PLAYING TOGETHER AND RITUALISATION IN ONLINE GAMES

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Abstract

There is a tradition in game studies of seeing games as 'more than games'. In the vein of this tradition, the social aspects, in general, and the practices of playing together, in particular, are increasingly conceived of as essential for games and the relationships of the players. However, there is currently no comprehensive description of them and their roles through an integrative framework.

This thesis investigated certain social aspects *in* and *around* online games, with a particular emphasis on the practices of playing together with fellow players, friends, family and romantic partners. To explain all these practices in an integrated fashion, an ethnographic study was conducted (using participant observation and 57 structured and semi-structured interviews) and the data were analysed mainly through a ritualisation framework. This framework was inspired by a multidisciplinary perspective on secular ritual in modern and post-modern societies. Notably, the concept of relationship rituals (coming from social psychology) was very useful. In the context of online games, ritual and ritualised play (but also ritualisation as a process) refer to practices through which the game is enriched with new meanings which go beyond its ludic instrumentality, that is, the game moves across the frame of being 'just a game'. These new meanings include those focusing on relationships, social interactions (including sociability, cooperation, conflict and competition) and identity.

The emerging practices of playing together belonging to two dimensions of ritualisation, mainstream and subversive ritualisation, and their functions were described and analysed in two online games, *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*) and *Star Kingdoms* (*SK*). On the mainstream dimension, two types of relationship rituals were identified and analysed in *WoW*, namely initiation rituals and playing together rituals. In addition, the quantitative results generated from the interviews with *WoW* players were similar to the ones from the literature and supported the qualitative analysis.

The current findings confirmed the ideas that most players play with close others and the social aspects of online games are essential for gameplay. Most importantly, the thesis described in detail and analysed the practices of playing together and their roles, showing that ritualisation provides a comprehensive framework able to address their diversity.

Subversive ritualisation was explored as well by looking at the emerging, subversive practices of playing together, taking the form of Underground Al-

liances in *SK* (which are player created social structures also called UAs, having a complex relationship with both official and player rules). These practices were found to be influenced by the way the game was designed to respond to the existing and developing relationships of the players. Moreover, this thesis identified and presented the functions of UAs.

To sum up, playing together is ritualised in and around online games, that is the games transform in veritable 'tools to relate with' and 'tools to build identity with'. These meanings focussing on relationship and identity support the idea that the social aspects in and around online games are essential for both the relationships/social interactions of their players and their gameplay.

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Dedication

To my husband, mother, sister, parents-in-law
and to my father

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Online games of the *Massively Multiplayer Online Games* (MMOGs) and *Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games* (MMORPGs) types (henceforth called simply 'online games') play an increasingly important role in contemporary society. MMOGs are a species of networked computer games generating a persistent world, which can be played by thousands of players over the internet. By definition, MMORPGs are a sub-category of MMOGs characterised by the fact that their universe is usually graphical and their players assume one or more characters (called *avatars*, which are their graphical representations in the game). The MMORPG players adventure in the persistent universe of the game, slaying monsters, fighting other players and collecting rewards.

The importance of online games is reflected in their increasing number of players, expanding diversity and the growing interest taken in them by game developers or owners, other media, educational and business-related organisations.

Online games manage to absorb a high number of players into their spectacular universes. For example, *World of Warcraft* (an MMORPG and one of the games included in this study) had more than 8 million gamers in January 2007 and showed a steady increase of its number of players. At the beginning of 2008, World of Warcraft reached 10 million subscribers (Blizzard Entertainment, 2008a) and, at the end of 2008, it reached 11.5 million players (Blizzard Entertainment, 2008b).

Popular online games are a profitable source of revenues for game developers or producers or even some players, while for most players they are mainly a source of entertainment. In addition, some online games are an important part of what is now called '*serious games*', that is games which are used for serious purposes. For example, education scholars found that online games are

valuable resources for teaching. Moreover, there is a growing trend of using online games as part of public relations campaigns to further the interests of companies or other organisations. For instance, several universities and companies bought land and established venues in *Second Life* (a world-like online game of a somewhat different type, called 'metaverse') to raise their profile.

