His interest was generated from conversations with a co-worker, Iden, who was excited about the game's then-pending release. Aldebrandt had enjoyed other games from Blizzard, but had no experience playing MMORGs before, and ran into a significant logistical problem early on:

> The first day, I made a druid night elf character, so I started out in Teldrassil. Iden played a human paladin, and he was in some place called "Stormwind." I looked at a map, and saw how far away he was [Teldrassil and Stormwind are cities on separate continents], and we wanted to play together. So I made Aldebrandt, a human mage, instead.

Soon afterwords, the two men joined a large guild known for sending out invites and allowing in virtually anyone with the aim being to becoming the largest guild in WoW. Aldebrandt found himself promoted to officer a couple of months after joining, acting as a source of material resources and tactical support for new guild members. Over time, however, he grew disenchanted with the other officers, who he saw as ignoring regular members:

> Once I got on the inside I saw things a little differently. Their council acted like a guild inside a guild. It was a pretty elite group and that bothered me. They mostly talked in officer chat and ignored the little guys.

After talking about his grievances with other members of his guild, along with people in another leaderless guild he was familiar with, they all began discussing starting a new guild instead. Thus Amici et Familiae was born.

Not too long after AeF was founded, Aldebrandt visited his brother's family while on a business trip and installed WoW on Harrond's computer in order to, as Harrond put it, "Sneak away upstairs to play WoW while he was on the road." Harrond's youngest son Tylo took to playing immediately, and after watching his son play Harrond started soon after. A couple of months later Reikhardt and Halion had joined as well. Harrond's first encounter with his brother while playing made an impression. As he recounts:

> I still remember it like it was yesterday [laughs]. We were running around Westfall [an area early on in the game designated for new, low-powered characters], Tylo and I killing pigs and things — I think we were level 10 at that time — and here comes Aldebrandt on his horse riding up on us, one-shotting a bunch of monsters, and he gave us each 10 gold [a significant amount of in-game currency at the time], and man, we thought we were in Heaven. And then he cheered and waved at us and took off, and we just thought that was the coolest thing!

Soon after, Harrond and Tylo signed on with Aldebrandt's colleagues to become charter members of the newly formed Amici et Familae. Along with his extended family, Aldebrandt recruited new members from the ranks of his co-workers and elsewhere. This along with invitations to guild-less players that AeF members had positive experiences in pick-up groups with grew the guild to about forty people at its height, all-told.

In retrospect, Tylo now sees WoW as a central part of his adolescence, having played the game from age 13 on into adulthood. Harrond's job kept the family moving around the country enough that it was difficult for Tylo to maintain long-term friendships. Playing together with friends from school, as well as with his family members, provided a sense of social stability even when he was unable to maintain face-to-face contact.

> We moved a lot, growing up, so the natural answer was the internet — you can't move away from it. […] They're mostly around, you can hunt them down and find them, log in, and there's everybody right there.
>
> […] Personally, I think it's been a big deal helping me get through a lot of… moving around, starting over, not having a lot of friends, and all that stuff quite a few times. Just kind of a constant, always-there support, you know.

It should also be noted that Harrond himself was away from home a great deal due to his work responsibilities. As Tylo stated:

> [Harrond] had a corporate gig so he was on the road all the time, so I actually saw him every other weekend, and apart form that I saw him online in *Warcraft*, so...
>
> *So is that one of the main ways that you kept in touch with your dad?*
>
> It helped. I mean, we were — even still, I mean we work together now, and I see him every day and we're still talking about Karazhan [a popular classic WoW dungeon] and the old days and all that stuff. But back then it was a big deal. I was young, and we'd just moved to [the South] and I didn't know a lot of people, but had my online buddies so that was cool.

Looking back, Tylo saw playing WoW with a group that was made up primarily of adults, and those adults making up the bulk of his peer-group during his teenage years, was actually a net positive. In the abstract, as he mentioned above, he had a stable group of friends. Implicitly, the guild also helped him take on a more mature attitude as he grew older, avoiding a lot of the

"partying that a lot of the other kids at school" got into, along with the "drama," as he put it, that many of his face-to-face peers experienced.

While Tylo used WoW to maintain a steady social network, his mother Reikhardt was initially disinterested in playing with the rest of the family, although she had enjoyed single-player computer games in the past. In the end, she was talked into it at the behest of her husband. Harrond's sales position required him to spend roughly two weeks out of every month out of town. Playing WoW, he argued, would be a way to stay in contact with each other while he was away on business. "It was like a phone call," Reikhardt said, "but better than the phone because you could kill orcs together." She also suspected Harrond may have had an ulterior motive in convincing her to join him: "Harrond was probably afraid I'd get mad at him playing a lot so he gave an account to me to play, too."

AeF experienced an initial surge in membership numbers at the beginning of the first expansion, *Burning Crusade* (BC). However, toward the end of BC's tenure the guild reached its first crisis period, facing a serious downturn in guild membership. The guild forums had a number of conversations on this subject at the time, with a lack of recruitment for new, skilled players and a lack of progress in accessing new raid content being cited by members as the main reasons for the decline. Without enough people with characters powerful enough to enter later, high-end raids, there was no way for AeF's more motivated members to advance further to see that end-game content and their concomitant rewards.

This frustration led to a number of raid-oriented members creating a side guild for their "alt" (alternate) secondary characters as a way of achieving advancement unfettered by the limitations of their lower-powered guild mates in AeF. At the time, Aldebrandt was made aware

of this action but decided at first to overlook it even though joining more than one guild was technically a violation of the guild charter. Things came to a head, however, when some of those players began approaching other remaining raiding members within AeF to join their guild as well. The main problem was that AeF members drawn to join up in this upstart guild had to choose which guild's rads and dungeon groups to join. With the rival guild's greater focus on advancement, more highly motivated players inevitably began to neglect the weekly scheduled AeF events. At that point, Aldebrandt decided to "address the elephant in the room" in a pointed forum post, and make clear that while he understood his wayward members' desire to engage in more intense raiding activities than a casual guild could provide, drawing people away from AeF was not to be tolerated. One member of this splinter faction, Nate, noted Aldebrandt's concerns in an apologetic reply:

> I have made many friends in AeF over the last couple of years and I treasure that. I find myself conflicted as is typical of belonging to two guilds. If I was directly involved in recruiting activities, then I apologize and I will cease immediately. I have enjoyed my time here, but I am going to remove myself from AeF.
>
> I hope this won't be held against me, but I'll understand. You know where to find me if you need something. I would gladly help when I can if you'll take me.

Mirroring the WoW community as a whole, AeF reached its maximum number of active members during the game's third and most popular expansion, *Wrath of the Lich King* (WotLK). While not an enormous guild by any means, it was much less of a challenge to find members willing to assist with quests or dungeons, and AeF enjoyed a regular raiding schedule as well. Roughly during this period, Aldebrandt had also managed to recruit several of his co-workers into AeF — although by the time I conducted my fieldwork only one, Parolles, remained.

Parolles had originally started playing WoW as a way to get to know the members of his team at the company as a new, incoming manager. His staff were already avid WoW gamers themselves (in a guild on a different server than AeF), so he took the opportunity to observe how they worked in the cooperative environment of a MMORG to gain insight into their working personalities. He noted who tended to take the initiative in dungeons and raids, who followed along, and who tended to be disorganized and fell behind. "The funny thing was, was that was how it was playing out in real life" in the office as well.

A few months later, Parolles met Aldebrandt, who mentioned that he also played WoW, and invited him to join his guild. While he enjoyed the company of his fellow guild members, he also recognized that AeF was a very casual guild, "sometimes frustratingly so." During the later WoD expansion he opined:

> One of the frustrating things I find about AeF is that we never get to normal endgame content. We always have to go through the LFR system ["looking for raid" announcement board] or we just never get there. So, I mean that's a kind of a bummer to me, but we still have fun.

On the sly, Parolles joined raiding guilds using alt characters, and he saw a vast difference in terms of what AeF was able to accomplish, which was an occasional source of irritation. "My game is not going to be my job," Parolles said to me, however, "and in those raiding guilds it was." Playing with AeF provided more of a sense of escapism and enjoyment, and hence he chose to stick with that guild rather than switch to a more hardcore community. Aldebrandt was a strong guild leader, Parolles said, but he was also unwilling to share power with others in order to delegate responsibilities for recruiting new people into AeF, or acting as raid organizers on his behalf. It was all too easy to get distracted by what Parolles saw as

pointless “drama” amongst bickering guild members, overlooking the larger issue of advancement. While clearly tempted to leave AeF, the thing that kept Parolles there was his “real-life” friends in the guild, Aldebrandt and Edmund (a long-time friend from school), along with friends he made through the guild itself.

Edmund in actuality lived within a few blocks of Parolles’ home, and it was not uncommon for the friends to play WoW at one or the other’s house. During AeF’s later raid nights, Edmund would often convince Parolles to attend in spite of his fatigue from work or family time at home. While the two of them socialized away from WoW, it was clear during most of my fieldwork that the game played an important role in their friendship. Depending on their respective workloads from jobs, WoW would normally be the most common way in which they interacted.

Another co-worker, Cadwal, joined at Aldebrandt’s suggestion after leaving his son’s “starter guild,” which he decided had lacked direction. At the time, three other employees in their department also were members of AeF. For Cadwal, being a member of a guild with co-workers supplied a recreational community outside of his family, which occupied the majority of his time away from the office:

> It’s a very busy environment at work, and we take time to sit down together in the cafeteria and talk about sports, politics, philosophy, movies, *and* the game. WoW helps give us a social connection in the workplace. I work long hours, and what time I have free I want to spend with my family, so I can talk about the game and have that connection outside the family without having to go someplace else for it, like a bar or sports — I just have no time for them. I guess you could say it's an efficient social outlet away from the family.

Cadwal also noted that playing WoW with fellow employees kept lines of communication open even when they did not interact in the workplace on a regular basis. "I do talk to Aldebrandt [at work], but not often outside of lunch," he said, "Playing the game together makes the work connection smoother."

Cadwal's account of his social experiences playing WoW parallel those of Aldebrandt when it comes to the company they both work for. In interviews, I asked both of them if co-workers leaving the guild had affected work relationships with them as a result, and to differing degrees they agreed it had. Aldebrandt pointed out that the co-workers that left AeF were employees he had known only casually prior to them playing WoW together, and this had an impact on how they interacted during and after their membership ended:

> We had a couple of the guys that were co-workers that left the guild — we probably didn't hang around very much together before they were in the guild, but because they were in the guild we would sit and have lunch together on a regular basis, then when they weren't in the guild probably *not* have lunch together on a regular basis just because there wasn't any commonality there. The guild was sorta a thing that drew us together.

As guild leader, Aldebrandt said he initially took it personally when people would leave for one reason or another. "Later on, I got used to it: you know what? It's just a game, if people find something that's more fun for them — that's good!"

"I don't really talk to people who left the guild or stopped playing the game," Cadwal said when I asked him the same question I had of Aldebrandt, "It wasn't meant to be hostile, but more like breaking up with someone. Meeting them in the hallways, it's just not the same anymore." Cadwal pointed out that the two ex-guild members who had been part of the regular raiding group had used to sit with him, Aldebrandt, Parolles, and the rest on lunch breaks at the cafeteria.

This arrangement changed after they left the guild or more or less stopped playing WoW. Instead, Cadwal stated that Aldebrandt began sitting at a different table in the cafeteria away from the two men, limiting company at the table to just those co-workers who remained in AeF. To Cadwal, it was not meant to be personal; extending the metaphor of an amicable breakup, he described this change in behavior as simply marking the end of a relationship, echoing Aldebrandt's statement about lacking common interests — "there's nothing bonding us together anymore." That being said, he also stated that he had no problem speaking with ex-guild members at work, whether or not they were still playing WoW.

At about the same time that AeF experienced a surge in memberships during BC, one participant in this influx would prove to be influential determining the future direction of the guild, a recently retired father by the name of Walter, whose then ten-year-old daughter Wanda also played WoW (she was approaching her college graduation by the time I conducted my fieldwork). Father and daughter never belonged to the same guild while playing, as AeF was less appealing to her due to the lack of significant raiding emphasis. As Walter would attest, Wanda was clearly the better player between the two of them (although to be fair her father is very good), and has a membership in a more hardcore raiding guild. However, Walter would often call on Wanda to assist him when going through new areas of the game map for leveling, and he invited her on as a guest several times to help out when AeF had scheduled raids and was a player or two short. "She's more to me today the encyclopedia of *World of Warcraft* and I'm really now the student, these days," Walter stated in interview. This does not seem to be a point of consternation for him, though:

Is that role-reversal kind of awkward for you?

> Naw, because she still needs her dad for tech support! Even though she's still a Comp-Sci major, she still has to call me when her computer's acting up [chuckles], and asks me what I think she should do, so... I'm actually very proud of her ability to learn [to play WoW exceptionally], which is exemplified by her ability in school. My family has always been really big on being self-supporting.

Aside from providing technical advice on how to deal with an unruly computer, Walter mentioned to me one other tactic he has at the ready: his financial support. When asked how he persuades Wanda to join him for quests, dungeons, and raids so often, he half-jokingly explained that all he has to do is remind her about the money he provided to her for tuition, and she has no choice but to help him out in WoW.

While she was still very young, Walter took a number of steps to safeguard Wanda's experience online. Early on, they played together side-by-side at home in order to monitor what she saw on her screen in terms of text chat. "And when she was younger, I had the parental controls on her account turned on." When she was older, Wanda joined a guild, and her father would occasionally run with them in dungeons and raids, "partly to hear what was going on," to check on what kind of conversation her guild mates had while she was playing. He also insisted over her protests that her computer had to stay in the living room, "so at least I can hear her half of the conversation." As Wanda became a high school student, and later after she moved away from home for college, Walter relinquished that control.

As WotLK began to wind down, however, the guild again began to lose a number of players that were frequent raid group participants. AeF's status as a casual guild meant that only a minority of members were in a position to commit to regular raid schedules, let alone possessed gear powerful enough to play in them.

In a remarkable incident, Halion, Harrond, Tylo, and a few others were actually kicked from the guild by Aldebrandt when it came to light that they had created a raiding-oriented guild on the side for alt characters. They were frustrated by the unwillingness of AeF to push harder on end-game content, given Aldebrandt's credo as guild leader that people should be allowed to have fun with WoW however they want. Seeing this as a barrier to advancement, they planned amongst themselves to set up a separate guild that was focused primarily on raiding, but this went against AeF rules that members could have no other guild affiliations. Once the secret got out, so were they. About her husband's motivation for departure, Reikhardt observed:

> Usually when there's a large guild exodus, it has to do with the ability of the guild to raid. Some players work really hard to get their gear, and get all revved up, and want to play the high level raids, and then they can't do them because not enough people have the gear to do those raids.
>
> Harrond left [AeF] in the wake of one of these. It was more that he was frustrated being in groups that wiped [were defeated by raid opponents]. Later on he decided to focus on his career, and backed off on the game.

I asked Halion about this episode in the guild's history, and it was Tylo who apparently initiated the revolution along with his father. Needless to say, this annoyed Aldebrandt, and according to Halion he was quite hurt initially by his brother-in-law's breach of trust. Halion said he wasn't worried too much about this causing a problem within the family, and everyone involved said that it did not really spill over into daily interactions in everyday life (it probably also helped that the extended family was divided by several states at the time). "It was no big deal getting kicked out," Halion said, "because they'd have to let us back in because we were the only ones who could raid." In fact, this is exactly what happened. After a couple of months had passed, Aldebrandt let them back into AeF, and life in the guild resumed. Nothing was

mentioned in casual conversation after their return, but Aldebrandt was extremely reluctant to give any details about this incident when I interviewed him, suggesting the topic was still a sore point.

One issue of repeated concern throughout the course of my fieldwork was the need for more members within the guild. AeF had seen a significant drop-off in membership following the 2012 *Mists of Pandaria*'s (MoP) expansion release, and more recent attempts to attract players had not gone well. While some veterans had returned with 2014's *Warlords of Draenor* (WoD), they had more or less drifted away by the end of that year. There were a few new members that had joined during my period of observation, and in these cases the only ones who remained were those with a direct or indirect co-present connection to other players (in one case, one player was the professional colleague of a veteran member's dentist).

This lack of new blood was a major barrier to advancement, since a minimum of eight players from the guild was required to get recognition for completing raid content in the form of guild achievements, and a minimum of ten people was needed to enter a raid at all and have a strong chance at success. Given that most current members disliked the idea of playing with random non-guild members, each raid night began with a sense of drawn-out dread: would there be enough people online that night to make a go at a given raid, or not?

Frustrations built over this lack of active membership, and also over the closely related problem of overall competence. Two promising new additions to the guild roster ended up disappearing from the ranks when it became apparent that the rest of the guild was simply not in a position to advance through endgame content at a pace they found acceptable. I had a few

conversations with them via whisper chat on this subject, and while they appreciated how friendly and easy to get along with the regulars were, the lack of advancement was daunting.

Another major issue facing the guild as membership dwindled was the guild leader's virtual absence from AeF beginning in the early part of 2015. While Aldebrandt had been a regular presence for group events and dungeons upon WoD's release, he had become increasingly less visible as time passed. It later came out almost a year later from other members that were co-workers of his that Aldebrandt was dealing with a number of pressures at work, as well as a medical situation that — while non-life threatening — made the physical act of playing WoW uncomfortable.

While there were still enough members to usually make a go of things for raid night, Aldebrandt's presence was necessary for any chance for AeF to grow. As the sole guild leader, it was his approval that was required to grant full membership status to players interested in joining the guild. He was also the only person with administrative access to AeF's website and forum. This meant that the first thing prospective members saw visiting the page to learn more about the guild was a blog that had not been updated in more than a year, making AeF appear more or less defunct. Not having access to the forum meant that a major avenue for sociality and information sharing, not to mention raid organizing, was unavailable to a number of new recruits.

Once it became clear that Aldebrandt had more or less taken unofficial leave from WoW, one of the guild officers, Walter, stepped up to attempt a revival of the guild. As mentioned earlier, Walter was retired, with a daughter in college who played WoW in another guild. Given the free time he had available, Walter threw himself into the role of unspoken interim guild leader. He organized raid line-ups, and offered his help routinely to other members leveling up

characters or undertaking long-term goals — such as doing repetitive quest for enough reputation points with various NPC factions ("grinding rep") for access to flying mounts in WoD. Walter's officer status allowed him to add players as provisional members of the guild, and he managed to make contact with Aldebrandt on rare occasions to get them full membership status (although in some cases it took months for this to happen).

Toward the end of WoD, and throughout all of the subsequent expansion *Legion*, despite Walter's best efforts guild participation continued to decrease as AeF was, as he put it, "on life-support." Besides Walter and I, there were six other players that were on regularly for group outings, making raiding difficult. No raids meant no access to better gear, which created a negative feedback loop inhibiting any further progression within the raiding content of the game. Members became increasingly disheartened and frustrated, and even on the easiest settings wipes were common during raid events even when ten players could be brought on board to play. It became increasingly apparent that a couple of players also lacked the skill needed to overcome most raid boss fights, although no one would speak of this in public chat channels.

While the prior expansion, *Mists of Pandaria* had received a mixed reception amongst AeF members, there had been some initial excitement shown with the release of WoD. The guild would see the return of a few veteran players that had drifted away from the game before MoP was released, Nate being one of them. A major figure during the BC expansion, his presence was muted upon rejoining AeF, although he was heartily welcomed by guild members who had played with him earlier during BC as well as a later stint during WotLK.

Nate joined raiding groups on a semi-regular basis, and also participated in dungeon runs with guild members. While somewhat behind upon resuming WoW, he began quickly making up

for lost time, although he was not ever-present. However, a few months into his return, Nate fell off the radar again for a couple of weeks without explanation. Unlike some of the regulars, he had no face-to-face contact with other guild members, and hence there was no indirect line of communication to explain his disappearance. When Nate eventually resurfaced, he first posted to the guild forum explaining that his absence was due to a life-threatening medical condition, which he had recovered from, but made it impossible to keep in contact with AeF members.

Unfortunately, by the time of his return to the guild during WoD, activity on the forum had dropped off significantly, and only a small handful of people checked in, and then only on an irregular basis. The result: no one noticed his message, nor responded to him directly on the forum. Upon rejoining a raiding group a couple of weeks later, Nate explained over voice chat what had happened, and those on the channel expressed sympathy and concern for his condition, but the damage had apparently been done.

In a frustrated post on the forum a few days later, Nate expressed his disappointment in the lack of response to his medical emergency, and associated the lack of response with an overall change in the supportive tenor of the guild. He announced that, for this reason, he would be vacating AeF one final time, and other members later confirmed that he had kept to his word and exited the guild for good.

The various factors threatening AeF finally reached their climax during summer 2017. Walter had been joining raid nights with his daughter's guild, and had been inviting the remaining AeF members (myself among them) to sit in as guests. He explained in voice chat that he had become frustrated with his inability to generate enough interest within AeF to participate in raids, and that this meant that barring joining with outside players there was no way to

progress through the end-game content for *Legion*. This meant missing out on completing the raids for the expansion, as well as having no chance to gain any perks or rewards. Instead, he had begun playing in Wanda's guild as a pathway toward advancement, and being the unspoken, unofficial leader of AeF at that moment, he reached out to those AeF members that he thought were not only interested in raiding, but also of a competency level high enough to productively participate.

Four of us joined Walter on a trial run with the new guild, in order to get a feel for this community he had joined. As he described it, this group was a guild made up of a range of ages, including a number of women in their ranks, much like AeF in terms of temperament and social dynamics. The only difference, Walter said, was that they were more dedicated to the raiding content than AeF, and had not one but two weekly scheduled raid nights. We sat in on the night reserved for less powerful alt characters, and the experience was a positive one. Afterward, the guild leader and a couple of officers stuck around in voice chat to answer questions and introduce their guild to us. There was no pressure to officially join, they made clear; if we wanted to remain in AeF and have guest status in the raid groups that was fine with them. We asked a few questions about the process of becoming members, and also asked for further details about how loot was shared amongst group members, all of which reinforced the positive impression left by the raid.