One could argue that online games offer a fascinating and more controllable reality to their players. Nevertheless, online games are played in various ways, to different ends and produce multiple pleasures and effects. Many theoretical perspectives attempted to account for one aspect or another of online games. However, all the variation in the experiences that games engender makes their endeavours fragmented and unable to account for other aspects. Hence, a multifaceted but overarching approach (such as the current one) could bring some light on the interactions between these aspects. This thesis aims to explore various social aspects of online games from an interdisciplinary perspective, reuniting knowledge from game studies, anthropology, sociology, media studies, communication studies and social psychology. In particular, I am interested in playing together practices within online games and the social contexts of playing online games.

Before proceeding further, *play* and *game* need to be defined. *Playing* seems to be an inherent behaviour of both animals and humans whilst *games* appear to be a more sophisticated, complex and structured form of play (possibly exclusive to humans). This partition may be seen as corresponding to (but should not be confused with) the opposing poles of 'play' of Caillois (1958, 12-13) represented as a continuum: between *paidia* (characterised by an uncontrolled fantasy, exuberance, turbulence, free improvisation, carefree joy, etc.) and *ludus* (that requires a completely impractical growing effort, patience, mastery, skill, or inventiveness). However, games are composed of a mixture of elements belonging to *paidia* and *ludus*.

By mentioning rules and order, the definition of play offered by Huizinga (1949) is applicable rather to a more structured version of play, such as game. Both too restrictive and extensive in the opinion of Caillois (1958, 8-10), the definition of Huizinga (1949) allows an operationalisation of the game concept as "a free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'non serious', but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own boundaries of time and space according to

fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means" (Huizinga, 1949, 13).

While biologists think that play is a step in the development of some animal species, psychologists see play as having a biological and psychological function. At the same time, many game scholars believe, rightly, that games can be envisaged as cultural forms. By distinguishing play from game one can resolve these seemingly conflicting stances.

If one is to conceive games as cultural forms, she or he must realise that the socio-cultural contexts as well as technical matters (among other aspects) have transformed them across time and space and favoured one form over another. The online medium may have changed even the experience of playing games which apparently do not exhibit any modifications. For example, online chess is a type of online game which mimics traditional chess with the difference that the player can opt to play against the computer. This engenders a different kind of experience as opposed to competing against other players in face-to-face settings or in computer games (see the literature chapter for more details). Thus, online games may be seen as the organic result of the technological innovations and the adjustment of 'old' cultural products to the new environment (and the studies of the history of computer games attest this).

The studies presented in the literature on online games show that the social aspects of online games are increasingly seen as influencing the play experiences in a direct manner. The growing number of studies concerned with social aspects in online games tends to project an image of online games being not 'just games' within the discourse of academia, industry and players. However, the 'social' has multiple manifestations within and around online games and acquired various meanings according to the lenses through which it was studied.

1.1 Social aspects of online games

Understanding the many facets of the social aspects of online games and integrating this knowledge into the design of the game could possibly result in making or marketing better games. This may lead to more satisfied players or an increase in the number of players. Moreover, many of our daily out-of-game social interactions cannot be separated from the influence of online games even

in the case when one does not play or has no desire to play. Online games became a big part of the daily lives of many people (players and non-players alike) and their (social, cultural or economic) world cannot be cordoned off from the wider socio-cultural or economic world. For example, online games and offline settings intersect through undifferentiated advertising, the use of online games as educational tools (for example, within media studies or media anthropology) and the fact that the friends, partners or family may also play or wish to play these games. Therefore, it is crucial that a close investigation focuses on the social aspects of online games, along with an examination of the social dimension surrounding the play itself.

Another reason for selecting this particular medium is that online research is not only of relevance to those concerned with studying online communities or the social effects of the internet, but also to anthropology and social research in general. Due to the interconnectedness of the online and offline worlds, studying the phenomena taking place around newer media (including online games) such as playing together practices can provide at least a glimpse into human nature if not a comprehensive perspective upon it (Mann and Stewart, 2000). Thus, the research will address issues of a particular importance for game scholars, game developers or game owners and aim to answer persistent questions of interest to anthropologists, sociologists or other humanist scholars. For example, it may be difficult or uneconomical to observe issues such as ritual invention, ritual change or ritual abandonment in 'real life', but the online realms (including online games) with their less permanent, flexible communities may offer more opportunities as well as less expensive and more efficient means to study them.