After the three left, Walter spoke with us privately about the new guild, stressing that playing with them seemed the only way forward for any advancement given AeF's more or less dormant group activity in the wake of player attrition and Aldebrandt's apparent abdication from leadership duties. We discussed amongst ourselves reservations about leaving a guild that we

had invested several years in, and Walter commiserated with us. He then dropped a bombshell — after numerous years as an active member, and at going on three years as guild leader in all but name, Walter planned to leave AeF permanently and join the new guild instead.

This was a shocking turn at the time, given the tight group that the eight of us had formed by that point. However, the logic was undeniable. Without Aldebrandt's level of access, and without a way to recruit, promote, and support new members in the guild, AeF was essentially dead. There were four or five other members in AeF that were on along with the core group, but all were either uninterested in raiding or were unable due to technical reasons (one person lived in a rural area dependent on high-lag satellite networking for a connection). Walter extended an open hand to all of us, and would also reach out to the other active members as they appeared in guild chat for a couple of months. After that, he was changing to the new guild, and that would be that.

Following Walter's announcement, our core raid group decided to continue playing with the new guild, although none immediately jumped ship as full members. Parolles and Edmund (best friends who lived in the same city) gradually faded away from view, and only logged in sporadically after the current expansion, *Battle for Azeroth* (BfA), was released in Summer 2018. Work issues in both men's case, and family obligations as well in Parolles', kept them away from the keyboard. As of this writing, only one other regular member, Hester, plays on a regular basis, typically teaming up with Walter as a duo leveling up characters or working on non-raid content.

Aldebrandt was somewhat more active during BfA, recuperating from his medical condition, but the guild website was still neglected, and nothing has been said regarding an attempt to resuscitate the guild itself. Aldebrandt once told me he saw himself as "benevolent

dictator" for AeF, and shared with Walter that he was hesitant to hand over control to anyone else. Given that, it is unlikely that his guild will see any growth in the future. It is rather ironic that he left his first guild due to the lack of presence and direction of the leaders and officers at the time. This in turn has been the cause of his own guild's loss of members and current state of torpor.

While nearly all the members of WoW guilds I spoke with pointed out that a sense of community and friendship with others was a major draw of playing the game, there are lines of fracture that are implicitly and at times explicitly present. In discussions and interviews with members of AeF and other guilds, one theme was consistent in terms of internal guild politics: the tension between players focused on progression of their characters, and those who took a more casual socially-oriented approach to gameplay.

"Progression" as a term is invoked whenever more raid-oriented players discussed the process of developing a character to the maximum experience level in the game ("leveling"), and gathering weapons and armor necessary to boost the power of those characters in order to take part in WoW's endgame content — the raids that form the climax of each expansion installment's story. Progression is a long, time-consuming, and complex process involving in most cases many months of investment by players. Leveling up a character is required to be able to survive in more challenging "zones" (geographic regions) of the game world, not to mention being able to play through raids (see Figure 9). One must gain a certain level of competency of gameplay — and each expansion changes that gameplay just enough that this also is an on-going process — along with gathering particular items of gear to augment and increase the abilities of their character.

Figure 9: Leveling map of the continent of Kalimdor. The numbers for each zone indicate the level range necessary to adventure in that region. Players are not restricted from traveling to regions above their character level, but they will most likely be unable to survive fights with mobs there due to the disparity in power.

All of this requires discipline to commit to a set schedule during the week with other guild members to dedicate themselves collectively to playing through quests, dungeons, and raids to attain the goals presented in a given expansion's narrative. These goals generally involve overcoming the major villains that have been defined in the story that unfolds in-game as well as via non-interactive cut-scenes over the course of several months.

Tension on this front comes from the internal friction between casually-minded and more hardcore players within less raiding-oriented guilds. Even though the guild members I spent

time with described their guilds as "casual," there was always some subset of players that placed a great deal of value on progression as goal to pursue. Friendship and community were fine, these individuals said, but they also wanted to see everything in the game as well. This meant they needed to participate in raiding.

Unlike Nate's explanation for finally leaving AeF discussed earlier, the main reason people cited leaving guilds tended to be the perceived lack of progression doing guild raiding. AeF's guild forum has a few "farewell" posts by ex-members that touch on this issue, such as these examples:

> i hate to do it, but with heavy heart i'm leaving [AeF], i've had fun over the years and coming back but with the ramp up to the new expac [WoW game expansion], and needing to get stuff done i'm going to an old friends guild that has more people online that can help.
>
> For me, AeF has been home for nearly a year now. My most enjoyable moments in WOW have all been here. I have laughed, cried, and been lost with each of you. I have made friends that I beleive will continue on should there ever be a time that WOW is no longer there for me. […] My dream was for things to work here. However, it was clear in the last few weeks that might not be best for everyone. I am now hopeful we can make Tubal's vision happen [a member who discussed progression at length]. I leave knowing a lot of my friends are still in AeF and for me being elsewhere will never change that. I hope that everyone can continue to reach out and say hello and I hope that as all of us are working to have fun again, we remember the good times we've shared with each other and smile.
>
> You guys have been great. it's been an awesome time here, but after over a year I guess I need to change things up a bit, so i'm moving the pally [paladin character] to [a hardcore raiding guild]. Good luck to you all in ZG/MC and BC [classic raids]. Put me on your Friend list and the such, and i'll still be up for running with you guys if you want me to.
>
> I would like to start off saying I had a blast with AeF in the past year I've been part of this guild. I am sad to say I am leaving to join [a hardcore raiding guild], I do this not cause I am dissapointed with the guild or that I am displeased with the members. I am leaving because over the past few months I have become close friends to many of the [raiding

> guild's] members and wish for a new enviroment. I guess I am looking to change things up. I hope this doesn't completely destroy my friendship that I have built with you all over the past year. I do wish to keep you all on my friends list and mine on yours so we can continue to group up.

At its most active, AeF had roughly 65 active members playing on a regular basis. Of those, perhaps half took part in group activities such as dungeons and raids. The rest were of a more casual bent, meaning they preferred playing for reasons other than a focus on progression. In many cases, those players were more interested in things like material gathering and crafting items (characters can take on careers like armor-making, creating potions, and so on, all of which require materials gathered in the game environment). Otherwise, casual players simply did not have the free time or inclination to play at scheduled intervals to keep up with progression-minded guild mates, and thus tended to play solo, or group up with non-guild members as needed.

This creates a diminished pool of players from which to pick people to fill critical roles within raiding parties. At minimum, a raid requires ten characters, filling roles as a tank (one who takes the brunt of a monster's attacks), healer (one who casts healing magic to counter the damage inflicted by monsters), and DPS ("damage-per-second," those characters who's job it is to inflict damage on monsters attacking the group). Lacking an available player to fill any of these roles, or lacking a character who has the equipment to play their character optimally, generally means that either a raid would have to be cancelled, or that the group will very likely be unable to defeat all of the "boss" monsters in a given raid.

This practical reality of raiding was something that repeatedly set the goals of raiding players in conflict with Aldebrandt's vision for his guild. Aldebrandt always made clear that the

primary goal for AeF was to provide a community that would support people having fun with WoW in whatever way they preferred. In other words, he never dictated that all members must participate actively in progression activities and/or raiding. If someone was disinterested in raids, that was their decision, and he never bothered them about their preferences. On the other hand, if a particular player did want to join raids or higher-level dungeons, he would go out of his way to arrange for their participation in a guild run if at all possible. This, however, became a point of contention with more raiding-oriented players when the person being accommodated lacked sufficient gear to be effective within the group. If a DPS character is unable to do enough damage to contribute to a fight, if a healer is unable to mitigate incoming damage enough to keep the party alive, if the tanks can't keep the attention of a boss monster on them instead of the (much more delicate) healer or DPS characters, then the chance of a "wipe" (the entire party being killed) went up enormously. Given the challenges of scheduling a window of time sufficient for raiding given other responsibilities away from WoW, this can have a significant impact on guild progression.

As a result, while publicly players would go along with Aldebrandt's "benevolent dictator" persona, making raiding open to nearly anyone who asked, in private (whether in private voice chat channels or in-game text chat whispers) many raiding players expressed frustration and disappointment with the lack of skill evident in their more casual brethren. Ironically, Aldebrandt's own nephew Halion emphasized this a great deal when I interviewed him, clearly unhappy with his uncle's policy:

> *Were there any situations where the guild leader had to step in and assert authority?*
>
> No, but it would be nice if it happened. Aldebrandt finally began checking group members to make sure they had Naxx gear [equipment necessary to be effective in the difficult Naxxramas raid], but he didn't enforce disallowing under-geared people from joining the Naxx raids. It's probably a compromise because there just aren't enough geared people in the guild right now.

By contrast, another casual raiding guild I joined for raids late in my fieldwork period, The Victorious, made raiding groups open to anyone interested, but if it became apparent that they were holding back the rest of the party, one of the officers would politely ask them to leave and replace them with someone better equipped for the evening's activities.

This issue of progression — or lack thereof — was arguably the prime reason for AeF's decline as a guild. Essentially, Amici et Familiae became caught in a negative feedback loop due to its more open, inviting nature. Poorly equipped, less experienced players joined the raids, which inhibited the rest of the raiding party from experiencing a satisfying rate of success. As frustrations grew on the part of more experienced players, they began to splinter off and either stop playing altogether or (more frequently) join other primarily raiding-oriented guilds instead. The social inertia of relationships those players cultivated, however, was significant enough that several former players kept in contact on a personable level with their friends in AeF. In fact, a number of ex-AeF players returned to the guild once they had maxed out their main characters by progressing through raiding content with more "hardcore" guilds elsewhere. As a couple of people put it, raiding guilds downplayed the social aspect of WoW, and once their personal progression goals were met, what they really wanted was that sense of friendship associated with the casual group in AeF.

Talking with members of self-described casual guilds, playing alongside them for many months at a time and observing their interactions and comings and goings, it becomes apparent that there are structural realities to MMORGs that perhaps inadvertently generate conflict between the need for long-term, stable social relationships on the one hand, and the desire for "phat lootz" and character advancement — and experiencing that elusive endgame content in raids — that WoW constantly teases to players throughout the history of the game. The draw of casual guilds for new members is the promise of a circle of allies and friends; a supportive network that shares resources, but also provides a feeling of belonging and connection.

As one member of AeF bluntly observed in the guild forum, however, "the game is ALL about the loot!" The hard-wired digital architecture of WoW is centered on motivating character progression, which is accomplished by gaining better and better weapons and armor. In many cases, sociality in the final analysis becomes simply a means to this end, a detail baked into the design of the game. A point implicitly made clear in player narratives about their experiences with MMORGs is that, while social connections are important, progression is more so, and those friendships that they cultivate within WoW or other similar games that players proclaim to be the main reason for their enjoyment are in actuality disposable. Past a certain point, social relationships in WoW become transactional; one needs others primarily to succeed in raids in order to progress further.

And yet, for all that, there are also clearly examples of players who at least partially reject a purely utilitarian perspective on their fellow guild members. In spite of architected pressures to the contrary, my fieldwork revealed examples of people engaged in social connections in WoW as ends in themselves, rather than as stepping stones for individual achievement. Tylo's personal

history with the game was clearly motivated by the basic need to have long-term stable social relationships outside of his immediate family. The primary motivation for him was on the social aspects of the game, and maintaining friendships he had made through his affiliation with AeF. Those friendships eclipsed the need to progress in WoW's endgame content. While he may have chafed at the limitations a casual guild imposed on raiding, the presence of extended family members and friends to hang out with online were the real reason for his continued presence in the game, providing a sense of stability in the face of an otherwise uprooted adolescence.

Walter and Wanda demonstrate the complex social negotiations players navigate in order to maintain existing bonds. While Wanda declined to join AeF due to an interest in raid-focused play, she still enjoyed playing with her father on a regular basis each week, even if it wasn't raid content. Walter, on the other hand, often requested his daughter's presence to fill in on AeF dungeon runs and raids when our groups were short a member. His half-joke about invoking tuition payments as a tactic to ensure Wanda's participation also suggests that other non-Blizzard institutions (kinship in this case) can exert influence over the practical aspect of gameplay. Even though the architecture of WoW may have kept Wanda from joining AeF, her familial bond with her father ensured her enthusiasm for playing with Walter on a frequent basis.

WoW's gaming architecture does not appear *ex nihilo*, of course. It is a product designed by men and women situated within a particular socio-cultural moment in history. The software industry, and those who participate in it, perpetuates a hierarchical system based on meritocracy, a product of a peculiarly Western classical liberal view of the individual as an independent actor capable of self-improvement when unfettered by external controls. The technology sector in general has cultivated this ideology, and has embraced it for decades as the explanation for its

innovation and success. It is unsurprising then that WoW itself displays, implicitly and explicitly, this perspective. By creating an institutional infrastructure within the game that promotes the moral value of individual achievement, players are as a result guided by affordances made — knowingly or unknowingly — in light of that worldview. This idea of the accumulation of embodied competence as an individual project is one that the next chapter will explore in more detail.

Chapter 4: Insulting the Meat

As discussed in Chapter 2, AeF members describe their guild as a casual one, focused primarily on personal enjoyment and friendship. Dungeons, raiding, and player-versus-player (PvP) activities are part of that enjoyment and camaraderie, but are not the single-minded focus of membership as they would be in a progression-oriented hardcore raiding guild. WoW's nature as a game, however, creates a strong incentive for players to become involved in progression regardless of how they label themselves on the casual-hardcore continuum. Due to variation in individual skill even a casual guild like AeF will have a membership representing a wide swath of competency levels in the game. Unlike a raiding guild, AeF implicitly cultivates an atmosphere of egalitarianism in opposition to the explicitly (in some cases, ruthlessly so) meritocratic attitude more typical of raiders. As a result, AeF players tend to shy away from public boasts of skill (unless they're intended ironically). I found out by accident how players are kept in check if they threaten — even if it is unintended — this ideal of egalitarianism.

Prior to beginning my research in earnest, I had been a recreational WoW player for my own personal amusement. I had joined AeF a few years earlier as a happy accident of meeting two of its members in-person, but had not taken anything approaching a serious role within the guild. I had some experience playing with fellow members in occasional dungeon runs, but had not done any raiding — I focused mostly on quests, sometimes grouping up with AeF members or other friends I knew outside the game. The end result of this very casual approach to WoW was that throughout my time gaming in a non-research capacity I was forever trailing behind almost all the other guild members in level, meaning that I generally was not at a point where I

could successfully participate in most regular AeF activities. An emphasis on questing also meant that I missed out on opportunities for the more powerful weapons and armor given as rewards only in high-level dungeons and raids.

In preparation for my fieldwork, I endeavored to "level up" one of my characters to the maximum level in WoW at that time in order to ensure that I would be able to take part in AeF's weekly raid schedule. As such, I devoted a couple of months to running through dungeons with randomly-assigned non-guild members in pick-up groups (PUGs), as well as speeding through quests as quickly as possible to clear the then-current *Mists of Pandaria* (MoP) expansion's content. By the time the following expansion, *Warlords of Draenor* (WoD), began, I was ready to join the rest of the guild for grouped play.

New WoW expansions have the effect of being leveling agents in that previously powerful gear is made obsolete rather quickly, and everyone early on earns new gear at about the same power level at the beginning of WoD. This situation changed shortly afterward, as go-getter members of a guild pursued high-level rewards more quickly owing to greater free time and/or (generally) higher levels of competency of the game. I was in a position to devote a great deal of my daily time to playing, as this constituted the bulk of my fieldwork, and I took every opportunity to join any dungeon group that was offered by guild members. Playing through dungeons repeatedly allowed our core group of players to gradually unlock access to raids of increasing difficulty as the months passed. For the first time since I began playing WoW roughly eight years before, I found myself in a position of being part of a vanguard of guild members experiencing the game's core group content — although admittedly I was far from being a "MVP" in AeF.

WoD was noteworthy for the guild in that it marked major shake-ups in the regular roster of players. Many long-time members left during MoP and never returned, or popped in to make a handful of appearances during the early weeks of WoD but never took a significant role in grouped activity. By early 2015, a core group had cemented for dungeons and raids. I made sure to attend all scheduled raids, along with any dungeons organized by guild members, gaining experience with the game as I went. At about the same period, I also began raiding with Ignis Solis (IS), another less casual guild that was considered a "sister guild" to AeF. The leader of IS, Dion, was welcoming and encouraging, but gently suggested that I do some research on playing as druid DPS to improve my performance after a couple of raid nights. He recommended a few online strategy guides and YouTube videos for study, and using those sources and others I worked in earnest to strengthen my ability. With this assistance I began to hold my own with Dion's guild in damage-dealing during raids, and I improved significantly over a relatively short period of time, regularly placing in the top-tier of combat effectiveness with my peers in AeF.

Another significant benchmark was reached when I gained access to flight mounts in the WoD expansion around mid-2015. While most WoW players gained flight-capable mounts prior to WoD, in order to fly in the territory of that expansion, players were required to complete a long list of arduous, tedious tasks first. This made flight ability a significant accomplishment, indicating a certain degree of skill and dedication. For the first time since I bought the game, I had a sense of self-confidence in my ability to play competently and feel like I was actually contributing to the guild's success, as opposed to being a hanger-on who needed to be carried along by my betters. At that point, I was one of three people in AeF who could fly in WoD, and this led to my critical social misstep.

While I and several other players were assembling for the regularly-scheduled raid one evening shortly after I gained flight, I was speaking over voice chat with Walter and several other AeF members about my progress in the game at that point. I mentioned that I felt rather proud of myself for coming so far over the course of the last year. For the longest time I had been constantly playing catch-up with the rest of AeF, always trailing behind by months reaching maximum level relative to the rest of the guild. Now, however, I was one of the better DPS raiding players, and had flight before most of the rest of the guild. I simply made the point that this was quite a turn-around from the majority of my history with AeF. While my tone was not disparaging of anyone else, and I was not comparing myself to any other players, the response from the rest of the group was swift.

Walter immediately took a joking tone dripping with sarcasm, replying, "Oh, well, *thank you*, Chris, *so much* for lowering yourself to playing with lowly noobs like us. I'm really grateful such an *elite player* as yourself decided to play with us." He was joined by laughter from the rest of the guild group as others joined in with teasing of a similar vein. I realized that I had crossed an important line, but was only gradually recognizing the extent of my mistake.

Edmund, playing his warrior DPS character who was far from completing the requirements for flight ability, went even further than Walter in his reprimand: he challenged me to a duel. For context here, it is important to point out that Edmund played a significant amount of PvP gameplay in WoW, while I had (and still have) no PvP experience at all. Normally, PvP events are located in battlefield instances where Alliance and Horde teams face off against each other, but WoW also allows for individual Alliance players to fight other Alliance members (and Horde against Horde) in duels. Duels are unstructured one-on-one fights between players that

lack any sort of game-directed reward. They are the equivalent of sibling roughhousing, a way for players in the same faction to test their mettle against each other. Strategies for PvP, however, are very different in comparison to fights against computer-controlled opponents, to the point where some players describe it as almost a separate game. Given my total ignorance of PvP gaming, the outcome was a given, and I said as much to Edmund as the duel banner appeared in between our characters, announcing his invitation. "Doesn't matter, Chris," was Edmund's reply, "Let's see what you've got."

With the eyes of the rest of the guild raiding group on me, I shrugged and uttered a resigned, "Okay, fine…" and accepted the duel. My fight with Edmund was far from the stuff of legend; suffice it to say, I was soundly trounced within a minute of play, my opponent beating me easily.

"You may be able to fly, but I can still take you down," Edmund said with a laugh, his point clearly made.

It was a humiliating moment, and that feeling of being made a target of derision stuck with me the remainder of the evening. These were people — Edmund in particular — I considered to be friends, players I had known for years in some cases, and now they had spent a great deal of time that night taking me down a peg in a clear demonstration of social correction. While Edmund and the rest of the group that night never repeated their sanctioning of me, Walter repeatedly brought up "Chris the Elite" as a running joke for weeks afterward as a reminder of that particular incident.

Ironically, I actually *was* valued as a member of the guild at this point, and that fact was often implied in my interactions with other AeF members. Walter asked my help in coaching

another member about how to play their druid better in order to be more effective in our raid group. I received compliments from other DPS players on a number of occasions, pointing out how well my damage output was during group activities. I even was — to my surprise — being invited into private chat rooms with the movers and shakers of AeF to discuss guild business like recruitment and progression plans. While not a superstar of the guild, I was clearly respected and liked on a personal level. Regardless of all this, my expression of wonder in public over my improvement as a player clearly represented a major transgression to the rest of the group — but why?

This incident highlights the central source of tension within AeF, and within most socially-oriented guilds like it: the need to progress in power level and gear in WoW. The primary, defining characteristic of AeF as a guild was its orientation toward friendliness and sociality. AeF was a group focusing not so much on getting ahead in the game (as Dion's was), but more about having a set of welcoming people who you could kill monsters with while having an enjoyable conversation about the latest episode of *Game of Thrones*, or the outcome of the NCAA competition. As such, the guild strove to maintain an impression of egalitarianism for its members, stressing the moral value that everyone is there just to have fun, according to whichever way that they individually defined as "fun." Aldebrandt himself promoted this value as guild leader, refraining from making any restrictions about who could and could not attend dungeon and raid groups, no matter their skill level or quality of gear. Other than himself as "benevolent dictator," there were no other explicit hierarchical structures built into the guild's structure.