Before talking about these social aspects, one has to understand why the thesis focuses on online games of the MMOG type. More precisely, how they are distinct from other types of game and what is their importance relative to other kinds of interactive entertainment. The literature suggests that their most prominent feature is their communities. Hence, one may say that the difference between online games and other stand alone forms of computer and video games can be seen in terms of the access of online games players to a shared universe of the game, allowing multiple layered interactions and the construction of communities of geographically distant players. Nevertheless, the players preserve a certain spatial and psychological proximity by joining and using in common the virtual space of the game and sharing a set of interests, knowledge, and practices (mainly game related but not necessarily). While

online games establish in-game, persistent online communities from thousands of players, stand alone computer and video games usually do not. The latter engender distinct types of communities, which are sustained by the game, but, generally, not through or in the game, and thereby may display other characteristics. The ability of online games to develop persistent online communities has drawn the attention of researchers, who studied ways in which community is constructed and performed in these settings. In the literature review, I will discuss in detail the notion of virtual community and how it has been adopted in the field of game studies.

Within the game studies field, an important aspect is *playing together practices.* This aspect is closely connected with online communities, it portrays the games as more than 'just games' and it was investigated extensively. Researchers were interested in *playing together practices*, that is, practices of playing the game together with strangers, acquaintances, (online and offline) friends, romantic partners and family members.

One aspect of playing together, which was explored previously, is the life of formal and more enduring player associations (Williams et al., 2006; Axelsson and Regan, 2002; Seay et al., 2004; Bainbridge, 2010). Most of these works concentrated on playing together practices from the perspective of group play within a formal context. Few studies, however, were concerned with investigating less durable and less formal player associations or social structures. One of the works concerned with studying less durable player associations showed that the instrumentality of the game played a smaller role in regulating the behaviours of the players than shared social practices (Chen, 2009).

The playing together practices were also analysed by using a concept of *sociability* (associations with the sole aim of talking for the sake of communication and conviviality, explained in more detail in the literature review) mostly centred on communication (Steinkuehler and Williams, 2006; Ducheneaut et al., 2007) and less on the actions of the players (one exception being, for example, Brown and Bell, 2006). This view forgets that, although online games may be and often are played as more than games, they are first and foremost games. Thus, they focus on actions (Manninen, 2003).

An exception to analysing games only through the lenses of communication practices can be illustrated by the research of Ducheneaut et al. (2006), who explored the actions of playing together in formal player associations. The results of the study of Ducheneaut et al. (2006) suggested that some online games have a design which supports a social gameplay (playing *surrounded* by

players), but not a sociable one (players do not *play with* other players). Similarly, studying solely players affiliated to guilds, Williams et al. (2006) found that those with pre-existing social bonds (family, friends and co-workers) were not prone to playing solo ('bowling alone'), even though, for most others, the social ties which form in the games are mild and resemble those from places such as bars. Returning to the study of Ducheneaut et al. (2006), since the authors investigated only formal player associations from the perspective of playing together (disregarding more casual associations), their results cannot be generalised so easily. Thus, to obtain a valid idea on playing together practices, the area of playing together practices must be widened and studies must include informal player associations as well. This is where qualitative studies are needed due to the fact that they can explore those practices described by players, without assuming them *a priori*.

Furthermore, Ducheneaut et al. (2006) suggested that the design of the game encourages players to belong to these so-called 'voluntary' associations by offering incentives for players to join and 'punishments' for those who play solo in terms of difficulty of advancement in the game. In this thesis, I will restrict my interest to the study of game-wide practices emerging more from the players and less from the features of the game. In this case, the findings of Ducheneaut et al. (2006) support my choice to omit formal player associations at this stage.

Even when 'action' was included in the notion of sociability (e.g., Ducheneaut et al., 2006), researchers limited their attention to cooperation and mostly disregarded formal, direct competition and contests as important actions within the games (Carr, 2009). Moreover, almost nothing is said about the informal, indirect competition with friends, partners, family or strangers. In this context, it is worthwhile noting that Weibel et al. (2008) found that players preferred to enter competitions with human players instead of computer controlled opponents and reported enhanced presence and gameplay in this case. This indicates that competition and organised conflict have a powerful social dimension which is currently under-explored and, due to its importance for gameplay, needs to be investigated further.

Another important social aspect, which has not been investigated in much detail, is the social context of playing online games. This is referred to in the literature mostly as playing together practices with close others, who are known offline. Research showed that there is a connection between being committed to long term player associations and playing more (Seay et al., 2004).