Publicly, in guild and voice chat, AeF members hewed to this practice. There was an unspoken understanding among members that no one should get singled out for criticism due to poor performance. However, in private conversation, and to a certain extent within some forum exchanges, fractures appeared in this veneer of equality. As mentioned in the previous chapter, not all players kept their frustrations with less skilled guild members to themselves. Without naming anyone specifically, players like Halion did not shy away from pointing out that poorer players were holding them back from success in the more challenging raid content of WoW. Left unstated was the fact that everyone recognized that certain players were much better than others, more dedicated, and more knowledgable about critical features of the game. In AeF, as with WoW as a whole, there were some who leaned toward the casual end of the spectrum, and others who clustered in the opposite direction. Pointing this out publicly was never done, however.

This silence smoothed over the obvious fact that WoW has a built-in ideological orientation that worked at cross-purposes with the communal sociality engendered within AeF. Blizzard's developers, the men and women who spent so much time creating the infrastructure of this gaming environment, were informed by a moral system that placed a great deal of importance on the idea of individual achievement and merit. While that moral system influenced the internal decision-making regarding player affordances and practice, it has its origins going back to the beginning of the modern computer revolution.

Ideology and Software Design

World of Warcraft is a cultural artifact, and hence reflects the practices and ideology of its creators. Being a product of predominantly American software designers, WoW also possesses a

more or less American meritocratic model of society at its core. This model isn't necessarily reflected in its fictional pseudo-medieval feudal setting, but it is evident in the affordances granted by the designers to WoW's players. One can observe this in the laissez-faire, libertarian auction house economy, which is essentially unregulated apart from the exchanges that players self-organize. One can also see evidence of this in the way in which rewards are doled out in a manner that stresses individual achievement over that of a larger group identity. Players engage with quests, raids, and player-versus-player content in order to amass personal wealth and material rewards in the form of more powerful weapons and armor for their own individual characters While the guild structure permits cooperation, that cooperation is ultimately present in order to promote individual goals.

More hardcore raiding-oriented guilds embrace this meritocratic formula more or less unapologetically. Players join these types of guilds primarily based on the promise of successful, rapid progression through end-game raiding content. Social bonds are secondary concerns, taking a back seat to getting through boss fights victoriously. Raid nights may involve joking around during play, but the interactions tend to lack the intimacy of connection that one finds within more casual social guilds. Ultimately, everyone there is present to take on the next major challenge in the the game for themselves, with the promise of ever-greater rewards.

Socially-oriented, more casual guilds like AeF run into the issue of how to balance individual and collective interests. Officially, AeF exists in order for fellow WoW players to congregate, make friends, and hang out while playing the game. This focus runs headlong into the intrinsic nature of WoW's individualistic design, however. The very structure of WoW encourages and requires advancement and an increase in competence. Characters are defined in

ability based on their level of experience; higher level characters have a greater number of and more powerful attacks and defenses. As characters attain higher levels, the game environment opens up more fully to players for exploration and conquest. Each geographical zone of Azeroth, the world of Warcraft, contains monsters of specific level ranges, acting as barriers for players if their characters have not attained sufficiently high levels to proceed. Most weapons and armor also have minimum level requirements as well, meaning that players have a further incentive to progress in order to wield them, let alone overcome the opponents guarding them. Because of these limitations built into the game, players must better themselves individually in order to reach these goals — their guild mates cannot carry them through the entire game, nor are they able to coast along by themselves without investing significant effort.

These aspects of WoW are inescapable, and act in opposition to establishing a social environment where everyone is present just to "have fun." As I discussed in the previous chapter, AeF while nominally a casual guild, still contained a group of players who were as concerned with progression as they were with sociality and generating friendships. Aldebrandt, Halion, Walter, and the rest of this core inner circle enjoyed each other's presence and supported each other through game content, but progression was always a guiding light for their actions as well. Generally speaking, they formed a clique of players within AeF that rarely interacted with members with less time-investment and raid-oriented play styles unless specifically called upon for assistance. If one might forgive the broad-brushstroke language, these hardcore players simply overlooked their casual guild mates, and in private chat would speak in carefully modulated yet rueful tones about their relative lack of competence and experience. While George Orwell (1996: 117) was referring to livestock when he wrote, "All animals are equal, but

some animals are more equal than others," the same statement would seem to apply to guild members within AeF. My critical error was in directly drawing attention to the fact that I had accomplished significant goals in WoW that the majority of AeF members at that time had not, thus breaking that unspoken rule of silence regarding WoW's meritocracy-by-design.

That design reflects aspects of the concept "technoliberalism" as it applies to contemporary software development — "[a] distinctive combination of distrust of vertical authority, faith in technology, and faith in the legitimacy of emergent effects" (Malaby 2009: 27). Technoliberalism is not a trait unique to Blizzard's employees, however. Malaby (see 2009) recognized this ideological positioning while conducting an ethnography of Linden Labs, the development company behind arguably the best-known virtual world currently in production, *Second Life*. It is a cultural perspective that appears to be common amongst those working within technology-related fields, especially within software programming communities. Pfister and Yang (2018: 3) add a focus on the political economy to technoliberalism, as well. They stress that large technology companies (Apple in particular, but the argument would also apply to Facebook, Google, Microsoft, and others) view their products collectively as a way to solve liberalism's problems. Adherents of technoliberalism claim to do this by not only allegedly giving individuals the ability to improve themselves through digital technology, but also using that same technology to freely join larger communities.

One can trace this back at least as far as the mid 1980s with the establishment of the WELL ("Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link"), an early online message and chat system that had significant influence over the shape of internet social communities up to the present day (see Turner 2006). Stuart Brand cofounded the WELL, in partnership with Larry Brilliant, and was at

ground zero for the 1960s counter-culture as well as playing a role in early modern computer history. Not only was Brand a member of the Merry Pranksters, but he was also a colleague of Douglas Englebart. Englebart is best known as a key figure in the development of essentially everything we currently take for granted in the realm of computer technology. Brand was the videographer for Englebart's visionary 1968 presentation dubbed "The Mother of All Demos," wherein video chat, graphic user interfaces, the mouse, and other technologies currently in use were first unveiled.

Turner points out that Brand's strength was in creating "network forums" (Turner 2006: 5), bringing groups of people together that at first glance appeared to have nothing in common, and encouraging an atmosphere of innovation out of these connections. His close association with the New Communalist movement emerging out of the Hippies in the 1970s brought in a number of influential scientists such as Englebart, and this in turn lead to cross-pollination between these groups generating new ways of thinking about governance, the individual, and new forms of digital technology. The New Communalist connection is especially important to consider (Turner 2006: 110-111). While this movement was an outgrowth of the Hippies, it was distinct from them by embracing new technology and adopting much of the rhetoric employed by military-sponsored researchers. One should keep in mind that the internet itself grew out of the ARPANET project (of which Englebart was a part), which was intended originally as a communications tool for the US military.

The WELL opened in 1985, as a text-based online forum and live chat system. Through Brand's efforts, a large community of artists, iconoclasts, provocateurs, journalists, and tech entrepreneurs gathered together online there to share ideas about how to best make use of the

soon-to-be mainstream internet. This discourse established a general consensus early on about what the internet should be used for, and what values should be held by participants. Members placed a high degree of emphasis on freedom of speech and the free exchange of information, along with the idea that the online world should be treated as separate from the affairs of the everyday. Musician and journalist John Barlow in 1996 expressed these points most famously in his "Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace," in which he writes (Turner 2006: 13-14):

> We are creating a world that all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force, or station of birth.
>
> We are creating a world where anyone, anywhere may express his or her beliefs, no matter how singular, without fear of being coerced into silence or conformity.
>
> […] Your legal concepts of property, expression, identity, movement, and context do not apply to us. They are all based on matter, and there is no matter here.
>
> Our identities have no bodies, so, unlike you, we cannot obtain order by physical coercion. We believe that from ethics, enlightened self-interest, and the commonweal, our governance will emerge.

As members of the WELL went back to interact with people within their own specialized spheres of activity, these ideas and values spread out even further within widely disparate fields.

Brand's involvement in the nascent computer field, and his vital role in establishing the WELL, contributed to the larger narrative regarding moral and ethical components of online technology and communications. This narrative reflected a classical liberal point of view, promoting the idea that the internet was a tool for individual liberation and creative achievement. There is also more than a whiff of utopianism in the ideas that these early internet pioneers espoused, that by providing a space online to congregate, users would self-organize into governed systems that would work in their own enlightened self-interest. That utopianism one

could argue contributed to the development of technoliberalism that informs practice within many software companies today.

Coleman (2013), like Malaby, makes the key point that software programmers tend to a share a classical liberal outlook valuing civil liberties, individual freedom, limited government, and meritocracy. These ethics are prominent in the free and open source software community, and also commonly seen throughout the wider world of software development. This ideological perspective can be traced directly back to Brand and his compatriots in the WELL. Kelty (2008) argues that, especially in the realm of free open source software (FOSS), software developers have organized into "recursive publics." By this he refers to

> a public that is vitally concerned with the material and practical maintenance and modification of the technical, legal, practical, and conceptual means of its own existence as a public; it is a collective independent of other forms of constituted power and is capable of speaking to existing forms of power through the production of actually existing alternatives (Kelty 2008: 3).

There are a number of aspects of FOSS that exemplify recursive publics. The community requires the open sharing of programming source code. Software programmers also spend much time debating and writing up copyright enforcing varying levels of openness. There is, in addition, much discourse given over to how FOSS projects should be organized as well, not to mention how to define "free software" in the first place (Kelty 2008: 13-15). FOSS in essence is one response to the question of governance in the internet age, and is a product of the classical liberal ideology that guided early technologists in the post-'60s era (Kelty 2008: 306). Here again we see an emphasis on rational individuals in voluntary collaboration organizing in terms of acknowledged, recognized levels of competency. Going further, major figures in the FOSS

community such as programmer and activist Richard Stallman repeat the argument that free software is of strategic importance to preserving personal liberty as well, going so far as to promote it as a way of challenging perceived political overreach by governments (Kelty 2008: 308-310).

Elaborating on Kelty's work, Coleman (2013: 3) argued that FOSS represents a specific position within the liberal debate over whether or not intellectual property (IP) rights should have greater importance than free speech protections. Given the emphasis on open collaboration within the FOSS community, the idea of IP can appear in many cases to be anathema to doing effective work. Shared source code is also an educational tool for many hackers and programmers as a way of learning how to approach problems in software design. It also fosters a tradition in terms of reciprocal exchange, giving the rest of the community the expectation that in using open code, one is then required to give back by providing the code of one's own project once completed. Sharing source code also operates as a form of social capital; other programmers can inspect it and comment on it. Code that is deemed efficient or particularly clever adds to the individual developer's credibility as a competent talent in the field, and it is those individuals which also tend to take on roles of influence and leadership in larger projects (Coleman 2013: 120-122).

Because IP rights for closed source software block access to code, open collaboration, and the accumulation of social capital necessary in a meritocracy such as that shared by hackers, a conflict between the idea of free speech (and hence free access to course code) and the economic interests of large commercial entities would seem inevitable (see Coleman 2013: 182-183). While some FOSS programmers expand their interest in free speech more broadly

outside the limited context of software collaboration, most hackers tend to distance themselves from highly visible positions of activism. Coleman (2013: 187-189) notes that among programmers working together on the Debian Linux operating system there was an attitude of neutrality fostered within the group. This orientation is another aspect of the classical liberal mindset she identified in her ethnography.

There is a tendency for these aspects of classical liberal thought that became a part of the software development community to make their way into the products that emerge from that community. Malaby (2009) demonstrated this with the way in which Linden Labs designed and maintained *Second Life*, but one can also see these practices in action within WoW guilds, as well. Malone (2009) and Silverman and Simon (2009) analyzed the use of an informal currency referred to as "dragon kill points" (DKP) used in raiding guilds as a way to govern the distribution of rare raid loot. Supplies of certain types of powerful weapons and armor are constrained purposefully by Blizzard as an incentive for continued play, as well as a way in which to signal competence and thus gain social capital amongst other WoW players. Given that early on in WoW's history raid groups could be made up of as many as forty players, the chances of any single person in the raid group receiving these items as reward was very low, necessitating repeated attempts through the raid encounter.

Hardcore raiding guilds took issue with random loot distribution and instead self-generated a system for determining which member would receive a given item. DKP was accrued by each guild member as they took part in raids (and sometimes other activities, depending on the guild), and was stored like other in-game currencies. However, this particular currency was only used for spending on raid loot within one's own guild. Because DKP was

used to purchase rare loot gained through an exercise of skill that only a minority of players possessed, it operates as both a form of material and cultural capital in the game (Malone 2009: 305). Other players who lack a comparable level of skill can see these raiding players' rewards and interpret them as an emblem of their mastery of play. The DKP system encouraged raiders to play the game regularly, and also created a reciprocal relationship between individuals and the guild as a whole (Malone 2009: 298).

DKP then becomes another aspect of the liberal project of self-invention and development within WoW. The level system already does this, of course, enacting a disciplinary structure onto the subjective experience of players as they learn to play the game (Silverman and Simon 2009: 359-360). However, DKP elaborates on the built-in hierarchy of character levels and demonstrates a further way in which the players have absorbed the classical liberal notion of the individual held by technologists, tracing a lineage all the way back to the 1960s with its counter-culture and early computing systems.

AeF, it needs to be noted, never implemented a DKP system. Since this distribution framework by design establishes a meritocracy governing player relationships, it tends not to be used in socially-oriented casual guilds like the ones I studied. If DKP were employed within AeF it would explode the consensual official narrative that everyone in the guild was co-equal in terms of access to resources and guild status.

Warcraft Guilds of the Kalahari

My personal faux pas involving AeF shares certain similarities with that of Richard Lee while studying the Ju/'Hoansi in the Kalahari desert region (see Lee 1969). The community he

was researching were at that time primarily hunter-gatherers, and as a gift to them he purchased a large black ox in order to provide meat for a Christmas celebration in gratitude for their cooperation with his fieldwork. Lee was surprised by the reaction of his consultants, however. Rather than displaying thanks for the promised gift, members of the group instead expressed disappointment that he procured such a scrawny animal for their festivities. He was further taken aback when the ox was later butchered, and men and women claimed that it was simply a bag of bones, laughing at him as they did so, even though a huge amount of meat and fat was gathered from the carcass.

In frustration, Lee questioned a trusted consultant by the name of Tomazo about the reasoning behind his comrades' teasing, and learned an important lesson about how the Ju/'Hoansi regulate behavior that threatens to upset their egalitarian social structure (Lee 1969: 63):

> "But," I asked, "why insult a man after he has gone to all that trouble to track and kill an animal and when he is going to share the meat with you so that your children will have something to eat?"
>
> "Arrogance," was his cryptic answer.
>
> "Arrogance?"
>
> "Yes, when a young man kills much meat he comes to think of himself as a chief or a big man, and he thinks of the rest of us as his servants or inferiors. We can't accept this. We refuse one who boasts, for some day his pride will make him kill somebody. So we always speak of his meat as worthless. This way we cool his heart and make him gentle."

Insulting the meat Lee provided, in other words, undercut any implied claim of authority that he might make with respect to the rest of the community. In this case, that was not his

ultimate aim, but the potential for him to take such an action was seen as significant enough by his consultants that they took preemptive action.

My experience with AeF took on much the same shape. Once the implication was interpreted (rightly or wrongly to onlookers) that I was staking a claim to competency in the game at a level above that of my fellow guild members, I created a threat — however inadvertently — to the established status quo of egalitarian fun-seeking that Aldebrandt and the rest of guild sought to maintain. Walter, Edmund, and the rest “insulted the meat” that evening in order to preserve a sense of equality amongst players in AeF. By focusing on my own achievements in front of my peers, I undermined the perception that those achievements are done as part of a collective — the guild — and exposed the push-and-pull aspect of goals within WoW. On the one hand, the game encourages individual achievements that players strive to reach for themselves. And yet, those achievements can only be reached by joining with other players as a group.

But things go further than simply undermining emergent authoritarianism. Unlike the Ju/'Hoansi, AeF and WoW in general are based around hierarchies of skill and knowledge. AeF actively policed against this tendency built into the game by adopting a public narrative of equality, while “behind closed doors” (private chat, officer discussion boards, etc.) that hierarchy was recognized and acknowledged by its members. By making claims in public about my own increasing mastery of the game, I mistakenly pulled off the cloth covering this internal conflict that was in actuality the cause for a great deal of tension and problematic discourse within the guild. The obvious recourse was to sanction me — also in public — in order to reestablish the

threatened egalitarian narrative. By taking me down a peg, the rest of the raid group symbolically restored the established social order.

Emergent Play In MMORGs

This central conflict between the affordances built into a game system by developers and the personal interests of players in WoW reflects the "mangle of practice" that Steinkuehler (2006b) discusses with regard to another fantasy-themed MMORG called *Lineage*. The mangle is composed of a dialectical relationship between the intentions of players and designers, affordances hard-coded in the game itself, ever-changing behavioral norms amongst players, and the generally contingent nature of games themselves (Steinkuehler 2006b: 200). *Lineage* allows enough affordances within its structure that players were able to construct a form of play that differed significantly from the form envisioned by the game programmers. In comparison to WoW, *Lineage* is much more focused on PvP gameplay; in fact, the major focus tends to be on besieging opposing clan's strongholds (clans are *Lineage*'s equivalent of guilds in WoW). Also differing from WoW, there are no servers set aside to prevent PvP combat. *Lineage* lacks these "safe zones," actively encouraging conflict between players in different clans. There are, additionally, no checks against asymmetrical combat between players, with the immediate result that it is not uncommon to find powerful, high-level players staking out low-level training areas set aside for new players as PKers (player-killers) to kill their characters as a form of harassment for their own amusement (often referred to as "griefing").

Steinkuehler acted as a clan leader in *Lineage* as part of her research, and described the way she and other clans dealt with griefing of this sort in the game, as excessive harassment of

new players threatened the long-term viability of the game (Steinkuehler 2006b: 201-202). If new arrivals found the experience frustrating and ceased playing, it would cause the existing player base to diminish and potentially lead to the cancellation of the game. It was therefore in players' best interest to regulate each others' behavior to keep a minimum level of civility. To that end, Steinkuehler and other like-minded clan leaders "established a rewards system for any members who policed newbie [new player] territories, which included not only medals of honor (that accumulate to determine in-clan rank) but also public accolades in the form of clan Web site-posted screenshots to document our 'glorious kills'" (Steinkuehler 2006b: 201).

While the game itself had designed into it a system that permitted a high degree of power inequality between new and established players, organized collective pressure created and enforced a set of practices that undermined the programmed structure of the game. Players themselves put in place a system that directly conflicted with the picture of *Lineage* the game developers had intended.

WoW has a similar level of unintentional flexibility, as I found out from a discussion with Rob, a player who participated in a RP (role-playing-oriented) server. RP servers are instances of the WoW game world in which players are encouraged (or at least tolerated by peers) to communicate and behave in the persona of a fictional character they invent for purposes of play, in a manner similar to *Dungeons & Dragons*. My consultant mentioned that gamers on his particular server had developed an innovative way of organizing role-playing scenarios as a form of emergent behavior outside the affordances established by Blizzard programmers.

Normally, quests are offered to players solely through scripted non-player characters (NPCs) controlled by the game itself. Canned dialogue presents the objectives to players, and

once fulfilled, also presents a monetary or material reward. This limits player activity solely to those objectives designed by Blizzard. On this particular RP server, however, Rob described to me how players would take on the personas of various types of personalities within the game world, and actually come up with their own quests to then offer to other players. They would do so by standing in the same spot as a NPC quest giver (marked by an exclamation mark over their heads), and type in public text chat to converse with other players. Because WoW provides a way to trade equipment and currency directly between characters, player quest-givers were able to arrange material exchanges with players carrying out those quests as a way of self-organizing a reward system akin to that of NPCs. Those RP players managed, in a fashion akin to that of Steinkuehler's clan members, to create a system that exists parallel to and sometimes in contradiction with the understood design of a game as interpreted by its designers.

Calleja also noticed the ambiguous relationship between interpretations of a game by players versus those of its developers. He discussed this in terms of a game's "alterbiography" (Calleja 2011: 119-120), the subjective narrative that a player constructs via their personal interpretation of the game's design as envisioned by the programmers. Unlike Steinkuehler, Calleja is not focused on subversive emergent gameplay per se. An alterbiography is simply the story that a player imposes over their experience of playing a game as an act of practical interpretation; it is, in effect, what they tell themselves the game is "about." Just as audience members viewing a performance of *Hamlet* may differ in opinion over whether or not the title character is, in fact, mad, players involved in a digital game may also have a range of understandings of NPCs' motivations, and may also impose a personality on their silent on-

screen avatar. This action then sets the stage for a running commentary on narrative events during play that creates individual alterbiographies.

Meritocracy, Subversion, and the Project of the Self

Any trip through the "self-improvement" section of a bookstore, or a glance at literature on the current interest in "mindfulness" for that matter, will demonstrate how even outside of gaming and programming circles Americans have a fascination with creating or recreating the self as an ongoing project. People may joke about taking spare time off to go "find oneself," but many do actually focus on such activity. The idea of making something of oneself, unaided, by one's own bootstraps, and earning recognition for those efforts is arguably an intrinsic feature of American culture, and it is not surprising that this would be reflected in artifacts of popular culture such as *World of Warcraft*.

As this chapter has described, the subcultures occupied by software designers and game developers foster a meritocratic hierarchical system portraying status as being based on innate talent of individuals earning their positions of authority through personal effort in order to gain competency in their occupation. Because their own social worlds are based on this orientation, when tasked with creating virtual worlds in which to adventure, gain achievements, and in a sense also "find oneself," it is little wonder that those worlds reflect the same perspective held by their creators. Stewart Brand and his contemporaries contributed significantly to the liberal meritocracies that structured the early software industry along with nascent online communities, setting a standard for created traditions that grew out of those institutions.