By extrapolating, this may suggest not only that playing together in formal associations, but also playing together in general or with close people in their lives may influence gameplay to a great degree. To support this, there is a wealth of studies (mostly from a quantitative and motivational perspective; see the literature review for more details) indicating that a considerable percentage of gamers play the game mainly for social motivations (Seay et al., 2004; Griffiths et al., 2004b). Some researchers even suggested that women play for social reasons to a greater degree than men, who are motivated by achievement (Williams et al., 2009). Other researchers, such as Yee (2006d), pointed out that this might be explained better by age than gender. Thus, in general, these studies indicate that the practices of playing together in online games are very important for the people engaged in them and for gameplay and, consequently, are worthy of investigation. However, as I argue below and in the literature review, such perspectives as the ones above reflect the current problems in conceptualising the social dimension of online games.

There is no consistent manner in which the 'social' dimension of games (which includes these practices) is defined and operationalised. Most often, 'social' is taken to mean connections formed online (and sometimes transferred offline), socialising (see the literature review) or social motivations. In addition, online games (and MUDs) are seen as places where real relationships are formed (Parks and Roberts, 1998). An example of practice which was not included in the social dimension is that of playing against other players (for instance, competing). This activity is wrongly seen as oriented toward achievement and not as being fundamentally social and, thus, belonging to playing together practices.

Furthermore, the investigation of online connections was approached, most of the time, quantitatively. Researchers were interested in establishing whether or not members of online communities had close others in the game by counting the number of these connections and finding whether the friendships formed online were considered as intimate as those in real life. Moreover, researchers wanted to find out whether online friendships were transferred to real life. Admittedly, there are studies indicating that cases of offline relationships performed and maintained through online interactions are common in online games (Yee, 2001, 2006a; Williams et al., 2006; Cole and Griffiths, 2007). However, few studies are concerned with offline relationships brought online (such as the ones above) and even fewer with an action-centred notion of sociability (with exceptions such as Brown and Bell, 2006; Ducheneaut et al., 2006;

Williams et al., 2006). Some only look at one particular aspect, focusing on the players in guilds (Ducheneaut et al., 2006; Williams et al., 2006), friendships (Brown and Bell, 2006), couples (Carr and Oliver, 2009; Ogletree and Drake, 2007) or do not analyse in great depth the practices of playing together (Williams et al., 2006; Cole and Griffiths, 2007). For instance, it is not clear to what degree the findings of Ducheneaut et al. (2006) or Williams et al. (2006) apply to players which are not in a guild or those of Brown and Bell (2006) to other relationships than the specific one described. Thus, in addition to studying the effect of online on offline life or the differences between the two settings, as Yee (2006a) proposes, it is also important to understand the reasons and means through which online games and offline settings work together in forming, performing and maintaining relationships in general.

The literature shows that playing together was not conceived of in its larger meaning. In this thesis, I extended the meaning of 'playing together' not only to 'cooperative play' or, necessarily, 'playing *with* or *around* other players', but also to participation in conversations on game-related topics and cases of formal and informal conflict (playing against other players in player versus player styles of play or having disputes) or to direct and indirect competition (instances where players wish to have more advanced characters or with better gear than their friends, family or partners).

With this new operationalisation of 'playing together', a more in-depth analysis, exploring the practices of playing together in a systematic and unified way, is necessary. Such an analysis would help provide a wider picture of these practices by also describing why and how these practices take place. It is here that this thesis can contribute significantly to the field of game studies, by providing this type of analysis. One model that can address this is the ritualisation framework. There are several ways in which rituals and ritualisation can be defined (see the literature review), but, in this thesis, I selected a definition (which also operationalises ritualisation) in which ritualisation is seen as both a process and framework. On the one hand, ritualisation is the process of creation, performance, change and extinctions of rituals and ritualised play. As an adjective, mainly used in the concept of 'ritualised play', ritualisation refers to play which has the form, characteristics and functions of (or may be viewed as) secular ritual or elements of ritual. On the other hand, as a framework, ritualisation is a theoretical model which can be applied in order to explain various social phenomena, including those taking place in and around online games. In the context of online games, the secular rituals are those acts (or

performances) the effects of which are produced through disproportionately diminished means and through which the game is inscribed in a 'more than just a game' frame. Via these rituals, the game moves beyond its sheer (ludic) instrumentality (when games are played as just games) and is enriched with new, ampler meanings, such as those of *relationship* and *identity*.

In particular, ritualisation may have two forms: mainstream ritualisation and subversive ritualisation.