While the ideal of individualistic pursuit of excellence informs game infrastructures, that does not mean that there are not areas left open to exploitation and subversion by players, however. DKP systems and RP quest management in WoW, and anti-griefing policing in *Lineage*, demonstrate ways in which players carve out niches allowing for greater autonomy. It is perhaps ironic that these examples of low-level rebellion against the limits to affordances in MMORGs ultimately work in service to the same classical liberal project of individual mastery that guides the designers that created the infrastructure in the first place. On a broader level, players display resistance simply by continuing relationships with each other even when those connections serve no utilitarian interest in progression. Blizzard and other MMORG developers may encourage friendships as one element of their games in advertisements, but it still requires a certain degree of rebellion to maintain those relationships in the face of alienating game architecture.

Developing mastery, a demonstrable level of competence, within WoW is an ongoing process, one that can take different routes with different interpretations. During my fieldwork I myself took part in training to develop some amount of embodied understanding of gameplay in order to attain credentials that reflected that understanding. Like any means to an end, there are methods that can be considered legitimate and illegitimate — and sometimes the difference between them can be murky at best. In the following chapter I will describe my own experience learning to play WoW well, along with the ambiguities surrounding various paths to those same credentials of gameplay competence.

Chapter 5: “git gud,” Get Banned, or Get Mods

As stated in the previous chapter, WoW requires a significant amount of time and focus in order to become a competent player. That proficiency is demonstrated to oneself and to other players through the acquisition of various forms of credentials collected throughout play — generally powerful and rare gear, difficult to attain achievements, and access to high-level raiding environments. With these items in hand, one earns a certain level of respect from other players; the implication being that a person possesses the requisite skill and experience necessary to carry off gathering these status markers in the first place.

Most players reach a level of prestige within WoW the hard way: a long period of time learning to play the game well enough to attain a respectable amount of expertise. This is usually through a combination of trial and error, along with the study of paratexts in the form of written strategy guides and video tutorials (both categories usually produced by other players). Closely connected to this process, players also make use of a large library of available addons (modifications to the game, or “mods”). These addons augment the game’s pre-built architecture, usually providing an extension to the existing interface in order to aid player success in combat or other areas of engagement. The vast majority of addons are allowed by Blizzard (which deliberately designed WoW to be altered in this way within set limits), but sometimes players decide to go beyond what is considered acceptable and instead engage in activity that is considered “cheating.” Cheating in a game like WoW may take a number of

forms, but in all cases the intent is a more extreme form of addon use, one which does not merely augment the structure of the game, but in fact actively circumvents it.

All of these efforts, whether licit or illicit serve a particular goal: to gain credentials signifying competence in the game. Each player has the ability to "inspect" other characters, allowing them to view their abilities, level, and equipped gear. If a paladin during the WoD expansion is wearing a complete set of Tier 18 Ceaseless Vigil plate armor, one can be reasonably sure that the player in question is someone highly talented and experienced in the game. It can take weeks to months to accrue a full set of tiered armor, and can only be won by running through end-game raids over and over again. Someone displaying gear of that quality by default generates a great deal of respect from other players. The competence needed to earn those rewards requires that a player gain an embodied understanding of how to play the game effectively on a deeply intuitive level. The most common, socially acceptable way to "git gud" is through repeated play in contact with other players so that the micropractices involved become part of an individual's habitus. To give non-players a glimpse of this process, I will describe my own experience improving my performance in WoW.

Night (Elf) School

While I had played very casually, and mostly in a solo capacity, for several years prior to beginning fieldwork, after reaching maximum level in the game I soon realized that I had a great deal of work to do before I would be able to competently contribute to group endeavors with other guild members. Perhaps ironically, the event that motivated me to improve my performance was joining the raid group for one of AeF's sister guilds, Ignis Solis (IS).

My introduction to IS was through the recruitment efforts of its guild leader, Dion, who had a long history running in raid and dungeon groups with AeF in the past. By the time I began speaking with him, he had dropped out of AeF events, but he retained guest access in the guild's forum and would occasionally text chat with various members in-game. Three months into fieldwork, Dion approached me about joining IS's raid nights since they were trying to expand their raiding party's size in order to have optimal numbers against the various bosses they were working to defeat, and I apparently was judged as competent enough to be of use to his guild. His technique for persuasion was an interesting one, as he spoke carefully about the fact that AeF was not really raiding-oriented, and that he had heard other AeF members complain about the lack of advancement through endgame content. His guild, however, had more players that were interested in, and good at, working their way through the raids, and he thought I might be interested in joining them. Dion characterized IS as a "casual raiding" guild as opposed to a "very casual" one like AeF. IS's members were a good bunch, he said, but no one was too interested in anyone else's business. While group runs might have some conversation parallel to the game, members generally made no attempts to get to know each other closely. In stark contrast to AeF, when asked, Dion was unaware of any members who knew each other away from WoW. Also, he added, if there were any like-minded AeF people, they were more than welcome to join in on IS's raid nights as well: "Feel free to ask if anyone else wants to come, too!"

Intrigued, I accepted Dion's invitation, and spoke about it in guild text chat, dutifully asking if anyone else wanted to join me. This being early summer, most of AeF's membership had disappeared, and our guild's raid schedule was on hiatus. As such, no one raid-ready had

been equally intrigued by Dion's offer. There were however a couple of skeptical responses by long-time guild members about IS in general, and its leader in particular. After I mentioned to Aldebrandt I was joining IS for raids and finding the experience on the whole a positive one, we had this exchange in text chat:

> Aldebrandt: yeah, there are things I like and dislike about raiding with IS. we've done it off and on over time.
>
> Chris: well, they're definitely not potty-mouths like [another guild we raided with in the past], at least ;)
>
> Aldebrandt: true enough.
>
> Aldebrandt: the problem has always been a philosophy one. We will take anyone on our runs. We aren't all caught up in gear levels or anything. [In IS] anyone not perceived to be carrying their weight ends up being called out. That's not good overall.

Aldebrandt was not the only person to express concern about Dion's approach to WoW. Tubal, another long-time member of AeF as well as frequent raider, voiced doubts about my involvement with IS. He warned me not to trust Dion too much, as he had a checkered past with AeF. It turned out that several years beforehand he had generated some animosity with Aldebrandt and others by attempting to poach AeF's more skillful players for his own guild. Aldebrandt had words with Dion about his recruitment strategy, and he had backed off, but that incident still was a sore point for players like Tubal that had been around to witness it. "Just be careful," he advised me.

Duly warned, I began attending IS progression raid runs for the next several weeks. The experience was a good one for me as a player, and very instructive to observe the contrast between guilds when it came to organizing and and executing strategies. The one thing most

highlighted to me during the first few raids I joined was how badly I performed next to IS members. While I was never called out, as Aldebrandt had warned, for poor performance publicly, in private chat with me Dion gently critiqued my showing and provided advice on how to improve as a melee-oriented damage-dealer.

> Dion: Overall, [my] (and your) damage done wasn't too good.. i was sorely missing the mage and spriest..
>
> Chris: i really need to get my gear up, and stay on target with rotations :/
>
> Dion: doh, overall damage, [I] was #11 at 20k, [your character] was #12 at 12.7k
>
> Dion: icy-veins.com for rotation priorities..
>
> Chris: [in reaction to my damage output] ouch :(
>
> Chris: well, i'm pretty sure i have the lowest ilvl ["item level," reflecting the relative power of one's gear] of anyone running right now
>
> Chris: no competition for druid gear, at least :D
>
> Dion: Try getting Recount [a plugin for WoW providing combat analytics], and watch it to see how your damage/dps rates compared to others.. and that might be a good tool to try and better previous attempts..
>
> Chris: yeah, sounds like a plan. that and icy veins :/
>
> Dion: i use askmrrobot.com for gear/enchant suggestions.. you should check it out, and load your character to see where upgrades are found..
>
> Chris: yup, and i need to get the new gear enchanted and gemmed [accessories that enhance gear], too
>
> Dion: i just loaded your character.. and from [the Blackrock Foundry raid], you find (in order or upgrade) your Legs, Chest, Shoulder and Gloves, and Boots.

He then followed up by providing a list of gear to replace my existing set of equipment, along with which bosses to fight in each raid to receive them as rewards. Armed with that information, I began training myself in earnest.

In Chapter 1, I presented the basics of how WoW is played, but the actual practical bodily comportments of play are highly complex in close examination. Key to success is an understanding of "rotations," referring to the cycle of keyboard key presses that trigger specific attacks and cooldowns. Most abilities generally have a timer limiting how frequently they can be used in a repeated cycle. A "cooldown" is a particular action that occurs while primary attacks are either in operation or are recharging for the subsequent cycle. Each character class has a different set of attacks, defenses, healing abilities, and actions that mitigate against damage. Because of this, rotations can vary widely from one player to another. To pursue mastery of the game, players must understand the proper timing of their character's rotation, knowing when to time certain actions precisely in order to maximize their effectiveness and efficiency. While it is possible to play WoW entirely with a mouse, clicking on icons representing abilities, most players only use the mouse for maneuvering their character, and trigger those abilities using the keyboard instead.

With repetition, rotations using the keyboard become habit, and are reminiscent of the micropractices involved in intuitively knowing how to prepare a traditional meal, as Sutton (2014) recounts in his analysis of food preparation in a Greek island community, and de Certeau (1998) discusses in his discussion of French cuisine. My own training period in WoW reminded me of Wacqant's (2004) account of learning boxing in his ethnography of a gym in south Chicago, as I moved from near-cluelessness to respectable mediocrity.

To assist with this learning, an entire sub-genre of gaming blogs and YouTube videos exist that provide guides to improving WoW player performance. My exchange with Dion mentioned two such blogs, Ask Mr. Robot and Icy Veins. Robot is essentially an ability score calculator, allowing players to try out various looted gear items on the characters to see what impact they would make on their character's performance. This gives players an idea of which items are the most beneficial, providing suggestions on specific dungeons and raids to pursue in order to maximize their effectiveness in the game. Veins, on the hand, is a site with much broader scope. It presents comprehensive guides on each category of character class, breaking down individual rotation patterns based on context (individual versus group mobs, raid bosses versus regular mobs, and so on). The goal is to provide every player with the most efficient approach to fighting opponents within the game.

YouTube videos, on the other hand, provide examples of various battle scenarios using screen recordings of other players in the act of playing WoW. While mostly used to gain strategy tips for overcoming opponents, they are also useful for training. A search for my character class and race turned up a number of instructional videos demonstrating different rotation options based on the circumstances. By paying close attention to which abilities are activated on-screen, players can see these rotations in action. As ability icons light up on the HUD, a viewer can determine what pattern of key presses the player is employing during a battle, and then repeat those exact key presses during their own play sessions.

Strategy websites and online videos represent the most visible forms of participatory culture within the WoW player community. As Jenkins (2006) described in detail, participants are part of a complex system of capitalist consumption that is not limited to purchasing and

playing the game, but is also involved in the production of these paratexts that provide a form of collective folk knowledge of how to play WoW (see Levy 1999, Steinkuhler 2010). These fan-made materials have multiple layers of meaning beyond the merely didactic.

For one thing, WoW strategy paratexts serve the meritocratic aspect of gaming. Players who provide the best guides, or share the most helpful and/or novel videos, demonstrate their expertise to the rest of the gaming community. It should also be noted that given the advertising dollars connected to viewership and subscription numbers, these types of consumer-designed products also provide a not-insignificant material income to their authors. Above and beyond playing guides, these sources work in concert with a range of other WoW-related player-produced works. One can find with little difficulty a range of fan creations lacking any instructional content: web comics, memes, fan art, music, machinima (fan-produced CGI videos), and even live-action videos — all dedicated to expressing enthusiastic interest in *World of Warcraft*. Collectively, these creations express and constitute a sense of togetherness, a social bond, that connects fellow WoW players in a larger group. Common awareness and enjoyment amongst players of Icy Veins' guides, the latest installment in the *Dark Legacy* web comic, or recent "Alamo" druid meme gives the impression of being a part of an imagined community (see Anderson 1991).

I personally found Icy Veins the most helpful for improving my gameplay, but still struggled with the rotations in-game. It is one thing to know the correct pattern for most contexts in WoW, but getting the practical timing right of when to actually press a button triggering a particular action was the real challenge for me. Many abilities in a rotation are intended to be activated only when a character's energy (mana, "rage," etc.) reaches a certain percentage in

order to maximize the outcome of specific abilities that depend on it. What I found myself wishing for while studying rotation and strategy guides was the chance to view someone in-person while they mashed buttons on a keyboard in order to see the actual micropractices that constituted play. This was one thing I was unable to do during the course of my research, however. Instead, I spent a great deal of time practicing using in-game combat dummies (see Figure 10), as well as playing through PUG ("pick-up group," composed of strangers) dungeons in order to get a somatic understanding of the embodied experience of playing WoW. By this I refer to learning the general flow of combat involving mouse and keyboard use in order to be effective in the game.

Through much trial and error over the course of a month — and at one point enlisting my brother to view a screen capture video I made of myself playing for constructive criticism — I began to make noticeable improvements in my character's damage output. The biggest issue learning to play well was figuring out when to use "cooldown" abilities. For my night elf druid DPS character, cooldowns consisted of damage mitigation actions, self-healing, and abilities that increased my damage output ("buffs"). Through this experience I found that the single most important thing I needed to be aware of was keeping my buffs active for as long as possible during raid battles. By making sure that I was always activating my buffs regularly I was able to keep my damage rates up at a significantly higher level than before. This is something that may seem intuitively obvious to more experienced WoW players, but in the heat of the moment a less-skilled player (such as myself) will be primarily concerned with just getting the patterns of attacks down; adding in buffs and other cooldowns adds to the number of keypresses one has to

Figure 10: Shades of Wacquant. This screenshot depicts me practicing rotations using training dummies in Stormwind. With repetition, one gets a feel for order and timing of keypresses that result in the greatest amount of damage-dealing.

keep track of, and requires a greater degree of awareness over and above that necessary to keep track of basic actions and avoiding being in an opponent's area of attack.

One other thing I noticed while playing over the long term, especially when I was a part of raiding groups and thus aware that other people where depending on me, was the embodied responses I had during the act of play. Crick (2011: 266) also touches on this as well in his discussion of embodiment and digital games. Unlike playing by myself, I would sweat noticeably on raid nights regardless of temperature in the room, owing apparently to stress I was feeling over making sure I was doing the right thing as part of the group — performance anxiety, if you will. The other thing I found myself doing was leaning in toward the computer screen during periods of tense gameplay; typically this occurred when set upon by large numbers of mobs, or during intense battles with a single, more powerful creature.

On a deeper level, I also noted how gradually gameplay became incorporated into my own habitus as I gained a certain level of competency through repetition playing dungeons and raids with various guild groups. Embodiment isn't just about a sense of incorporation with my avatar's perception of the game world through Crick's game body. I became aware of how my dispositions during play were gradually becoming habit, exercised pre-objectively during intense raid nights. I had purchased a mouse designed for MMORGs that had twelve buttons one side intended to be pressed with the thumb for various actions. On a conscious level, I knew that each was keyed to particular attacks and buffs, and I understood the sequence of actions that by player consensus agreed on as "optimal" for success. With habit, my body became accustomed to performing specific sequences of action without me necessarily having to be consciously aware of pushing each button. It was almost like a dance in miniature after a while, with my fingers performing the steps rather than comportments of my legs and arms and torso. Press 1-2-3-4, pause, press 6, hold down the modifier button on the mouse with my ring finger, press 1, release the modifier button, and repeat — like dancing the foxtrot: slow, slow, quick-quick, slow, and so on. After a while, my hands just knew what to do with the mouse and keyboard when combat began, at times entering a flow state.

Another aspect of my education as a druid oriented toward damage-dealing (DPS) was gradual awareness not just of my avatar relative to boss mobs, but also how my avatar body related to the avatar bodies of my fellow guild members during instances. Part of one's responsibility as DPS is to stay out of spaces that are struck by area-of-effect (AoE) attacks to take pressure off healers to keep one alive, but one also has to manage the amount of "aggro" (aggression) their character accumulates from mobs. Aggro is related to the amount of

threat a mob has toward a given character; characters who do more damage to a mob tend to have more aggro, and hence the mob is more likely to attack them over other targets. The tank's role is to maintain aggro so that DPS characters can do damage to it and wear it down for defeat. Druid DPS characters have certain abilities that can inflect a large amount of damage in a short amount of time, on occasion drawing a mob's attention from the tank to them. Lacking the tank's high armor rating, this can be especially disastrous during high-pressure raids.

I learned the hard way to keep track of what the tanks in my groups were doing, and where they were located during fights. This was particularly important in those rare instances where I was better geared and more highly skilled than a given tank, virtually assuring that I would be inadvertently pulling aggro from the tank if I followed my typical rotation. In these cases, I would slow my rotation of mouse button clicks, or even skip attacks I knew were more likely to draw a boss' attention. In other circumstances, being aware of the tank's position was critical to survival. When accidentally aggro-ing a boss or large numbers of powerful mobs, I eventually learned to immediately run to stand adjacent to or directly at the spot where the tank was standing in the game map, and stop attacking. This combination of actions would then cause the mobs to shift their attention back to the tank, and I could then renew my attacks without being pummeled. Early on in my experience playing in instances with AeF, Aldebrandt or another party member would warn me to do this in voice chat. Fortunately, this became an absorbed habit of my gameplay over time.

Judging from the responses I received from consultants during interviews, my experience was more or less typical of most other WoW players. My observations during play of other guild members mirrored this process as well. For the most part, people were self-taught, drawing on

personal experience and experimentation during play, and making use of WoW-related paratexts. Twitch live-streaming gameplay was also cited by a few players as a useful resource to draw from.

There were a few occasions, however, where players reported more socially-oriented methods of learning. As an example, Howard, a player in a self-described "casual raiding guild," described an instance of direct instruction in gameplay:

> One of the greatest players on our server was a druid -- a night elf priest healer, and she would -- *he*, he played a "she" [chuckles] -- he was like the big raid healer who everybody knew, and [Howard's guild leader] approached him, and he actually ended up giving like an hour long inservice to our raid healers -- including me -- for us to learn how to prioritize our priests and stuff, and what the priorities were for healing and all kind of stuff. They ended up -- we ended up downing two bosses that we couldn't before because our healers were up to the task after that little, like, "master class" on -- [laughs] we did this voice-chat master class on healing!

Given that WoW consists of moving an avatar representing the player's presence within the game's landscape, it was striking how infrequently players demonstrated directly game strategy by actually acting out the maneuvers one should enact during a particular boss fight in raids or dungeons. In fact, I only observed a single instance of this type of instruction during my fieldwork period, conducted by Aldebrandt during an early raid in the WoD expansion. One of the more casual members of AeF, a hunter named Gray, would occasionally join our weekly raid nights, but as she was less experienced with endgame content her presence made the experience a challenging one.

The first raid in WoD, Highmaul, began with the boss Kargath Bladefist, located in a gladiatorial arena which featured fire totems (skull-topped flaming obstacles) in a ring in the center that periodically emerged from the ground. These totems would cause a tremendous

amount of damage to players if they were adjacent to them, but if the boss were lead by a targeted player to the totems they could be used against him instead. Aldebrandt (who was one of two tanks in our group) was aware going in that Gray was unfamiliar with the raid, and took time before beginning the fight to explain how the totems worked.

Running his avatar over on top of one of the totems currently embedded in the ground, he said, "See these skulls, around the corner over here?"

"Okay?" Gray replied, not recognizing what he was referring to.

To emphasize his position, Aldebrandt began hopping in place on top of the totem's location. "I'm right behind ya, I'm jumping on one."

"Oh, yeah."

"Okay, there are four of those and he [Kargath] creates fire totems that stand on those."

"...So don't stand near those," Gray said.

Aldebrandt then ran to a space equidistant from two of the fire totem locations and began hopping again. "Well, so since you're ranged [a character using ranged weapons rather than melee] you'll wanna stand between two that have fire on them like right here. Every once in a while he picks someone to charge at..."

At this point, Aldebrandt moved to a point behind one of the totem positions and continued, "...And you'll wanna run around behind the fire so that he runs *into* the fire and won't hit you."

After confirming that Gray understood what to do, we began the battle and proceeded through the rest of the raid as usual. It was noteworthy that this particular time a guild member took the opportunity to actually act out what needed to be done prior to a fight. In every other

instance I observed, explanations about strategy were only delivered verbally. It is reasonable to speculate that Aldebrandt made an exception given that Gray was new to raiding in general, let alone the Highmaul raid specifically. It was also understood -- although never explicitly stated -- that she was one of the less skilled players in the guild, so that may also explain the change in instructional technique. Aldebrandt's incorporative approach, however, seemed to help Gray make her way through this particular encounter with a minimum of difficulty.

This event also demonstrates the practical aspect of embodiment within WoW. By moving his avatar body to specific positions in the arena, Aldebrandt effectively instructed Gray how to move her own character's body in such a way as to avoid the boss as well as the fire totems. It had the added benefit of serving as a reminder to the rest of the raiding group about that strategy as well. With repetition, these practices then become a part of each guild member's habitus. In a sense, Aldebrandt's actions here are indicative of a struggle against the liberal architecture of *World of Warcraft*. He explicitly displayed his own embodied understanding of the Kargath boss fight as a way of assisting Gray for her own personal edification.

During my observations of consultants within their homes during play, it became apparent that a significant amount of training occurred in the moment while engaged with a game. Players I had interviewed indicated that, in circumstances where they were gaming co-present with family members or friends, they learned how to play a given title through instruction from another person. The in-person video recordings I made demonstrated how this instruction took place on a practical level.