1. The mainstream ritualisation refers to ritualised practices belonging to the mainstream styles of play (defined as the prescribed or most used styles of play). This type of ritualisation is centred on the creation, performance or expression and maintenance of relationships and includes initiation rituals and playing together rituals. Alternatively, another overlapping classification distinguishes within the sphere of mainstream ritualisation: *inner circle rituals* (which is play with family and romantic partners), *private circle rituals* (that designate play with friends from real life) and *extended circle rituals* (or play with friends or connections made online), all reunited under the banner of *close circle rituals*.

2. The subversive ritualisation is characterised by being in a constant tension with the mainstream ritualisation and is composed of ritual practices and groupings pointing to a style of play that is not mainstream (that is, it is not the prescribed or most used styles of play), for example, subversive practices and player associations.

1.2 Aim and objectives

This thesis aims to explore emergent playing together practices in online games, defined as play with strangers, friends, family and romantic partners.

The objective of the thesis is to describe, analyse and explain the playing together practices through the integrative framework of emergent ritualisation, where ritualisation is understood as the tendency to invent, perform, maintain and extinguish rituals. Moreover, ritual is used in its secular sense and as a syncretic metaphor for instances where games are played as more than games, and their mechanics and specific instrumentality are subordinated to a bigger meaning. Thus, in this ritual view, online games become 'tools to relate with'.

In particular, I am interested only in playing together practices which emerge mainly from players and less from the way the game was designed.

This general objective is divided into two specific objectives, namely:

1. To explore, identify and analyse some of the playing together practices and their functions from the perspective of mainstream ritualisation (see above). In the context of this work, mainstream ritualisation includes: initiation rituals and rituals of playing together (which are relationship rituals performed with strangers, friends, family and romantic partners).

2. To explore, identify and analyse some of the playing together practices and their functions from the perspective of subversive ritualisation (see above), where subversive ritualisation is defined as opposed to mainstream ritualisation and includes subversive practices and social structures.

These objectives were investigated in two online games of MMOG type, one - a graphical MMORPG (*World of Warcraft*, *WoW*) and the other - a text based MMOG (*Star Kingdoms*, *SK*).

1.3 Original contributions

This thesis follows in the steps of a rich tradition in game studies of conceiving of games as 'more than games', places where community is formed and expressed and where players establish, perform and maintain relationships. However, current research in the field lacks an integrative, systematic and exploratory approach to the practices of playing together.

This is exactly were my thesis comes to fill a gap in the current knowledge. In particular, I use the ritualisation framework to explore, identify and analyse playing together practices in online games and their functions for relationships and gameplay. The ritualisation framework allows the integration and explanation of phenomena previously regarded as separate or treated distinctively by various studies of online games (such as playing with strangers versus playing with close others; or playing *with* versus playing *against* other players). Hence, ritulization brings back into the social realm activities less explored by game scholars and even less in connection with playing together practices, such as competition and conflict, in their formal or less formal types.

Although some of the roles of playing together practices were mentioned by several studies, they were treated from an 'effects' perspective in the literature.

This previous perspective, which attempts mostly to see the effects of online relationships and interactions on offline ones and vice-versa, seems inappropriate because it implies an artificial separation between the two settings. This is because it frames either one aspect or the other (offline or online) as important. Moreover, the effects perspective does not explain how these roles are fulfilled, whereas the current ritualisation framework proposes credible ideas regarding the way in which playing together practices perform their functions.

Furthermore, this thesis combines an ethnographic approach, which explores what players say about their playing together practices (without pre-assumed ideas) and a quantitative approach which grounds the research and makes the comparison possible with other quantitative studies. As well, the qualitative approach of ethnography means that the focus was shifted from representativeness (which was the main concern of many quantitative studies) towards depth and context.

In addition to the novelty brought by applying this ritualisation framework to study playing together practices in online games, my thesis also will identify the following specific results:

1. First, using the ritualisation framework, I will identify and describe in depth two types of relationship rituals belonging to the mainstream dimension (called close *circle rituals*), namely initiation rituals and rituals of playing together, and their functions in *WoW*. Through rituals, the game stands for relationships and interactions (*the relationship and interaction creation, performance and maintenance function*), as it becomes a symbol and means to produce and express affection and closeness (*affective and supportive functions*). In addition, the game creates a shared universe of interests and hobbies, it provides an opportunity to spend time and do things together, including participating in (in)formal conflicts and competitions (*normative and subversive functions*). Moreover, the game generates topics of conversations and forms shared pasts, presents and futures (based on the concept of 'shared pasts' proposed by Katovich and Couch, 1992). These shared occasions are crucial for the relationship identity (*identity creation and maintenance function*) by engendering community and cohesion (*the community construction function*) through affinity, integration or separation and belonging (*belonging and integration functions*). Furthermore, via rituals, the game is or becomes context for social interactions, a source and metaphor for domesticity, togetherness and source and management of tensions (*trans-*

formative and restorative functions). All these meanings of the game centred on relationship and identity support the idea (which is also indicated by quantitative data in this thesis) that the social aspects of online games are essential for the relationships or social interactions of their players and a key element of the reasons to start, continue, re-start or stop playing the game.

2. Second, using the same framework of ritualisation, I will investigate its subversive dimension by examining emerging, subversive social structures called Underground Alliances (UAs) in *SK*. UAs are a form of player modifications in *SK* (along with player rules) and have a complex relation with the (official and player created) game rules. Thus, I will identify and describe the elements conducive to the creation, dissemination and maintenance of both the secret social structures and player rules in *SK*.

3. In addition, I will analyse some of the roles of subversive ritualisation in *SK* by describing various functions of UAs. Apart from a dysfunctional side (tied to a greater degree to the instrumental side of the game), UAs display the following functions (pointing more to the ritual dimension of the game): *the subversive function* (with an emphasis on less formal conflict and competition), *the relationship and interaction creation, performance and maintenance function, the community construction function* [three important aspects closely connected with this function have also been identified, namely *the social identity (re)production, cohesion and narratives*], *the immersion function, the role as resource for (social and cultural) gaming capital*.

4. Finally, the thesis supports the idea that ritualisation is not specific only to text-based worlds, being present in and around graphical environments as well. Thus, ritualisation does not appear to be the consequence of the medium, confirming the statement from the literature, that ritualisation is an essential phenomenon for culture and society encountered throughout human history (Bell, 1992).

1.4   Chapter overview

This thesis is structured as follows:

Chapter 2 reviews the research on social aspects of online games. The chapter identifies that playing together practices have a significant role in the

online and offline experiences. Nevertheless, a new framework is needed in order to investigate playing together in and around online games in an integrative fashion. This is where ritualisation framework is very useful, because it is able to provide an integrative analysis of playing together in online games and a general perspective on the interplay between in-game and out-of-game relationships.

Chapter 3 introduces the methods used in this thesis. This chapter reviews the ethnographic methodology and presents the two methods used in the thesis, namely: semi-structured interviews and participant observation. Furthermore, I also provide details on how these two methods were used. In particular, I describe how the interviewees were recruited and how the interviews were taken.

Chapter 4 describes the online games which represent the focus of this study. More specifically, the thesis considers two games, a graphical MMORPG (*World of Warcraft*) and a text based MMOG (*Star Kingdoms*). In addition, to provide my own perception of playing these games and mitigate the potential biases, I included a short auto-ethnography of each game.

Chapter 5 explores the dimension of mainstream ritualisation, by identifying and systematically analysing initiation and playing together rituals and their functions in *WoW*. The chapter shows that through these rituals established in and around the game, relationships are formed, expressed, performed and maintained. The fact that the game takes on new meanings focused on relationship and identity indicates that the social aspects of online games are important for the relationships or interactions of their players and gameplay.

Chapter 6 investigates the subversive dimension of ritualisation in online games by examining emerging, subversive social structures called Underground Alliances (UAs) and their functions in *SK*. In addition, the chapter identifies the elements that led to the creation, dissemination and maintenance of both the secret social structures and player rules in *SK*.

Chapter 7 summarises and critically analyses the results and indicates future research directions.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

This chapter starts by presenting a short history of computer games, focussing on MUDs and MMOGs and their sub-genre MMORPGs, followed by mentioning some of the earlier research interests in computer games.

The main focus of this thesis is the social dimension of online games and one important aspect of online environments (not necessary specific to games) is the communities they engender. Hence, this chapter continues with a discussion about online communities, without restricting the investigation to games. The discussion also reflects the general trend in the literature to see online games as places which form communities. Perhaps, these communities are less closely knit than traditional ones, as the literature suggests, but still meaningful and performing various functions for their members, reminiscent of what offline communities offer.

Next, the discussion shifts towards studies of online games, showing the interest which they generated from the academia across time and which has known a veritable resurgence in recent years. Furthermore, these studies are evidence of the breadth and extent of research concerned with these virtual realms and the variety of the approaches and academic fields through the lenses of which online games are investigated. These fields range from anthropology, psychology, literary and film studies, cultural studies, media and communication studies, sociology, game design and humanities to social computing. In particular, the chapter describes studies with an educational and cultural focus, motivational and demographic surveys, ethnographic studies, studies of gender and studies of sociability.