As one example, I observed two adult brothers, Neil and Quinn, as they played a notoriously difficult third-person action fantasy game call *Dark Souls II* on a game console. This

particular title is known for its extremely challenging boss battles, and Neil provided suggestions to his older brother Quinn on how to beat Quinn's current opponent, a giant armored swordsman named "The Pursuer" who had been following him throughout much of the game (hence his title). While Quinn's character had a shield to fend off attacks, the game deducts stamina for each time the shield is used. As a consequence, Quinn was running into trouble getting past this particular obstacle. As context, one should be aware that that the two brothers kept up a running joking commentary throughout play, in combination with a remarkable amount of wine consumption:

> Quinn: [directed at the television] I'm going to block your attack!
>
> Neil: You've fought him before, so now you know their strategy, so just win.
>
> Quinn: I… don't… know…
>
> Neil: [cheering him on ironically] You should win, and never lose. Just win!
>
> [Quinn isn't timing his shield block correctly, and takes some damaging blows from The Pursuer.]
>
> Neil: Quinn, stop what you're doing, and win!
>
> Quinn: [referring to his character, who has run out of stamina and is now unable to shield against attacks] Ah, he's not blocking!
>
> Neil: Just win!
>
> [Quinn's character is killed by The Pursuer. An ominous "YOU DIED" message appears on-screen. Quinn stares for a beat at the screen with a frustrated smile.]
>
> Neil: He [The Pursuer] killed your guard, you ran out of stamina!
>
> Quinn: [Thinking for a second, noting objects in the chamber on screen] There's a big ballista there. [Looks at Neil] Can I get the ballista?

Neil: You can get the ballista. I think the ballista is meant for multiplayer, like you're supposed to like distract him and the other guy like, shoot him?

Quinn: We don't have —

Neil: — But I've done it before… when I've done it by myself. He *will* destroy the ballista if he reaches it and slashes it.

Quinn: [sighs, psyching himself up for the next attempt] Ooooh-kay!

[Quinn restarts his character from a save point and begins traveling back to The Pursuer's location.]

Neil: Yeah, you can skip all the other bad guys and go straight to The Pursuer.

Quinn: You think I could reach the ballista?

Neil: Ida know, like I said, I done it once and that was like the first time I beat him? Having more experience now, never again have I hit him with the ballista again.

These exchanges were typical of the sort of off-the-cuff social learning that went on between players who shared the same physical space. While Quinn and Neil's conversation was didactic, it was also highly informal in tone. Neil was acknowledged as the better, more experienced player, but did not take the role of an explicit mentor. He simply watched as a participant, chiming in with jokes and ironic commentary depending on the situation on-screen. Neil advised, but only when directly asked by Quinn.

Gender seemed to play a role in how one learned WoW, with most of the women I interviewed mentioning that their male relationship partners provided support on playing successfully, to varying degrees. This reflects an overall pattern in WoW I found through my interviews that the majority of women began playing in the first place due to connections to their husbands, boyfriends, or male relatives, a pattern supported by other similar studies (see Taylor 2006, and Yee 2006: 315-316). In Chapter 3, I described AeF's history, and related Reikhardt's

account of joining WoW in order to keep in touch with her husband Harrond while he was out of town for business. Mirroring Reikhardt, I interviewed another married couple, wife Quintana and husband Yamir. When both were in college (and later during Quintana's time in graduate school), WoW was a way to maintain their relationship when physically separated.

> Quintana: At the time we were dating and living together, and, um, [looks at Yamir] I think you were working [out of town] at the time? And you had a long commute home and just wanted to kind of play to unwind. So I felt like I wasn't getting quality time with him so, um, I started playing too to see what it was all about. Plus, I've always been attracted to that kind of, like, theme, like the fantasy… role-playing stuff, but had never really done much of it so was kind of interested anyway [shrugs]? So…
>
> Yamir: And I don't remember the exact timeframe, [looks at Quintana] but was it actually when you did the stint down in Notre Dame for grad school?
>
> Quintana: That's when I was playing with you the *most*. So, um, so one summer I spent… living down in Notre Dame doing a [course of academic study], and that [looks at Yamir] was our first time doing long distance? So, um, I remember we kind of used the game to have something to do together that night after class and work.

Quintana went on to explain that she spent much of her time leveling outside of a guild structure and raids, preferring to play dungeons in PUGs on her own. It was when playing with Yamir that she would engage in conversation about how to play the game. Yamir was a source for advice on leveling up her character's abilities, as well as what to do in dungeon boss fights.

Another striking element I noticed while I observed people playing games in their homes was the lack of any direct somatic training in how to play. At no point did anyone give a demonstration of what to do within a game in terms of button presses, mouse gestures, or gamepad use. As one saw in the examples above, tutoring on how to play was limited to verbal suggestions or instructions only, which parallels the manner in which information was generally shared between guild members in WoW. This may be due to the fact that the games my

consultants were playing while being recorded had interfaces that were not as complex as WoW. Console games such as *Dark Souls II* are played using a gamepad with six buttons, and a computer game like *League of Legends* has keyboard commands limited to ten keys. Given that depending on layout, WoW may take up nearly the entire keyboard with various commands, it may simply not be necessary to be as concerned with physical comportments in those other games. Perhaps people take for granted that everyone knows how to handle a gamepad, which might explain the lack of direct instruction in timing of attacks and so forth. Training in how to play therefore focuses on the theory behind it, not the practice.

My personal experience learning competence combined embodiment and bodiliness. Through habit, I became accustomed to playing WoW using the socially approved "official" rotation for druid characters in a damage-dealing role. That involved embodied knowledge of which mouse and keyboard buttons to push to maximize my combat effectiveness, and also how to move my avatar around a battlefield in relation to other players' avatars. This embodied understanding of play over time afforded me certain credentials in the form of titles, gear, and even flying capability which signaled to other players in my guild that I possessed some level of mastery. As a result, I became a valued member of AeF's raiding parties, and was able to use those credentials as a passport to participate in other guilds' raid groups, like Ignis Solis and Nos Simul Surge. Training and competence results in bodily signals (in the form of powerful gear) that builds social connections, if only on a transactional level.

This chapter has been concerned with how players learn to play games well in an embodied manner, within a larger social context. However, there are other avenues that a player may take to success in WoW other than practicing rotations and consulting with paratexts or

other players. These avenues consist of techniques that go against the intended design of the game in question, and one would be remiss in overlooking them as part of the overall play experience.

Cheating

As has been noted numerous times by now, a person's social standing in WoW is determined primarily by the level of expertise they demonstrate within the game, whether it be through practical techniques of play or via deep knowledge of the game world and its minutiae (how to profit in auction house exchanges, how to most efficiently gather resources, knowing where Mankrik's wife is, etc.). This expertise is reflected materially in the weapons, armor, gold, and other items possessed by a character, much of which is open to scrutiny by other players. While most players arguably put in the time and effort necessary to learn this expertise in the manner discussed above, there are certain players who choose to look for abbreviated methods of attaining those same milestones. Put simply, they cheat.

As Consalvo (2007: 85-86) discussed, digital game players do not have a single, shared, codified understanding of what constitutes "cheating." Definitions of cheating may range from actively hacking the programming code of game in order to get around the limits they impose on player affordances, to something as seemingly benign as reading a strategy guide as preparation for a boss battle. Context may also play a role here; cheating that is specific to a single-player game may be judged by others as less of a moral issue than that perpetrated within a multiplayer game.

Cheating in WoW can be a complicated affair, requiring a certain technical aptitude in circumventing protections built into the game itself, and also (depending on the method of cheating) persuading other people amenable to providing assistance. These forms of cheating might be described as existing on a moral spectrum, from minor offenses undetectable by Blizzard, to serious breaches of the game's license agreement subject to sanction by the company itself (in the form of a temporary or even permanent ban).

Mia Consalvo (2007) reported on and analyzed a wide swath of cheating practices amongst gamers, ranging from using built-in cheat codes included by developers for testing purposes to purchasing third-party programs designed to exploit weaknesses in game code to gain an advantage in online multiplayer games (including MMOs). My experience during fieldwork was that players primarily fell into two categories: those who used third-party "bot" programs, and those who arranged to have other people play their characters for various reasons.

Bots are a constant threat to WoW's infrastructure and social structure. Put simply, a bot is a program that a player installs and runs to automate certain types of behavior within the game. Players who participate in PvP battles might use a bot to run their character for them in battleground scenarios multiple times a day in order to be part of a (hopefully) winning team, and thus reap rewards. Bots have simple artificial intelligence algorithms that run through a set script based on what is going on around the character, and respond accordingly. Experienced players can usually spot a character run by a bot, and Blizzard has systems in place to track suspicious behavior. Bots are used in this manner because with a minimum of effort, they can gain the rewards of a winning side without having to "waste time" actually playing the game.

Bots are also used by many players to automate tedious practices related to crafting professions. If a character has a profession devoted to gathering raw resources through mining, fishing, or gathering herbs (for crafting arms and potions), a player can run things using a bot, gathering resources automatically throughout a particular zone in the game environment.

It may not be surprising that using a bot in WoW is a bannable offense, either resulting in a temporary suspension or permanent removal of one's account. However, for players willing to live dangerously, they provide a fast, efficient method of excelling in a particular skill without the inconvenience of having to physically play their character as they increase their score in a given profession, or build up currency from success in battlegrounds. Advancement in these areas leads to advancement overall in WoW, an alternate pathway to progression and the rewards of participating in endgame content. One can possess the credentials of competence in WoW without needing to possess the actual competence itself.

This is perhaps most notoriously demonstrated by the controversy between Blizzard Entertainment and the developers of the Glider bot program designed to work with WoW (see Albanesius 2010; Duranske 2008). The Glider program shares the same basic motivation as the DKP system; it was intended to solve a specific problem found frustrating to a significant number of players. In this case, however, Glider dealt with the problem of "grinding" in WoW, the portion of the game wherein players spend much of their time carrying out repetitive activities in order to accrue experience points in various fields of practice to advance in the game, or to gain certain exclusive rewards. Grinding can be very time-consuming, so to combat this the Glider program was created to in essence install an "automatic pilot" system for WoW characters (see Glider 2008). Players would install the program, set behavioral parameters in

terms of the grinding practices to be completed, and let the program loose to carry out those commands with the selected character.

This might not be a problem if it weren't for the fact that such software is in direct violation of Blizzard's terms of service in the license of WoW. The game company sued Glider's creators in 2008, claiming that the bot program was an example of intellectual property violations (Albanesius 2010; Duranske 2008). It was also argued that Glider circumvented software that Blizzard had previously developed to block the use of bots by gold farmers and others. This, Blizzard argued was against a portion of the Digital Millennium Copyright Act, and was hence grounds for an injunction against the sale of the program, and justification to cancel any accounts found to be using it (Duranske 2008). While the intellectual property violations were rejected by the courts, the DMCA violation still stands and was later upheld (Alanesius 2010).

During my fieldwork, one particular week Blizzard suspended tens of thousands of accounts for six months in response to bots used by players in PvP and crafting activities. It was the WoW equivalent of a major DEA drug bust, making the main pages of every major gaming website online. It even affected AeF, as one of our frequent raiding members, Tubal, found his account suspended for half of a year. He sheepishly explained in the guild forum about his banning:

> Well...about my visit to the dark side...
>
> About 8 weeks ago saw an article on botting that had been done on a site that had previously opposed it. Sort of the "everyone's doing it" article. Made a good case for it. Frankly tired of the grind needed for a couple of goals i decided what the hey...

> Well..used it over the last several weeks...fishing and archeology only...probably to no one's surprise. Amazing what other options there were...but again, i was just tired of the grind and repetition for fishing and archeology so decided to try it.
>
> Anyway..today there was a huge wave of suspensions for botters...(mostly HonorBuddy [another commercial bot program])…apparently WOW learned how to detect it and cleaned house. Most of the suspensions were for 6 months (I guess they want us back for the next expansion).
>
> So anyway, you won't be seeing [Tubal] for a long while. Haven't decided whether I will get an alternate account.
>
> Sorry to those who might be upset with me for trying it out...I had pretty much maxed my gear and my garrison...done the content...not much else i was thinking of doing...so decided to go after some elusive pets. I thought I would post this so if anyone else was tempted you would think twice.
>
> Guess if I come back you'll have to decide whether i can stay in guild.

Tubal returned to playing almost immediately by starting a new account, but due to starting over again with new characters he was much delayed being able to rejoin the raiding groups, having to begin a new character again back at level 1. The rest of the guild accepted him back without any objection, however. Owing to his contrite manner, and the perceived lack of severity in his actions, guild members spoke to him with forgiveness and sympathy. Aldebrandt cleared the air about there being any resentment of Tubal's actions:

> I'm sorry to hear about this, but we'll still be around when you get back and of course if you decide to open up a second account, just let me know.

Another member posted a response in a similar vein:

> dang! 6 months buddy? At least it's not a lifetime ban. Grab a second account from a recruit a friend- that will keep ya busy

Of particular interest here is the moral interpretation of Tubal's actions. He himself seemed to believe that his actions were illegitimate given the embarrassed tone of his forum message. Tubal would later speak with me in private chat apologizing over his behavior, and noting especially that it left our raid group with one less participant. Given that we were already facing extreme challenges getting enough members together for raiding, his absence was seen as a significant loss (if only temporary). The rest of the guild struck a forgiving note in response. Few comments were made about Tubal cheating, and those that did were minor jokes free of the sort of sanctioned response I received when I spoke about achieving a certain level of competency in the game. The implicit meaning of Tubal's violation was that it was not a significant transgression, and no one was harmed by it. The only real concern voiced was sympathy over the length of his account ban, and the time needed to regain his ability to raid with a new character on a replacement account.

This presents an interesting contrast with Blizzard's technoliberal emphasis on character progression above all else. While Chapter 3 demonstrated how an orientation toward endgame content necessitated reinterpreting sociality on transactional terms, this incident with Tubal reveals a certain amount of resistance to the game's architecture. Tubal showed a great deal of remorse over his illicit activity, and this in turn likely influenced how his fellow guild members reacted to his admission of guilt. If AeF had thoroughly absorbed the internal inertia of the WoW's design, Tubal should have been ejected due to his failure to being able to contribute for a significant period of time due to his account being temporarily banned. Instead, we have an example of the way in which players value relationships on a level that goes beyond simple reciprocal exchanges for individual goals.

Clearly, the moral and ethical map that motivated Blizzard's mass closure of thousands of accounts did not match that of members of AeF. Tubal, for one, saw cheating in terms of "everyone is doing it," and that using it for repetitive profession-related tasks rather than combat meant that using a bot was not a major issue — a venal sin rather than a mortal one, if you will. Blizzard however portrayed the use of bots as a problem that undermined the very spirit of the game, whether it was for PvP combat or material gathering for professions. A forum post by a company community manager made their position plain:

> We've recently taken action against thousands of World of Warcraft accounts that were found to be using third-party programs that automate gameplay, known as "bots." We're committed to providing an equal and fair playing field for everyone in World of Warcraft, and will continue to take action against those found in violation of our Terms of Use. Cheating of any form will not be tolerated.

One could argue that Blizzard's response was based on a perception that botting did an end run around the meritocratic basis of WoW. How can one be certain of a player's competency if they used a shortcut to gather the credentials that signify mastery (or at least attentive labor investment) of the game? In basic terms, Blizzard may have feared that the complex system of relationships in the game could fall apart if no one could trust the level of capital accrued by each other based on signifiers such as wealth, gear, and earned titles from in-game achievements. This would be above and beyond the matter of gaining an unfair advantage over players who did put in the amount of effort required to reach those goals. WoW is specifically designed to lock content behind "gates," tasks that require developing one's skills to a minimum level of sophistication. Anything that allows people to leapfrog over others without having learned those basic competencies upsets the social dynamics of the game community, destabilizing the meritocracy upon which the game is based.

Elaborating further on gating content, Blizzard is at its core still a business designed to produce profit within a capitalist political economy. Besides continuing to attract new users to pay monthly subscriptions, developers must also maintain those subscription numbers — ideally in perpetuity. By pushing new content out to players on a regular schedule, Blizzard works to capture that market of subscribers to ensure that they keep logging in (and paying for the privilege) to experience the next new chapter in the game's ongoing story. Seen from this angle, cheating then is anathema to the generation of ongoing profits. If players suddenly have a mechanism in place to bypass some if not all of the gates placed in the way of accessing new content, they have much less incentive to continue subscribing in the long term once they've reached their goals. Blizzard may make public pronouncements about the value of fair play, but it is not too difficult to locate more material motivations behind their statements. Debates about "gaming addiction" aside, there are parallels here with the deliberate, calculated design of casinos intended to attract and hold the attention of gamblers in order to extract money for as long as possible (see Schull 2012).

In contrast to the attitudes of AeF members, a review of official forum posts on this matter revealed a great deal of contempt for players who employed bots. Many players used derogatory terms to refer to such folk, and many voiced the opinion that rather than just a six-month suspension, players that used bots for any reason should be permanently barred from WoW. It should be noted that the majority of authors focused on botting in the context of PvP gaming, raiding, or gold farming (doing repetitive non-combat tasks that are rewarded with cash).

> "I agree with blizzard on this one. I hope they ban all the gold sellers and mythic raid carriers on my server." (Lstrea 2016)

> "Thank you for the bans. I know it effects your revenue, but it certainly does effect the community in a negative way when people cheat." (Kamalie 2016)

> "My account is 10+ years and I'd expect to be banned if I did something like that as well. What these people are doing isn't a "mistake." They know exactly what they're doing and are trying to get away with it." (Konietzko 2016)

What emerges from a review of these forum messages is a view of botting as a severe infraction against "fair play" that appears to be in agreement with Blizzard's stated position. That Tubal was let off the hook in terms of moral responsibility seems to be due to his long history with the guild as a person of some respect, and what was seen as a relatively minor level of infraction compared to other forms of botting. He had already proven the integrity of his credentials as a skilled player through years of play with his peers in AeF.

One other form of cheating came to my attention during fieldwork: allowing another player to run one's character in WoW. Like botting, this is considered by Blizzard to be a violation of WoW's terms of use, and therefore also subject to account suspensions (although account sharing is technically much more difficult to identify). The ultimate aim is really no different than using bots: players do this in order to gain some form of advantage over the game, in some cases over other players as well — in this case by giving access to their characters to another (usually highly-trusted) user.

While Tubal was the only WoW I found who admitted to botting, I ran across a number of people who had at some point played another's character, or vice-versa. While still a punishable offense according to Blizzard, this activity was conducted relatively commonly among respondents, and without any sanctioning. One woman I spoke with described how her husband

would often ask her to play his main character and carry out tasks that advanced him but were highly tedious (primarily fishing). Halion told me about playing his mother's character at times to collect certain types of crafting materials he otherwise lacked. He would also surreptitiously mail gold from his mother's character to his own, a virtual world equivalent of dipping into her purse for petty cash. Your humble author also admits, prior to beginning research, to taking up his brother's offer to let him play my druid early on in order to finish a series of quests needed (at the time) to gain the ability to transform into a fast-swimming seal. This process required going through dangerous high-level territory, along with a difficult battle with an adversary at the end of the line.

According to Blizzard such behavior is serious enough to potentially warrant banning an account, ostensibly because sharing accounts again breaks the implied rules of fair play and equality between players. It is a short cut to credentials and content access, allowing someone to essentially skip over the difficult parts of WoW in order to enjoy the fruits of someone else's labor. This may be true, but it is curious that in recent years Blizzard has offered character "boosts" for US$30 that automatically advances one character to the maximum level of the current expansion. This "pay-to-play" purchase, while portrayed as a legitimate act by the game developers, has the same effect in practice as having someone else play in one's stead, however. In both instances, a person is paying cash in order to skip the perceived "grind" of leveling up a character. Users who make use of the boost leapfrog over content that would normally introduce abilities unlocked during normal progression, without having to play through the progression itself. On top of which, boosts favor those players with the economic means to pay the required fee, meaning that Blizzard is explicitly favoring one group of players over another. Again, the

ambiguities surrounding the meaning of cheating rears its head in this case. Boosts explicitly are described as a way for new and lapsed players to immediately join the endgame action. Like gating content discussed earlier, it seems to be a method by which Blizzard embraced an unofficial practice in order to monetize it with the intent to maintain and perhaps increase its profits as a capitalist enterprise.

With regards to cheating, one comes to the same conclusion that Taylor (1996: 51-52) did while studying *EverQuest*, that it is “socially produced and only made meaningful via contextualization.” How cheating in WoW is defined and interpreted depends on a complex negotiation between individuals, their guild mates, and Blizzard’s retinue of developers. This negotiation results in a multiplicity of understandings that are not necessarily compatible with one another, depending on what each group views as being most at stake. It is perhaps ironic that a company like Blizzard operates according to a technoliberal ideology advocating a light governing hand, but in the case of their definition of cheating, employees are all too enthusiastic to react according to what could be interpreted as more authoritarian principles.

Design, Learning, and the Player as Platonic Ideal

As stated earlier, WoW is a designed commodity, one which was assembled with intentionality by Blizzard to provide a certain kind of experience. That experience in turn has been influenced by the cultural position of its developers, shaped by a historical narrative of liberal individual achievement and hierarchies of displayed skill going back decades in the field of software design. WoW was specifically developed with an ideal player in mind, not just in terms of the story provided for gamers to experience as they progress from level 1 to 120, but

also in terms of how the interface itself is assembled and presented to users. That interface as a byproduct also shapes the embodied practice of playing the game.