Finally, I offer a critical discussion of the literature and identify the areas where new contributions are essential. I identify that there is a need for a unified, integrative analysis of online games focusing on why and how gamers 'play

together' with friends, family and romantic partners and what are the roles that games have in forming, performing, maintaining and enhancing relationships. Ritualisation is one answer to these questions by providing a framework which reunites communicative, expressive, cognitive, affective and behavioural approaches to online games, players and their relationships and interactions.

The following section illustrates the creative tension and illusory dichotomy between culture and technology and offers definitions, a concise history of computer games, with a focus on online games, and of some of the early research interests in them.

2.1 Computer games: summary history and research interests in them

Computer, digital or video games is a generic name for a form of interactive entertainment which comprises a variety of genres and forms of interactivity ranging from arcade games to stand alone console and PC games and to online games. In spite of being separated facets of the phenomenon of interactive gaming, computer games were sometimes treated in a indistinct fashion regardless of their genre or technical specificity. Even some scholars, for example Kirkpatrick (2007, 75), advocate a comprehensive discipline, the aim of which would be to study all computer games.

Both visionary entrepreneurs and multinational corporations had a sense of the importance of play and games in everyday life. These pioneers took into consideration economic reasons such as the possibility of obtaining huge revenues from them, instead of rejecting game projects and deeming them childish ventures.

The history of the interactive entertainment shows the transformation undergone by each of its components and the technological deterministic, the social constructivist, and the economic logics behind the transition to each phase. The work of Kline et al. (2003) offers detailed historical references and the economic and socio-cultural background needed for a deep understanding of these transformations.

Interactive games emerged from the confluence of military and industrial research and the exercise of hackers' mastery in experimenting with programming to challenge the capabilities of computers or learn through a playful approach (Bell, 2001, 45; Kline et al., 2003, 24). Here, the term hacker is not used with its new pejorative connotation, associated with digital delinquency,

but with its old one, of a 'computer virtuoso' (Kline et al., 2003, 86). In a cyclical movement, hardware innovation also determined a similar move in computing, and the games were the first exploratory programs to test the limits and performances of the machines by changing and improving their format and content (Stone, 1995, 13-15; Bell, 2001, 45).

The arrival of the first computer game is placed by most researchers at the beginning of 1960s, when Steve Russell from MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) created the game *Spacewar* (Kline et al., 2003, 80). Some British researchers credit A. S. Douglas, who was doing his doctoral studies at Cambridge, with the appearance of the first computer game (Buckingham, 2006, 3). The ancestor of *SimCity*, a computer model of a social system named *Simsoc*, was launched in 1967 and tested in the classrooms by real individuals. Similar games were created by MIT researchers: *The Game of Life* (a simulation game of evolutionary theory), *Lunar Landing* (a reminder of the origins of computer games in space programs) and *Hammurabi* (where players could demonstrate their administrative skills by ruling an ancient kingdom) (Kline et al., 2003, 89-90). In the 1970s, the success of the Role Play Games was transplanted in the virtual realms of university computers by their programmed successor *Adventure* (Kline et al., 2003, 89-90).

The first multiple-player game is thought to have been designed by Rick Blomme, who in 1969 created a two-player version of the game *Spacewar*, using as a game platform the system PLATO (Programmed Logic for Automatic Teaching Operations), introduced in 1961 at Illinois University (Mulligan and Patrovsky, 2003, 438). The timid beginning of the world-wide commercialisation of interactive games was made by Nolan Bushnell's 1970 version of *Spacewar*, named *Computer Space*, which was the first coin-operated arcade video game. Despite the failure of *Computer Space* to appeal to players, Bushnell's company Atari, founded in 1972 and a legend in the interactive gaming industry, created the successful arcade game *Pong* (Kline et al., 2003, 24,90). The computer games' 'invasion' of amusement arcades is seen as an attempt to clear the reputation of this place, giving it the look of a space for family entertainment (Bell, 2001, 45). Instead, the ill-famed arcades altered the reputation of already tainted computer games even more (with their military origin implying violence), creating the 'video games culture', a term used by Haddon (1993, 123-47) to designate a special type of sociality among youth, soon associated with addictiveness, delinquent behaviour and an unusual perception of violent acts as not deviant (Bell, 2001, 45-46).