One can get a rough idea of what Blizzard views as the ideal method of play by considering WoW's default game settings. Those settings represent affordances established by the game designers acting as an institution imposing a particular set of approved practices on players. Of note are the primary movement keys, W-S-A-D, governing — respectively — forward-reverse, and left-right turning. These keys are also the traditional movement keys for most contemporary 3D first- and third-person action games (such as *Doom*, *Fortnite*, and *Dark Souls*). Looking more closely at the layout of other commands, nearly all of them focus on the core 61-key area, encompassing the letter, number, and punctuation keys. Multiple commands are tied to the same key via "chording" by holding down a modifier like Control or Shift at the same time as another key — for example, pressing Shift and 1 together generates a different attack than just pressing 1. The function keys are also implemented in this default setup for further actions. The suggestion here is that players are expected to use one hand on the keyboard, and the other on a mouse to one side — again analogous to other 3D action games. Lefties will note that this arrangement is tilted toward the left side of the keyboard, implying that Blizzard planned primarily for right-handed players.

Given that all of these actions are provided keyboard equivalents, the implication is that players should be pressing keys for attacks and buffs rather than clicking on the on-screen icons associated with them (see Figure 10 and Figure 11). Blizzard's (2018) own webpage explains this as something that should be taken for granted, omitting mention of mouse use completely:

Figure 11: Default action icons for a druid character. The default set lacks keybindings for anything other than the main abilities in the lower left side of the display (number keys 1-7).

Figure 12: Customized action icons for a druid character. Note that each icon has a letter or number corresponding to the key or key combination used to activate them. This customized set has been altered to use those keys for nearly all commands. In this way the mouse is used only for locomotion, while the keyboard is used for all other duties using the player's left hand.

"Each slot on the standard action bar corresponds to a key on your keyboard. To trigger an ability, you can press the corresponding button on your keyboard. Simple!"

Indeed, long-time WoW gamers often mock those who are caught clicking icons during combat — "mouse player!" being a common call-out in YouTube video comments and forum posts. Most players seem to think that using the mouse for those commands is a sign of a less-competent player, although one of my interview consultants admitted that he played using that technique in spite of the negative connotations associated with it (he was in fact a highly skilled player and co-guild leader).

The heads-up display (HUD) on-screen also gives an image of how Blizzard conceptualizes the most appropriate way to play WoW. By default, in the upper left corner of the

screen a player sees their character's portrait, adjacent to which are horizontal bars indicating health level and the amount of energy currently possessed for special abilities (mana, etc). Opposite this is a mini-map, providing a bird's eye view of the immediate vicinity, along with important landmarks (NPC vendors, mailboxes to send notes to other players), and natural resources available to collect for their professions (ore, herbs, etc.). When in a multiplayer group, those other characters' stats and portraits are listed below the player's, and a pull-out menu there is present to provide tools for placing markers on the landscape to draw attention to the environment or specific foes.

The character stats provide an easy point of reference for players during combat, to assist with timing abilities and cooldowns. That group members also appear here allows each person to track their peers as well — especially important for those playing healer in order to monitor health points. In concert with the chat functions available in the default keybindings, this promotes the impression that WoW is a social game, one played as a group with other human players, to differentiate it from (mostly) single-player games such as *Doom*. These tools are available out-of-the-box, without the need for addons because the developers intend players to spend most of their time ideally playing alongside each other.

Another perspective on the Platonic ideal of gameplay held by WoW's developers is by studying the paratexts that the company itself provides to players. The game's main website displays a paragraph or two each of information on a range of features from character types to how to play. This second category is the most interesting in terms of focus. While professions and auction houses get a paragraph each, the majority of text is devoted to talking about group play in dungeons and group quests. Presumptive new players are told that each class has a

specific role in a party, how to gather a group, what to do together, and are even given basic tips on social etiquette during play (Blizzard 2018):

> Keep calm: Dungeons can be hard. If everyone in your group dies (what's called a "wipe"), don't beat yourself up (and, more importantly, don't give the other players in your group a hard time either). Mistakes happen. Just revive, and give it another shot.

Blizzard depicts WoW as fundamentally a social endeavor, one that is also combat-focused. Other forms of enjoyment are either glossed over or omitted completely. There is no mention of the mini-game reminiscent of *Pokemon* pet battles whatsoever, even though a number of AeF members spend the majority of their time collecting pets for use in that mini-game. Short-shrift is also given to professions which can take up a significant amount of effort and provide equally significant rewards (either gold or gear). Perhaps it is unsurprising for a game with the word "war" in the title, but there is little recognition of the broad categories of interest players have made for themselves away from fighting. For example, Reikhardt — the sister of AeF's guild leader mentioned in Chapter 2 — began playing primarily to collect gather-able flowers and other plants to level up her Herbalism profession score. Other members of AeF found enjoyment in other professions such as Blacksmithing and Fishing, either for the goods they produced for themselves or their guild-mates, or because they found it relaxing.

As a way of smoothing over the game's learning curve for players new to MMORGs in general, Blizzard made a number of introductory tutorial videos during the *Warlords of Draenor* expansion (now apparently removed) demonstrating how to play each class when first starting out as a new player. These videos were predicated on using a free level boost to maximum level (then 90) when purchasing the expansion, and focused on gameplay using abilities that unlocked

at that level of advancement. The content was limited to under ten minutes and covered only a small subset of abilities that each class had access to. Tellingly, each video went over key attacks and defenses that would grant a decent chance of survival in ordinary encounters while questing or running through dungeons. The character builds, however, were not the most energy efficient, especially with regards to raiding content — different contexts require different priorities in a rotation. In a sense, it seemed as though Blizzard wanted to preserve a sense of discovery for players as they experimented with their character's approaches (explicitly encouraged at the end of each video), which also is compatible with the guiding classical liberal orientation of the game and its developers. Through one's own efforts will one persevere, Blizzard seems to suggest here, not just by depending on handouts from others.

There is another related interpretation of these training videos, however, especially in light of the fact that they were presented in the context of character boosts. Boosts, while convenient and time-saving, also create a problem for players and Blizzard both since they skip over the time necessary to gather an embodied sense of competence handling characters. Quests, and dungeons in particular, are intended to be training wheels for players to gain mastery of the game in preparation for raids, portrayed as being the "real game." The videos provide just enough of a push to players in order to gain a sense of being "good," with the security that they can build on those foundational skills going forward. The positive consequence for Blizzard again is that it also encourages players to continue their subscriptions each month.

Addons

Keep in mind that this aspect of design is not limited to Blizzard itself. WoW is known for also having a high degree of plasticity with regards to its interface and even the way in which the game is played practically through its vast library of third-party addons. These addons operate as extensions on top of the existing game infrastructure, providing assistance or streamlining of certain aspects of play. Addons are not considered to be cheating generally speaking, as they do not normally automate gameplay that otherwise requires skill and understanding of play. Examples of addons include Recount (which displays a window listing damage output contributed by each member of a party), Elephant (a feature-laden text chat recorder), and the charmingly-named GTFO (which plays a klaxon warning sound if one's character is standing in the middle of area-of-effect damage attacks).

Like the standard WoW interface, addon developers base their products on assumptions made about what players do when playing the game. Each of these peripheral programs serves to meet a perceived need on the part of the designer as well as that voiced by other players. The process of addon creation is completely democratic — anyone with a little knowledge of the Lua programming language can put one together, and Blizzard explicitly encourages this with APIs ("application programming interface," programming libraries aiding software development) for just such a purpose. Given that certain features officially added to the game in later years, like highlighting quest goals on the in-game map, began as addons, one could argue that this third-party ecosystem functions as a testbed for the developers.

The range of addons is breathtaking, but one need only glance at the front page of addon website Curse to get an idea of the major focus of developers in this domain (see Figure 12).

Figure 13: Homepage of the CurseForge website. This site contains the largest number of addons ("mods") for WoW, as witnessed by the total listed at the top of the screen.

The most popular addons deal with raiding, providing additional tools to make such instance runs successful. Deadly Boss Mods (DBM) is arguably king of this category, providing HUD indicators and audio feedback to give players information on pending attacks by bosses.

Other popular addons include the aforementioned Recount and GTFO, along with Healbot, considered by members of AeF as a requirement to play priests and other healer classes with any degree of effectiveness. Healbot creates a separate parallel HUD for healers that makes healing other characters in the group a relatively simple point-and-click process, with more detailed information on character stats to facilitate more precise use of energy. This mod, as with others like DBM, have the ability to make significant changes to the user interface, and thus the embodied act of playing the game.

Golub (2010: 34-35) has noted that the amount of information that players must be aware of during high-pressure raids is enormous. One must track their own character's abilities and attributes during battle, along with their positioning relative to their fellow players' characters and AI monsters. On top of which they must be aware of and track cycling attacks and defenses initiated by said monsters. Addons provide a way to organize and distill this information in such a way to make the raid experience more easily navigable for people, in a sense "decomposing the world" (Golub 2010: 35).

Taylor (2009) expands on this aspect of WoW addons in her discussion of another raiding modification called CTRaidAssist (CTRA). One of the central points in her analysis is that addons such as this create, in effect, an extra player in the group, one operationally defined by information provided by the addon itself. If all players in a raid share the same raid addon, they receive identical updates about upcoming attacks, or special effects from attacks (Taylor

describes one which turns characters into living bombs against their group mates). In a sense, the addon takes on the role of an additional raid leader, giving tips and strategy advice to the rest of the party. Absence of this mod can have serious consequences on a number of levels (Taylor 2009: 335):

> Experientially the player without CTRA will be not only outside of the technological system at work for the other players, they will also be outside of a *social system* in operation. This has profound implications not only for our analysis of a game and a play moment, but how we more generally understand the objects of our inquiry.

This point became evident several times while I played with AeF and other guilds on raid runs. On several occasions we were playing with members who either lacked DBM entirely, or had an obsolete version installed which lacked full compatibility with the current version of WoW. In such cases raid leaders would have to negotiate tasks with those players in order to compensate for the lack of communicated support. Other members were occasionally called upon by the leader to take the "handicapped" player in hand to direct them when they needed to act during a boss battle.

The role of addons in WoW, and their connection to both signifiers of competence and cheating, can be murky the closer one examines them. DBM and raid mods like it are considered near-indispensable tools in one's armory to be considered a good player. An up-to-date installation of DBM can provide a player with all the information they need to be successful in a raid or dungeon, calling out devastating boss attacks ahead of time in order to avoid a relentless series of demoralizing wipes.

For newer players, or those just beginning to get a handle on raiding, DBM is a critical crutch to assure oneself that one would be caught unawares during a battle, and be in a position

to mitigate most if not all attacks that might cause their character's (and potentially the groups's) demise. Having addons such as this installed, and understanding how to use and interpret it is also a trait marking a player as someone of repute, reflected in their mastery of the raiding portion of the game. Aldebrandt of AeF specifically recommended a set of addons to members who partook in raiding, and many more raid-oriented guilds make addons such as DBM a requirement in order to be allowed to participate.

These modifications, it seems, can come to be seen by players as an additional category of credential to indicate their level of competence. The implication appears to be that if one is truly a skilled WoW player, one will use the addons in order to eke out the highest level of efficiency during play. Returning to the "ideal player" model of software developers, the contrast between Blizzard's perspective and that implied by many addon creators is striking. Blizzard does not necessarily demand that players follow "one true path" to success and mastery with WoW, and their training videos encourage people to experiment and find a play style that works for them as individuals. Raid addons like those above however take the opposite tack, encouraging a uniformity of practice to ensure an optimal path to victory. Other paths may exist, but they are not given the imprimatur of those seen as expert players (addon developers, YouTube streamers), and hence do not make their way into the design of such addons.

For all the positives associated with using such tools, DBM and its ilk could also be described as a subtle form of cheating, although one that has tacit acceptance by Blizzard. DBM takes away a lot of the suspense of playing through instances, given that it loudly announces each boss attack in a dramatic fashion (either using audio cues or with text overlays in the center of the screen).

It says something about Blizzard's attitude toward such features that even after fifteen years of such addons they have yet to include analogous options built-in, despite the overwhelming popularity of these types of raiding mods. As Burke (2002: 15-16) points out in the context of addons for *EverQuest* and other earlier MMOs, even if a supplemental program is considered to be exploiting a weakness in the infrastructure of a game, if enough people make use of that exploit (assuming it is not considered a bannable offense) it will eventually be considered a "standard maximizing tactic, eventually receiving the tacit endorsement of the designers." What could be considered cheating in one context becomes a mark of distinction and competence in another, based on the social capital (see Malaby 2006) of those participating in a mod's use. Social capital in this context is capital possessed by players by gaining the respect of their peers, and which can be exchanged for various obligations in the game — such as joining a raid group, or helping with a time-consuming quest (Malaby 2006: 145-146).

The moral positioning of addons becomes ambiguous when viewed in the larger context of learning and cheating. Clear divides exist between the meanings held by players and Blizzard itself about how to interpret certain sorts of practice, and there exists a spectrum of interpretations even within the player community. No firm line can easily be drawn around what constitutes a truly ban-worthy offense, and Blizzard's own business interests further complicate what might otherwise appear to be a straightforward argument. Addons work best by decomposing WoW's structure in order to simplify play, making it easier for players to be effective in their roles as tank, DPS, or healing.

This act of simplification would seem to threaten the baked-in ideology that undergirds WoW's design, however. If using Healbot devolves the role of healer to a basic push-button

affair requiring little other than paying attention to green health point bars on the screen and clicking a button when they begin to get too low, is success really a sign of competence? In a similar vein, does DBM do anything other than encourage a player to behave in the manner of one of Pavlov's dogs when hearing an alarm sound? One could make the argument that over-dependence on addons transforms WoW from being a game about gaining mastery to one being about following a simple, pre-programmed script instead. Connecting back to my own experience in order to git gud, it would not be too difficult to make the argument that studying strategy guides and YouTube recordings of boss fights creates a secular codified gospel, a textual doctrine that adherents follow unwaveringly as they repeatedly perform their ritualistic role within a raiding party.

Of note also, is the social aspect of the body in this discussion of how to "git gud" at *World of Warcraft*. Embodiment and bodiliness both operate within a social context, as Csordas, Turner, and Wacquant all demonstrate, and I would be remiss in pointing this out in my own research. My experience negotiating aggro levels with tanks in my group shows how there is a certain social coordination of bodiliness between players that holds implications for embodiment during gameplay.

What divides the merely average WoW player such as myself from someone of demonstrable mastery such as some of those I raided with is the ability to go beyond just rote memorization of dance steps in a boss fight. The truly gifted players I witnessed transcended simply following a published rotation cycle on Icy Veins. Tubal, Halion, and others like them had gained an embodied understanding of the micropractices required to win fight after fight. Paratexts and social learning were a beginning, but the best players are those that are able to

improvise and change strategies on the spur of the moment in response to unforeseen circumstances. Like Wacquant's boxers, true competence comes through a pre-objective perception of what needs to be done and doing it.

Chapter 6: Conclusions

The results of my ethnographic research indicate that there are significant lines of tension between institutional groups organized around the MMORG *World of Warcraft*. On the one hand are the game's designers at Blizzard, who have developed a game structure that, while dependent on groups of people joining together in order to complete WoW's narrative, also gradually transforms those social relationships into something that is simply utilitarian in the service of individual achievement. On the other hand of other institutions in the form of guilds, families, friends, and other communities that use WoW as a locale to interact. Those communities come into conflict with the architecture of a game that emphasizes personal development over communal identity. The market relations built into the game cause social alienation amongst the player base.

Throughout this work I have attempted to connect the American cultural history of technoliberal ideology with social learning in *World of Warcraft*, exercised in embodied practices that are structured by that ideology. The ideal of individuals bettering themselves and attaining acknowledged levels of competence — and thus status and respect — through their own efforts permeates the software industry in general and game designers in particular. One could say there is a certain libertarian spirit that values most those programmers who are deemed to have a masterful grasp of writing code, and solving particular problems in innovative ways. That perspective also makes its way into the infrastructure of games like WoW, encouraging players to develop their skills at playing this game in order to attain individual mastery of its designed systems.

The key to attaining competence with digital games in general comes down to the incorporative and embodied aspects of the practice of play. Following Calleja (2011), effective game design develops a sense of incorporation — not just immersion — within the space that the game inhabits. WoW in particular offers a vast geographic area to explore, with many nooks and crannies to discover that are engaging even if not directly tied to quests. Players are offered a number of choices regarding what ability and play styles to deploy while involved in WoW, and can also select multiple paths to explore while leveling their characters for progression. While it is served piecemeal to players via dialogue text with NPCs, WoW also provides a long, complex narrative structure to frame player activity in the context of a larger good-vs-evil fantasy epic. This storyline includes a number of important NPCs who may help or hinder players, and have backstories as well as actions during the course of a narrative involving drama, comedy, horror, and tragedy experienced by players as they participate. The game is, of course, multiplayer, so this story is one that is experienced with others as well, generating discourse on multiple levels about details of the game in a shared environment. Most directly connected to Csordas' (1990, 1994, 2002, 2011) work, WoW also requires a great deal of kinesthetic control over one's avatar in order to succeed and thrive as a player. This is something that Crick (2011) makes clear in his discussion of how embodiment takes form in 3D digital games in terms of mastering bodily comportments of the game controller, as well as incorporating the subjective perspective of the game body during play.

True competence is a result of embodied cultural knowledge about how to play WoW well. This is a relatively long-term process that players undertake when they first install the game on their computers. Whether or not one focuses on playing in groups, WoW — as with any

other game — requires social learning to attain a reasonable level of skill. In this age of ubiquitous computing and planet-spanning communication networks, it is not difficult to find sources of information on how to do well in the game. Some people directly observe others as they play, whether sitting next to them in the same room while gaming, or studying in-depth YouTube video tutorials covering raid strategy and character ability customization. Addons can play a role in social learning here as well. A mod like Recount provides detailed quantitative data on damage outputs and healing amounts generated by players in a group, including the user. A player can essentially use a tool like this in order to observe at a distance, based on metrics of performance gathered during dungeons and raids. Having access to that data provides comparative sets with which to judge the effectiveness of various approaches to playing, encouraging players to pick the most efficient set of tactics for a battle.

Paratexts, it should be noted, also play a role in social learning, even though a player may not be directly interacting with an author. Fan-created websites, like YouTube videos of game sessions, are sources of a tremendous amount of helpful information about how to "git gud." Some are almost institutions unto themselves, like Icy Veins and WoWHead. These sites provide explicit instructions on how to set up character ability rotations for a multitude of battle scenarios, whether facing single targets or groups. Respected websites encourage a common denominator in terms of practices that the WoW community more-or-less agrees on as the "right" way to play a class in a given instance of the game. Some players may debate a given strategy guide from a popular website, but most will endorse its overall effectiveness. Ultimately, however, all players are subject to the same institutional forces at Blizzard that have defined the user interface — including the approved use of addons — according to assumptions about who

WoW players are and how they should be playing the game. It is this institutional orientation that prescribes certain types of embodied practice on the part of players in order to be successful. Success in this case is defined as participating in progression in order to join large raiding groups to battle the primary antagonist of the game's narrative.

Through this ongoing process of social learning — ongoing because WoW constantly has gameplay tweaked and bugs fixed — players absorb the habitus of a successful WoW gamer. Observation, participation, and consultation with paratexts over time leads to those micropractices becoming rote embodied understanding of how play the game. As players clear quests, dungeons, and raids later on, their character progresses with the acquisition of new and more powerful gear which has a positive impact on progression through the game's content. Those material rewards, especially if they were gained through completion of difficult tasks requiring the significant expenditure of time and effort, advertise the competence of their owner to other players as a socially defined set of credentials that are emblems of mastery.

Those credentials may then be exchanged as a sort of insubstantial currency with other players in networks of reciprocal exchange. This is most visibly a characteristic of social relationships with guilds, whether or not they consider themselves hardcore or casual. Rare weapons and armor, and hard-to-earn titles from achievements can all be used in various ways as forms of social and cultural capital. A character who has accumulated enough of these items will be much more likely to be invited to join group endeavors, especially a seat on a regularly scheduled raiding group within highly competitive raiding guilds. These credentials earn the respect of others in a player's guild, and it is also highly probable that such people would be able to gain positions of authority within guild hierarchical structures as officers or even guild leaders,

depending on the player's own leadership abilities. Possessing a character who has gathered many rare and powerful items can create a social position of influence within guilds through direct exchange of goods. If they are the source of key ingredients for certain crafting items the other guild members require to create gear, as well as to advance their crafting skills, they may then be at the center of a web of reciprocity wherein they have leverage to call in favors from recipients, aiding in their own progression.

As I discussed in detail in Chapter 3, the reciprocal exchanges one sees in WoW, whether external to the guild in the form of auction house transactions, or within guilds between members, reflect at their core WoW's bent toward a classical liberal ideology placing emphasis on the development of the individual. This is not to say that Blizzard designers explicitly are promoting a particular moral view of what it means to be human. Instead, what one can see revealed in the infrastructure of the game is a concrete notion of how the world is supposed to work. That worldview is the product of a long historical process informed by the discourse over many decades between a large group of influential software and hardware developers, artists, and journalists. It is simply part of many programmers' habitus that an individual's worth is determined by their own merit as producers, as members of that particular community. Thus, decisions about what affordance to provide players are in part directed by internalized notions about what what is natural to humanity. If developers implicitly agree that a meritocracy is the ideal way to set up a system of governance, that system will be reflected in their work on WoW. The game's structure therefore favors the promotion of individual achievement marked by skill levels (1 to 120 at this writing), a game world economy based on unregulated capitalism, and "soulbound" quest rewards that are unable to be shared amongst players.

Users gather credentials displaying their individual achievements to others, and the game invites players to compare themselves to each other through the architecture of the game. As an example, one feature of WoW is that one can select another player's character on-screen and "inspect" them, choosing this option from a contextual menu on the character's portrait. This command brings up a window displaying all the gear, visible or not, that that character possesses, identical in manner to how one would look at their own character.

This inspection feature invites users to compare their character to other's in the game, and provides a seemingly objective method of rating how they stack up in terms of power. Inspection also aids in examining the credentials of other players, an it is often used by players gathering groups for dungeons and raids to determine who will be most effective in the instance. While conducting fieldwork, I myself witnessed exchanges in guild chat when a part of PUGs where non-guild members were critiqued and in a couple of cases mocked by Aldebrandt and other AeF players based on the quality — or lack thereof — of the gear they carried. Those items broadcasted an assumed level of competence to others, and were used to pass judgement on their owner's worth, indirectly used as a form of cultural capital. A character equipped with nothing but "purples" (hard to find, powerful items named for the text color of their names that are typically require numerous, repeated trips through a raid to acquire) is given respect by other party members. However, if someone is caught carrying nothing but "blues" or, Heaven forbid, "greens," while attempting to join an endgame raiding group, they may very well be labelled as a clueless newbie by the rest of the group. In some cases they may be simply refused a spot in the party to begin with.

The gear your character displays acts as a form of bodiliness and carries an implicit meaning about your merit as a player, and locates you within a hierarchy established according to perceptions about your mastery of the game. As shown in Chapter 3, this was Halion's understanding of how social relations are arranged within WoW, and informed his position about the alleged inadequacy of AeF to make serious inroads at progression for endgame content, and it was echoed by other members at various times as well. WoW at a basic level affirms a system of structural inequality, cordoning off content based on demonstrated competence via the possession of particular credentials. This is part and parcel of the meritocracy that structures relations between the software coders responsible for creating the game. Players are pushed by the promise of numerous types of rewards in WoW to strive for mastery by the institution guiding this structure. There is always some sort of be-carroted stick present to encourage continual engagement, partly to promote the developers idea of "fun," but also to maintain a constant stream of revenue to Blizzard.

That internally-devised momentum in WoW's design is managed by players in several different ways. As I presented in detail in Chapter 4, users generally follow the official, intended path of individual improvement. This entails a long-term commitment to playing the game in order to gain an embodied awareness of what key presses and mouse gestures are critical to being competent during play. The social, multiplayer component of WoW provides reinforcement of the necessary time commitment due to reciprocal relationships within guilds. "We're all in this together,' Walter would often joke in voice chat, and that attitude is the foundation for the networks of support that guild structures provide to their members. It also creates a sense of momentum in tandem with promises of material rewards provided by quests to

encourage developing one's skill at playing the game. There's little respect ascribed to those who only wish to be carried by their peers through dungeons by people seen to have earned their place in the group.

Besides equipped gear, another category of credentials imparting an impression of skill on players is the installation of key addons, in particular those relating to raiding. Deadly Boss Mods, CTRaidAssist, and Healbot are considered by most players who take part in raiding to be essential equipment in one's arsenal of mods for WoW. Having them installed ensures that a player possesses the same amount of situational tactical information as everyone else in the group in order to ensure clear communication and a maximization of potential effectiveness in a boss fight. Those who employ them, and more importantly understand how to best use them, during play are far more likely to gain rewards of rare gear via successful raid outings.

Addons like those mentioned above are, as I discussed, tacitly encouraged by Blizzard's developers, as one can see in the modular, plastic design of the WoW's user interface. However, there are limits to what the company finds acceptable to modify, and this is made clear in the text of the end user agreement for WoW when players initially install the game. Modifications that are deemed to upset the balance of "fair play" are therefore considered bannable offenses subject to temporary or permanent suspension of a user account. In spite of this threat of sanction, many WoW players view these unapproved addons, in particular bots like Glider, as essential tools to enjoy the game. Cheating in this way is defended by its practitioners as a way of skipping over what is seen as the most overly frustrating element of gameplay, specifically the grind of leveling a character. Whether this grind is experienced interacting with NPC mobs or human-controlled opponents in PvP battles, the argument is one of expediency. These users wish to cut to the

chase, as it were, and get to the endgame content Blizzard promotes to players as soon as possible.

The preceding discussion focused on the liberal structure imposed on players by Blizzard. That structure encourages players to view each other as means to an end, when joining together in order to play through group content. However, as I saw in most of the guilds I played with, people frequently see their connection with others as an end in itself. Throughout my ethnography, I have described examples of this social orientation. As one example, Aldebrandt, Harrond, Reikhardt, Tylo, and Halion played WoW originally as a way to stay in touch with each other even when Harrond travelled for business, and Aldebrandt lived on the opposite side of the country. The game provided the means to maintain social bonds within a household — and include Aldebrandt as well — even when the economics of that household required Harrond to be away for weeks at a time.

The same could be said for Walter and his daughter Wanda, another situation where WoW provided another way for family members to preserve that kinship attachment through a common practice that was compelling for them both. Walter spoke warmly of playing alongside his daughter, and displayed a great deal of pride in her accomplishments as a distinguished player (in addition to her scholastic success at university, of course). He didn't play with Wanda simply to get through dungeon and raid content (although that did happen occasionally), it was also about the simple enjoyment of interacting with his daughter.

Tubal's past with AeF also demonstrates the subjective social importance of WoW for players. The earnest language exhibited by his forum message explaining getting banned exemplifies his close sense of affiliation with other guild members. Tubal's degree of regret and

apology there indicates a relationship with other players that is not just transactional, but is based on sociality for its own sake. His message implies a sense of being bound to the larger community of AeF members. Furthermore, in that text, Tubal is arguably seeking reassurances from his fellow guild members that he will still be allowed to continue that social bond with them in the future, despite the effect his absence would have on raiding opportunities.

The account of my own travails learning to play WoW well in Chapter 5 provides examples of the way in which embodiment and bodiliness are known in the subjective experience of playing. These are social processes that are present within the larger context of relationships with other people involved in the game. Playing through raids with AeF is a form of social action. Our group used voice and text chat to coordinate avatar movement, attacks, and buffs. As I described when playing DPS, players move their avatar bodies in order to keep their characters alive, as well as help their compatriots be successful — as seen during Aldebrandt's instruction to Gray.

Bodies make themselves subjects of the social in other ways. This was apparent in my reprimand at the hands of other AeF members in Chapter 4. Edmund challenged me to a duel, and I was easily defeated by his far-superior PvP abilities. That duel was a way to remind me of my place within the larger guild, and how I ranked relative to other, better players in AeF. That incident served to reinforce that belief within the guild that no one was counted above anyone else, ironically through an action that explicitly reinforced a meritocratic social order. It was also an incident that disturbed me greatly recalling childhood memories of bullying and made me question whether or not to even continue working with AeF. Other players reported having similar emotional reactions to "griefing" or harassment, in many cases motivating them to quit a

guild in favor of somewhere more welcoming. Fortunately, in my case this was a short-term situation that was not intended to be personal. Tubal also experienced something similar with the full institutional weight of Blizzard essentially removing his avatar body from play in response to his use of a bot. Even though he was able to begin playing immediately after the ban by creating a new account, the new character name was a constant reminder of his transgression, not just to himself, but to everyone else he played with.

While it is true that there are not necessarily any material stakes involved with playing WoW, the stakes for players are social instead. This is clear in both my sanctioning, as well as Tubal's temporary account ban. In each circumstance, there is contingency involved in terms of whether or not social connections can be maintained with other players. I felt a great deal of humiliation the night that Walter, Edmund and the rest of the raiding group mocked me for my boast of competency. At risk was the possibility of permanently offending the guild — or allowing my emotions to override the objective knowledge that this treatment was mostly "good-natured ribbing" — and severing my connection to people I had known for several years.

Tubal was in a similar predicament, made worse by Blizzard's role in it. His shame with regards to employing a bot was palpable in the remorseful message he sent to the guild, exacerbated by the knowledge that his ban did not just affect himself, but extended to the rest of the guild by placing further pressure on AeF's ability to participate in raids. By approaching the guild forum, and framing his announcement as an apology, Tubal was placing a bet. That wager was over how forgiving his long-time friends and co-workers would be toward him admitting to being a cheat.

One could make the claim that cheating is an example of the logical end-point of classical liberal ideology with regards to digital game participation. If one fully incorporates the moral value of individual achievement of mastery in some sort of skill as the ultimate aim of life — "being your best self" and so on — along with the idea that limited external governance is necessary to provide the personal freedom to actually accomplish that goal, than cheating is simply another avenue of everyday practice amongst a constellation of others to reach individual excellence. It is a short cut to gathering the credentials necessary by way of the game's infrastructure to fully participate in the real point of WoW (as defined by its developers), which is the endgame raiding content. All other moral considerations may very well be secondary. One's stature in the community of WoW players is to some extent determined by those credentials as cultural capital (see Malaby 2006), so why not use a bot to accelerate the path through progression to reach the ultimate goal of the game?

Keep in mind that bots are not necessarily a statement of inferiority on the part of players that employ them. Tubal himself was one of the best raiding party members in AeF, and even he decided to use this type of cheat to skip over having to personally oversee progression of fishing profession scores he saw as boring and tedious. His intent was not to compromise the integrity of the game, or undermine the success of the rest of the guild — far from it. The motivation in Tubal's case to use a bot was to maximize his individual experience of WoW, fast-forwarding through parts he found distasteful in order to have a more active role elsewhere.

Given that his fishing profession is one that gathers numerous types of raw materials for crafting gear, and that he offered crafting materials to many members of his guild, one could also make the argument that his actions, while officially in violation of the game's user agreement,

were done to at least partly assist Amici et Familiae as part of the guild's broader progression experience. Tubal, like other players who fell under the "cheater" label at one time or another, was simply performing an extreme example of exactly the sort of meritocratic practices that Blizzard's own development staff valued as part of their own identities as programmers: finding innovative solutions to complex, multifaceted problems.

My discussions in the preceding chapters were intended to highlight a basic source of conflict and tension within *World of Warcraft*. There is a distinct push and pull exercised on players by Blizzard's developers, with a source in the technoliberal worldview that informs both the coders in their cubicles and the people who pay a not-insubstantial monthly subscription to participate in the world they have created. On the one hand, players want to experience victory overcoming foes, both AI- and human-controlled, reaping the rewards of their successes. By those efforts they gain the credentials that permit them access to see the whole game, not just a portion of it.

But at the same time, the appeal of massively multi-player online role-playing games is that they are *multi-player*. One gets to experience fending off the fire-breathing attacks of Onyxia the black dragon and the vile necromancy of the orc warlock Gul'Dan in the company of other actual living, breathing human beings. It is quite thrilling on a subjective level to be a part of a raiding group that has finally managed to take down a particularly difficult raid boss after a dozen frustrating wipes. People cheer each other in voice chat, exchange congratulations, and joke with each other about their gear repair bills, all with a communal sense of accomplishment and relief.

Along with those brief periods of post-battle excitement, the players in the self-described casual guilds I spoke with all placed a great deal of value on the day to day interactions with their fellow "guildies" outside of raids and dungeons. People share conversations about their jobs, families, hobbies, and most other aspects of their lives besides gameplay. One member of a guild I played with, Nessa, was unable to participate in instances due to a slow internet connection, but she continued to be a valued social presence in the guild due to all the conversations she has taken part in in text chat. The guild forum often ended up being used as a place to post photos of the dogs she was raising, peppering text updates with photos of growing puppies

Unfortunately, WoW's design architecture places a constant motivation on players to focus on progression above all else. That means that the social connections that one makes with guild members like Nessa may be real and significant, but they are secondary considerations ultimately, when faced with the structural necessity of individual progression. As I described in Chapter 2, a guild like AeF, when having given the impression to more competent members that it has plateaued, becomes subject to the design considerations of the game. The result is often something similar to what has happened to AeF, the more raiding-minded players begin to drift away from the guild, many times severing their relationship with it completely in order to join a group of players that have skills equal to their own and a focus primarily on progression. Those players may still chime on in text chat occasionally, or even join as special guests on an occasional dungeon or raid run, but they no longer have their singular attention given to the friends they described in their farewells from the guild.

Reading those “goodbye” posts left by players to their guilds and frequent companions in the game, one can detect in these texts notes of true, genuine affect. While non-gamers may raise an eyebrow at the idea that such friendships could generate real feelings of intimacy, it is important to keep in mind that in many cases those people that are being dismissed have spent as much time with each other in voice and text chat as many players spend with their own families. Given that, is it not possible that these connections can breed familiarity and attachment at least as much as one can have for close co-worker friendships? Being a part of this gaming community appears to be a legitimately important social and psychological aspect of players' experience. There is on a certain level a real tragedy in the way that these connections that people have made are, past a certain point, subject to the institutional whims of WoW's designers. Ultimately, players are torn between a basic need for sociality and long-term relations to others, and the infrastructure of the game which both works for and against this impulse. One could reply that “it's just a game,” but that dismisses the nuances of subjective meanings and experiences players ascribe to WoW in the same way that describing communion during a Christian church service as simply “snack time” does to parishioners.

While my dissertation has primarily discussed the way that institutional forces affect the embodied practice of digital game playing and the social relationships between players in *World of Warcraft*, there are a number of other topics that crept up during my fieldwork that suggested further areas for useful research. MMORGs are a complex genre of game, and the social aspects allow for a wide swath of future investigation.

Gaming and Power Relationships

One of the things that initially drew me to study WoW was the way that family relationships were practiced in the context of multiplayer games. In particular, I noted that in many instances children would often outstrip their parents in competence managing game systems and the embodied elements of play. I observed a number of examples in which offspring would take a leadership role in groups that included a parent or other older relative. Walter and Wanda were one frequent example of this dynamic, but Aldebrandt's extended family also provided examples of this phenomenon. This lead to questions I began asking myself about how social power and hierarchies in families that took part in MMORGs were managed by participants.

Given the amorphous nature of social organization within and outside WoW, perhaps the best way to frame power relations in this context is by using the concept of heterarchy. This term was first coined by Warren McCulloch (1945) as a way to describe the lack of a single centralized organizing structure for human cognition. The term, however, has in subsequent years been adopted for more general use in multiple academic arenas, with Carol Crumley (1995) applying heterarchy to anthropology as a way to more accurately depict complex, overlapping political relationships in an archaeological context. Depending on culturally-defined context, one or more of these hierarchies may come to the fore, receding into the background when the social context shifts, making way for a different hierarchy to assert itself.

Heterarchy as an organizing principle is similar to Goffman's performance theory (1959) in terms of how social roles and power are also dependent on context. In one front stage — at home, for example — an individual may hold a position of authority as a parent, and behave in

ways that reflect that role (disciplining their children, enforcing bedtime). In the front stage of the workplace, however, that same person may hold a subordinate role within a corporate business environment in which they themself are subjected to actions by higher-level management (project directives, reprimands for low productivity). In the case of WoW, there is an overlapping set of hierarchies present, one based on traditional household ideas about familial authority systems, and the other incorporating the classical liberal model of meritocracy.

In interviews, I noted that parents did not give any indication of annoyance with their children in situations where the parents had inferior performance in WoW or other games. In fact, with respect to WoW, as noted with Walter in Chapter 2 there was no feeling of threat to his role as father. Nessa went further than that when I spoke with her about playing with her three sons. She actually welcomed the opportunity WoW gave her children to take on the role of a leader during guild instance runs, as she believed it provided them with a safe environment to practice being in adult positions of authority.

Warcraft guilds that are constituted at least in part by families seem to reflect the concept of heterarchy, given what I observed and recorded. It would make for an interesting project to look more closely at internal household dynamics during play to study if and how heterarchy is expressed amongst family members, and (at least in American homes) how cultural meanings and practices regarding kinship are revealed and affected in these circumstances.

Regarding Walter, Nessa, and other parental figures, the thought occurs that what may be happening here is another example of the classical liberal project of individual creation of the self. In instances when I had the opportunity to talk with parents who played WoW with their children, the constant theme was one that taking part in a MMORG provided a field in which

their children could demonstrate independence and self-improvement through the act of playing with older children and adults. The ultimate aim, for parents at least, was self-improvement on the part of their children.

Embodiment and Virtual Reality

Another avenue deserving of examination is the emergence of viable, commercial virtual reality (VR) headsets. While VR offerings have been available to consumers in various forms since the mid-1990s, those early systems lacked many features such as head motion tracking. More immersive systems with full tracking of head and hand positions made their way into video arcades on a limited basis, but even then the computational power necessary to create a more or less photo-realistic environment was far from possible at the time. Instead, players made due with blocky, low resolution graphics that lacked even basic texture-mapping for detail. It has only been in the last three years or so, with the release of the Oculus Rift and Vive headsets that VR technology has reached a level of maturity to begin approaching the utopian hopes of early developers. With a combination of headset and individual hand controllers, along with an off-the-shelf consumer graphics card, users can experience a remarkably detailed virtual environment, allowing a feeling of incorporation — of *being there* — that was simply unachievable twenty five years ago.

At the risk of uncritically reifying '90s technoliberalism, I would argue that VR technology may soon transform mainstream digital gaming. At this writing, we are only seeing the early stages of the first generation of truly useable consumer headsets. In the next few years one can expect iterative improvements granting even higher levels of image fidelity and

interactive complexity of design. However, even now VR products are sophisticated enough to create a level of incorporation that potentially can make non-VR first-person games pale by comparison. By being able to, in effect, place one's whole body within a game world, manipulating virtual objects directly with one's hands, as opposed to having an experience that is mediated by mouse, keyboard, game controller, and monitor, users are able to realize a level of embodied locality heretofore unknown.

This technology is so new that there is a wide-open arena for new research topics on the subject. Even a cursory experience of a VR program raises all sorts of questions about its use. Does embodiment function the same in a VR game as it does for non-VR titles? Does realism affect the subjective interpretation of incorporation, or can more stylized art styles create the same effect? What impact does interactive VR have on sociality when in the presence of other users over a network? How does culture influence the way that VR is interpreted by users?

For that matter, new questions emerge when looking at VR in terms of the institutions of software companies. The affordances at the disposal of players are both greater and less than those with a standard keyboard-and-mouse game like WoW or *Halo*. One can physically walk around one's living room while subjectively being on a Caribbean beach or a dragon's underground cavernous lair, something that can't be done in WoW. With non-VR games, you are still conscious of the fact that you are sitting in front of a computer monitor. The differences in bodily comportments intrinsic to these two types of interfaces dictate different design decisions for game worlds. One obvious example: in a first-person shooter like *Doom*, one can easily travel within a level long distances without worry of physically colliding with anything "real," as all travel is conducted by pushing the W-S-A-D buttons on a keyboard and aiming one's

direction with the mouse. Moving in the same way using a VR system is much trickier, as one cannot physically run 10 meters forward to fight off hordes of demons on Mars without running into the living room wall, or tripping over the cat, or any number of other real-world collisions. Standing in place and using a hand controller to indicate velocity in the game solves one problem (the cat is safe), but creates another potential problem — motion sickness, as visual information is out of sync with the rest of the somatic data you absorb while playing. Due to this kind of restraint on playability, many VR game studios have rethought what kinds of titles to create.

In a sense, virtual reality is in a sort of liminal period in terms of software design analogous to that of the early 1980s as consumer computers began to make significant penetration into households. Software designers both then and now seem to be negotiating exactly what types of programs work best on their respective technology platforms. Now would be a perfect opportunity for researchers to examine how VR software teams are engaging with the technology and determining what affordances to emphasize for users. In the most basic terms, how are they deciding what VR is actually good for? The decisions they make, like the decisions guiding Blizzard with respect to WoW, or Linden Labs and *Second Life*, have import for the future of everyday technology going into the future. Understanding the institutional perspectives on virtual reality development will provide important insights into how this technology will affect users and the sociocultural environments they inhabit.

Of relevance to my own work, there are already examples of social learning visible within the VR user community, and I have witnessed numerous examples of this process in relation to the institutional affordances that Oculus' developers have designed into the Rift software. The Rift provides a "home" location for users in VR, a headquarters that is

customizable to a certain degree in terms of decorations and furnishings (see Figure 14). The effect is similar to designing a home interior in the computer game series *The Sims*, or the virtual world *Second Life*. This customizability was released at the beginning of 2019, nearly three years after the headset's release. Soon after, an update allowed users to crate and upload their own template architecture to use in place of the default "living room" areas provided by Oculus. Within days, a variety of new environments were shared amongst users consisting of everything from desert islands to recreations of medieval cities from *World of Warcraft*.

What was of most interest to me was that not only can users visit other people's "homes" when shared publicly, they can also socialize with each other and verbally converse (the Rift has a built-in microphone). Many times I saw people approach the owner of a custom home location and ask how they uploaded the models online to visit in VR, eliciting long conversations about the technical requirements involved in making 3D models available with the Rift homes. If several people were visiting the same custom locale, many times the owner would put on an impromptu workshop while there, going so far as to project a floating big-screen display of their computer's desktop so they could demonstrate which websites to visit to download software and models to make them useable within VR.

The most remarkable thing I noted was that Rift users discovered a way of circumventing the architected boundaries of the allotted spaces for their homes — something I found out after speaking at length with a British motorcycle restorationist about his heavily modified home. The Rift offers two modes of locomotion: continuous movement as in a first-person shooter, and short-range teleporting as a means of avoiding motion-sickness for new owners. The restorationist explained that if you leaned forward through the outer wall of the template, and

Figure 14: An example of an Oculus Rift "home."

then holding a controller forward, one could teleport outside the confines of the home location. It turned out that each home template was located within a much larger space, which could then be populated with 3D models to decorate just as the provided "living room" spaces. Several users took advantage of this "bug," and had shared this information amongst themselves through their friend networks. Over a couple of months, I began to see the fruits of this communication as increasingly elaborate homes became publicly available in order to show off their owner's work.

In a sense, what I saw over the course of four months after using the Rift could be seen as a form of cheating, in ways similar to the Glider bot in WoW, or cheat codes in first-person shooters allowing players to fly or pass though solid walls. Rift users discovered a way to literally transgress boundaries established by software designers, boundaries that were seen as

limitations on creative expression. The men and women who cheated in this way learned to do so through direct interaction with each other within these virtual environments. Like WoW, the interactions often pointed to specific paratexts like YouTube videos and software documentation as a way of understanding the technical aspects of 3D geometries in VR in order to create personalized spaces that brought them subjective feelings of satisfaction, as expressed by the creators I met. Social learning was the vector by which users learned that architected boundaries were not completely insurmountable, and taught them how to transgress. A study of the subjective experiences of these users would be useful here, in order to determine if and/or how classical liberal ideology influences the desire to create these types of heavily modified spaces.

Closing Remarks

In Chapter 4, I mentioned in passing Sutton's (2014) ethnography on Greek cooking, but that research seems to parallel much of what I found in my examination of WoW players. While the contexts may appear to be worlds away at first glance, the comparison becomes increasingly apt to my eyes. Sutton discusses at length the micropractices involved in food preparation and consumption, and the almost ritual-like manner in which they are enacted. However, he goes further than simply describing the practice of cooking, and demonstrates how food preparation — and the reciprocity surrounding gifts of food — are connected to broader cultural concerns. One of the things that Sutton documents is the discourse surrounding "traditional" Greek meals, including the traditional methods by which those meals are created. His consultants make the point throughout the book that Greek cultural identity is intimately connected to food, emphasizing its nationalist aspects.

At one point, a discussion amongst members of a household breaks out debating the merits of two different TV cooking show hosts, one viewed as "traditional" (Mamalakis), and the other more cosmopolitan (Vefa). Vefa was criticized for bringing in ingredients and techniques from other European countries, but her show was also very popular. In his analysis, Sutton (2014: 147-148) explains that while television may be commodifying a fetishized version of "Greek" cooking under institutional pressures to integrate Greece into the larger European Union, this does not match the discourse of people on the ground. In fact, his consultants are very aware of the internal heterogeneity of Greek cuisine in form and practice, and this knowledge is at odds with a media narrative promoting a monolithic, nationalistic idea of "Greek food." Instead, people's conversations about food and its preparation emphasize the ways in which both have stayed constant as well as changed through time.

Like Greek cooking, WoW players also find themselves at times at odds with larger institutional forces. AeF guild members are subject to the ideological orientation of the game designers who are operating from a perspective valuing the idea of individual achievement, and its relation to respect and status within a given community. The design of the game inscribes this ideology on the bodies of players through the user interface and ideas about how best to play the game. As a result, players adopt a set of micropractices that through discourse in-game as well as via paratexts are agreed on as most competent, in much the same way that Greeks agree on a "traditional" method of cooking. While the game structure encourages individual progression over that of sociality among players, given the meritocratic bent of the design, they themselves place a high degree of importance on the sense of community derived from playing together as part of guild collectives. In the case of players who leave AeF to join raiding guilds, only to

return later to casual gaming, it appears that players are still capable of generating narratives that undermine the institutional concern with success above all else.

In Chapter 2, I made the argument that embodiment is something that is just as active within digital games as without. I also pointed out how practice and meaning flows between game and non-game, demonstrating that games do not represent an arena divorced from everyday life. However, in analyzing interactions between players and how those interactions exist in a fraught relationship with structural pressures imposed by game designers, it also appears that there is something happening here that is operating differently from prior interpersonal connections in the past.

During my time with Amici et Familiae, I found that WoW had a transformational effect on the nature of friendship amongst the guild members I observed. Relationships in these groups were severed not due to changes in geographical proximity owing to — for example — taking jobs elsewhere, or due to interpersonal conflicts as they might have in other circumstances. Instead I found that it was frequently because the structure of the game itself required people to stop interacting as regularly and intensely as they used to in order to gain progress for their digital characters. No actual material gain was at issue here, merely the ability to experience new areas of the game world — “endgame content." In other words, players were under pressure by the nature of WoW to shrug off friendships that had in some cases years invested in them in exchange for virtual rewards that disappeared the moment they logged out of the game.

While there are analogies to behavior and sociality that take place outside the context of gaming, what I saw was something new, something that did not appear capable of occurring without including the incorporation and embodiment relating to playing this game. Furthermore,

this pattern was caused by institutional interference in the social relationships of these players. Friendships and camaraderie were both created and circumscribed by interventions on the part of Blizzard Entertainment. This aspect of social relationships is something that would not occur practically without the online component of this massively multiplayer online role-playing game.

My research suggests that there is much that is messy and contingent about social relationships mediated by digital technology. But these connections are mediated additionally by institutional decisions on the part of Blizzard's developers. It also raises the question of whether this critical positioning of a corporation leads to a situation where friendships are seen as necessarily transactional, or at least situationally contingent. The aspect of disposability brought to these friendships may be an effect of their practice within the space of *World of Warcraft*, reflecting capitalist attitudes towards all aspects of everyday life as seen in contemporary neoliberal politics. There is certainly room here to explore the macro-level implications of what I observed in miniature during my fieldwork.

Based on my research, sociality in WoW tends to shift from being purely an end in itself, to instead being transactional in nature. Raids seem to mark the beginning of this transition in relationships between players. Quests and dungeons are relatively easy to complete in comparison to raiding, and consequently require less competence from players. These lower-intensity pursuits generally lack minimum gear requirements, as well, meaning that they are open to anyone in a guild who expresses an interest.

The game changes markedly once players outgrow ordinary dungeons. At that point, progression for characters demands a shift in focus to raiding content above all else. This is quite clearly evident in the discourse within AeF regarding getting properly geared for endgame

content in Chapter 3. With raiding, there is a pressure imposed by WoW's architecture to play with guild members who are recognized as highly-skilled, and those members are not necessarily people that one has close co-present relationships with outside the game. In order to be successful in the later stages of WoW, players often end up joining in groups made up of people based on their skill, rather than those they have strong social connections to. Players who fell behind in terms of gaining competency or credentials in my observations generally become marginal within AeF, and as the guild forum's litany of "farewell" posts attest, it was frustration over not having enough skilled players to outweigh the more casual players that motivated many people to leave. Once a guild is unable to serve the liberal interests of members who have switched over to raid content, membership within that guild comes into question. It is much more about "what's in it for me?" than "what can I contribute?" at that point. The result is increasing social alienation between players, as their interests become focused on progression over building and/or maintaining relationships.

This institutional pressure is problematized by the fact that for a significant number of players the social is still an important draw for WoW. In the preceding pages, I have described several examples of connections between players being important for their own sake. Tubal's apologies over cheating, Walter and Wanda's father-daughter bond, as well as those relationships tying Aldebrandt to his brother's extended family all serve as representative cases of this phenomenon. In a broader sense, being a part of a community like AeF means that members provide a sense of shared identity with each other, and reassurance that they hold a meaningful position amongst their fellows.

Going forward, there are additional questions raised regarding embodiment as experienced by the players I studied. Future research should focus on how people navigate different sets of dispositions, not just in terms of the act of playing the game, but also in terms of how they navigated through various categories of social interactions. A closer examination of sociality in action during play, as well as more pointed lines of questioning in interviews, would be helpful to shed light on this area.

The concept of flow needs additional study with respect to the subject of gaming embodiment, as well. Practical competence in specific sets of bodily dispositions are critical to success in a game like WoW. Crick (2011: 266-267) specifically cites Merleau-Ponty (2002: 164-167) when discussing this kind of competence, in terms of familiarity with using a game controller. Crick draws a parallel between learning to play a game and Merleau-Ponty's discussion of picking up bodily habits such as driving a car, a blind man using a cane, or typing on a typewriter. Objects separate from the body become incorporated into our perception of the world by becoming subsumed as extensions of the body. A typist does not consciously consider the angle and trajectory of each of their fingers as they approach the keys. Instead, "the subject who learns to type incorporates the key-bank space into his bodily space" (Merleau-Ponty 2002: 167). The same could be said for using a keyboard and mouse, as I myself experienced while learning to play WoW effectively. The difference here is that I'm making use of Crick's (2011) game body to perceive that virtual world, rather than relying solely on my own embodied perception. The experience of flow in these instances is another area that needs follow up work, as the absorption of mouse, keyboard, and controller into our bodily perception is necessary for

our ability to enter flow states. Studying flow states in players might shed light on the manner in which game controllers are incorporated into players' sense of embodiment while playing.

Ultimately, my research on this subject has demonstrated a complex set of connections between ideology, sociality, and embodied practice within the community of *World of Warcraft* players. Blizzard's game design provides a field in which individuals can create and maintain relationships with each other in the context of the game world (with spillage outside of it as well). However, the guiding ideology of the developers necessitates progression within the game, which itself is dependent on embodied competence of play. Varying degrees of competence result in a push and pull dynamic between players, which directly affects the social bonds between them, which in some cases (as seen in AeF's history) lead to schisms as well as close associations between players. With no sign of WoW discontinuing in the near-term, and a new expansion on the horizon, it remains to be seen whether the tensions between developers and players will be resolved in the future.

Works Cited

Argyle, Katie, and Rob Shields. 1996. "Is There a Body on the Net?" *In* Cultures of Internet: Virtual Spaces, Real Histories, Living Bodies, edited by R. Shields, 58-69. London: Sage.

Behm-Morawitz, Elizabeth. 2013. "Mirrored Selves: The Influence of Self-Presence in a Virtual World on Health, Appearance, and Well-Being." Computers in Human Behavior 29: 119–128.

Bessiere, Katherine, A. Fleming Seay, and Sara Keisler. 2007. "The Ideal Elf: Identity Exploration in World of Warcraft." CyberPsychology & Behavior 10 (4): 530-535.

Black, Daniel. 2015. "Why Can I See My Avatar? Embodied Visual Engagement in the Third-Person Video Game." Games and Culture 12 (2): 179-199.

Blanchette, Jean-Francois. 2011. "A Natural History of Bits." *Journal of American Society for Information Science and Technology* 62 (2) 1042-1057.

Blizzard. 2018. "New Player's Guide." *World of Warcraft* website, August. Accessed June 2019. https://worldofwarcraft.com/en-us/game/new-players-guide/part-two

Blodgett, Bridget Marie, Heng Xu, and Eileen M. Trauth. 2007. "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) Issues in Virtual Worlds." The DATA BASE for Advances in Information Systems 38 (4): 97-99.

Boellstorff, Tom. 2008. Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Boellstorff, Tom. 2011. "Placing the Virtual Body: Avatar, Chora, Cypherg." *In* A Companion to the Anthropology of the Body and Embodiment, edited by F. Mascia-Lees, 504-520. Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1977. Outline of a Theory of Practice. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Burke, Timothy. 2002 "Rubicite Breastplate Priced to Move, Cheap: How Virtual Economies Become Real Simulations." Game Culture conference, University of West England, Bristol.

Calleja, Gordon. 2007. “Digital Game Involvement: A Conceptual Model.” Games and Culture 2 (3): 236-260.

Calleja, Gordon. 2011. In-Game: From Immersion to Incorporation. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Campbell, Benjamin C., and Justin R. Garcia. 2009. “Neuroanthropology: Evolution and Emotional Embodiment.” *Frontiers in Evolutionary Neuroscience* 1 (4): 1-6.

Castronova, Edward. 2005. Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online Games. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Crick, Timothy. 2011. “The Game Body: Toward a Phenomenology of Contemporary Video Gaming.” Games and Culture 6 (3): 259-359.

Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. 1990. Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience. New York: Harper and Row.

Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly, and Stith Bennet. 1971. “An Exploratory Model of Play.” American Anthropologist 73 (1): 45-58.

Csordas, Thomas J. 1990. "Embodiment As a Paradigm for Anthropology." Ethos 18 (1): 5-47.

Csordas, Thomas J. 2002. Body/Meaning/Healing. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Dale, Laura Kate. 2014. "How *World of Warcraft* Helped Me Come Out as Transgender." *The Guardian* website, January 23. Accessed November 3, 2016. https://www.theguardian.com/technology/gamesblog/2014/jan/23/how-world-of-warcraft-game-helped-me-come-out-transgender

Dibbell, Julian. 2006. Play Money: Or, How I Quit My Day Job and Made Millions Trading Virtual Loot. New York: Basic Books.

Ducheneaut, N., Yee, N., Nickell, E., and Moore, R. J. 2007. "The Life and Death of Online Gaming Communities: A Look at Guilds in World of Warcraft." CHI 2007 Proceedings 839–848.

Ducheneaut, Nicholas, Ming-Hui "Don" Wen, Nicholas Yee, and Greg Wadley. 2009. "Body and Mind: A Study of Avatar Personalization in Three Virtual Worlds." *CHI 2009*.

Entertainment Software Association. 2019. *Entertainment Software Association* website. Accessed October 26, 2019. https://www.theesa.com/esa-research/2019-essential-facts-about-the-computer-and-video-game-industry/

Gadgets 360. 2018. "World of Warcraft Subscription Numbers Reportedly Revealed." *Gadgets 360* website, October 16. Accessed February 22, 2019. https://gadgets.ndtv.com/games/news/world-of-warcraft-wow-subscription-numbers-battle-of-azeroth-1932930

Golub, Alex. 2010. "Being In the World (of Warcraft): Raiding, Realism, and Knowledge Production In a Massively Multiplayer Online Game." *Anthropological Quarterly* 83 (1): 17–46.

Goffman, Erving. 1959. The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life. New York: Anchor Books.

Griffiths, Mark D., Jon Arcelus, and Walter Pierre Bouman. 2016. "Video Gaming and Gender Dysphoria: Some Case Study Evidence." *Aloma* 34 (2): 59-66.

Huizinga, Johan. 1949. Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element In Culture. Boston: Routledge.

Kamalie. 2016. "Recent Actions Against Botting in WoW." *World of Warcraft* website, May 19. Accessed December 12, 2018. https://us.battle.net/forums/en/wow/topic/20744124429?page=2

Konietzko. 2016. "Recent Actions Against Botting in WoW." *World of Warcraft* website, May 19. Accessed December 12, 2018. https://us.battle.net/forums/en/wow/topic/20744124429?page=2

Langer, Jessica. 2008. "The Familiar and the Foreign: Playing (Post)Colonialism in *World of Warcraft*." *In* Digital Culture, Play, and Identity: A *World of Warcraft* Reader, edited by H. G. Corneliussen and J. W. Rettberg, 87-108. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Lee, Richard. 1969. "Eating Christmas in the Kalahari." *Natural History* 78 (December): 60-64.

Lehdonvirta, Vili. 2010. "Virtual Worlds Don't Exist: Questioning the Dichotomous Approach in MMO Studies." *International Journal of Computer Game Research* 10 (1): 1-16.

Levy, Pierre. 1999. Collective Intelligence: Mankind's Emerging World in Cyberspace. Cambridge: Helix Books.

Lstrea. 2016. "Recent Actions Against Botting in WoW." *World of Warcraft* website, May 19. Accessed December 12, 2018. https://us.battle.net/forums/en/wow/topic/20744124429

Malaby, Thomas M. 2006. "Parlaying Value: Capital In and Beyond Virtual Worlds." *Games and Culture* 1 (2): 141-162.

Malaby, Thomas M. 2007. "Beyond Play: A New Approach to Games." *Games and Culture* 2 (2): 95-113.

Malaby, Thomas M. 2009a. Making Virtual Worlds: Linden Labs and Second Life. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Malaby, Thomas M. 2009b. "Anthropology and Play: The Contours of Playful Experience." *New Literary History* 40 (1): 205-218.

Mauss, Marcel. 1973. "Techniques of the Body." *Economy and Society* 2: 70-88.

McCulloch, Warren. 1945. "A Heterarchy of Values Determined by the Topology of Neural Nets." *Bulletin of Mathematical Biophysics* 7:89-93.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1962. Phenomenology of Perception. London: Routledge.

Miller, Daniel and Jolynna Sinanan. 2017. Visualizing Facebook: A Comparative Perspective. London: UCL Press.

Nethaera. 2016. "Recent Actions Against Botting in WoW." *World of Warcraft* website, May 19. Accessed December 12, 2018. https://us.battle.net/forums/en/wow/topic/20744124429

Orwell, George. 1996. Animal Farm. Signet Classic.

Osborne, Heather. 2012. "Performing Self, Performing Character: Exploring Gender Performativity in Online Role-Playing Games." Transformative Works and Cultures 11. Accessed November 16, 2013. http://journal.transformativeworks.org/index.php/twc/article/view/411/343

Poor, Nicholas and Marko M. Skoric. 2014. "Death of a Guild, Birth of a Network: Online Community Ties Within and Beyond Code." Games and Culture 9 (3): 182-202.

Ryan, Jenny. 2012. "The Digital Graveyard: Online Social Networking Sites as Vehicles of Remembrance." *In* Human No More: Digital Subjectivities, Unhuman Subjects, and the End of Anthropology. Edited by N. Whitehead and M. Wesch. Boulder: University Press of Colorado.

Salen, Katie, and Eric Zimmerman. 2003. Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals. MIT Press: Cambridge.

Steinkuehler, Constance A. 2006a. "Massively Multiplayer Online Video Gaming as Participation in a Discourse." *Mind, Culture, and Activity* 13 (1): 38–52.

Steinkuehler, Constance A. 2006b. "The Mangle of Play." *Games and Culture* 1 (3): 199-213.

Sutton, David. 2014. Secrets From the Greek Kitchen: Cooking, Skill, and Everyday Life On an Aegean Island. Oakland: University of California Press.

Taylor, T.L. 2002. "Living Digitally: Embodiment in Virtual Worlds." *In* The Social Life of Avatars: Presence and Interaction in Shared Virtual Environments. Edited by R. Schroeder, pp. 40-62. London: Springer-Verlag.

Taylor, T.L. 2006. Play Between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Taylor, T.L. 2009. "The Assemblage of Play." *Games and Culture* 4 (4): 331-339.

Salisbury, John Hamon and Penda Tomlinson. 2016. "Reconciling Csikszentmihalyi's Broader Flow Theory: With Meaning and Value in Digital Games." *Transactions of the Digital Games Research Association*. 2 (2): 55-77.

Schieber, Jonathan. 2019. "Video Game Revenue Tops $43 Billion In 2018, an 18% Jump From 2017." Techcrunch website, January 22. Accessed January 24, 2019. https://techcrunch.com/2019/01/22/video-game-revenue-tops-43-billion-in-2018-an-18-jump-from-2017/

Turner, Terrence. 1994. "Bodies and Anti-Bodies: Flesh and Fetish in Contemporary Social Theory." *In* Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self, edited by T. Csordas, 27-47. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Turner, Terrence. 1995. "Social Body and Embodied Subject: The Production of Bodies, Actors, and Society Among the Kayapo." *Cultural Anthropology* 10 (2): 143-170.

Turner, Terrence. 2011. "The Body Beyond the Body: Social, Material and Spiritual Dimensions of Bodiliness." *In* A Companion to the Anthropology of the Body and Embodiment, edited by F. Mascia-Lees, 102-118. Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

Wacquant, Loic. 2004. Body and Soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Yee, Nick, Jason Ellis, and Nicolas Ducheneaut. 2009. “The Tyranny of Embodiment.” *Artifact* 2 (2): 88-93.

CHRISTOPHER J. COOLEY

EDUCATION

December 2019	Anthropology Program; University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee. Ph.D.
May 2003	Anthropology Program; University of Texas at San Antonio. M.A.
May 1996	Anthropology Program; University of Texas at Arlington. B.A.

EMPLOYMENT

2014-	Teaching, Learning, and Technology Senior Assistant, University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee.
Spring 2014	Lecturer, University of Wisconsin at Whitewater.
Spring 2013	Graduate Teaching Assistant, University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee.
Fall 2012	Ad-hoc Instructor, University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee.
Spring 2011	Research Associate, University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee.
Summer 2010	Research Associate, University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee.
2009-2012	Graduate Teaching Assistant, University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee.
2004-2008	Adjunct Instructor, Northwest Vista College, San Antonio, Texas.

AREAS OF INTEREST/SPECIALIZATION

Digital technology, sociality, embodiment, education; online virtual communities. Ethnographic media analysis, representation issues; American Southern Plains.

PUBLICATIONS

2011	Cooley, Christopher J., Thomas Malaby, and David Stack. How Are Students Actually Using IT?: An Ethnographic Study. ECARS Research Bulletin 17. Boulder, CO: EDUCAUSE Center for Applied Research.

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

2016	Identity, Sociality, and the "Magic Circle" in Online Gaming. American Anthropology Association Conference. Minneapolis, Minnesota.
2012	Using Anthropological Ethnographic Fieldwork Techniques to Ascertain How Students Use Information Technology Resources. Association of Institutional Researchers Conference. New Orleans, Louisiana.
2011	How Are Students Actually Using IT? WiscNet Conference. Madison, Wisconsin.
2011	How Are Students Actually Using IT? EDUCAUSE Regional Conference. Chicago, Illinois.

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

2011	Research associate, UWM Student IT Ethnographic Project. January to June.
2010	Research associate, UWM Student IT Ethnographic Project. May to September.
1999-2000	Database coder, Bruni Pastorelas Photo Project. December to February.
1998	Field researcher, Programme for Belize Regional Residential Survey; Northwest Belize. May through June.
1997	Lab assistant, UT San Antonio Field School, New Mexico. December.
1997	Lab assistant, UT San Antonio Field School; Wilson County; South Texas. September through December.

SCHOLASTIC HONORS

1998	Lambda Alpha National Honor Society for Anthropology

GRANTS AND SCHOLARSHIPS

2012 UWM Anthropology Student Union Travel Grant.

2001 UTSA Department of Anthropology Competitive Research Grant.
1999 UTSA Liberal Arts Small Research Grant.

SOCIETY MEMBERSHIPS

2017- Society for Applied Anthropology

2013- Association of Internet Researchers

2008- Society for Cultural Anthropology

2000- American Anthropological Association