Following the phase of the history of computer games known as the migration in arcades, interactive games made their entrance into living rooms first on the consoles (game-dedicated mini-computers) as video games, and then on PCs as computer games, as the latter became less expensive, improved their graphics and sound quality and were connected in the emerging computer networks (Kline et al., 2003, 90-94).

2.1.1 MMOGs and MUDs

An ongoing success story in the interactive gaming industry, both in terms of returns and popularity, is the one about Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs), with their 'sub-genre' Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs). MMOGs are rooted in the text-based internet games called Multi-User Domains, Multi-User Dungeons or Multi-User Dimensions (MUDs), which also owe important elements to the subculture of tabletop role playing games as *Dungeons and Dragons* (Turkle, 1995, 180-181; Taylor, 2006b, 21-28; Kline et al., 2003, 159-163; Griffiths et al., 2003). The free circulation of computer games between academia and hackers coexisted with highly popular commercialised forms of entertainment - boardgames replicas of large-scale social experiments, as *Blacks and Whites*, *Diplomacy* and *Risk*. Among these games, *Dungeons and Dragons*, which witnessed a wide success since its publication in 1972, marked the appearance of a new form of entertainment: Role Play Games (RPG).

Because of their parsimonious text display, MUDs are deemed obsolete by some as compared to their graphically advanced siblings, MMOGs. Derived from the desire of the players to interact with other players not just within planned tournaments of First Person Shooters (FPS) or Stand Alone games, MMOGs came along. They are the result of a technological merge between Stand Alone games, network connected FPS games and MUDs in the context of the FPS' growing popularity and the sense of business manifested by some companies (Kogutt et al., 2001). The first MUD was created in 1979 by Roy Trubshaw and Richard Bartle (Bartle, 1999), and was an adventure MUD with a persistent world, allowing multiple users to log on at the same time.

While both MUDs and MMOGs create persistent worlds (players access a shared universe of the game in real time and the continuous existence of this universe does not depend on the players' choice to move in and out of the game), the main difference between them is the realistic and dynamic rendering of the virtual realms offered by the graphical user interface (GUI)

of MMOGs. Another element that differentiates MMOGs from other types of networked games is the number of players sustained by the game. Being a low-budget, hobby enterprise, traditionally, a MUD has a limited number of players. MMOGs admit a few thousands of simultaneous players (Seay et al., 2004; Oliveira and Henderson, 2003).

Turkle (1995, 181) offers a concise definition for MUDs, which are seen as 'a text-based, social virtual reality'. Given MUDs' vital importance in the history of MMOGs, it is worthwhile giving a more detailed definition of this genre: MUDs are games consisting in text-based virtual worlds located on a host computer which allows the access of players to them and participation through a character that they set up (Taylor, 2006b). Turkle (1995, 181-182) observed two main types of MUD, adventure and social MUDs, unified by the pleasure one finds developing and acting out her or his character(s) and interacting with other characters. Adventure MUDs create a game world where the players are immersed in a fantasy setting (often medieval), seeking to advance in the hierarchy of the game by finding treasures and killing monsters. Social MUDs focus on either interacting with other players, either building the virtual world by populating it with artefacts (objects or architectural landscape). Whereas, in some MUDs, the action of building is limited to a privileged class of players, in others, such as MOOs (object-oriented MUDs), all players are encouraged to create artefacts in the game.

According to Yee (2006d), *Ultima Online*, launched in 1997, is generally known to be the first MMORPG which allowed thousands of users to be logged on at the same time. This was a notable departure from earlier MUDs, which had far fewer capabilities in terms of numbers of players supported simultaneously. The same source mentions that *EverQuest*, launched in 1999, was the second MMORPG. It attracted 400, 000 players and, from 2004 to 2006, *EverQuest* was the most popular MMORPG in North America, although having at least ten other MMORPGs competitors on the market (Yee, 2006d).

Not only that MMOGs (and MMORPGs in particular) had a world-like appearance and feel, but they soon began to form communities with specific norms, traditions, vernaculars and culture. The new trend in the online gaming industry and academia is to focus on that virtual 'worldness', which became the characteristic of MMOGs, and also marked the shift from the perception of online games as mere playgrounds to the one which envisages them as rich social environments, where one can find a wide range of interactions between players, types of players, possible activities and experiences (Taylor, 2006b,

24). This shift began with the MUDs and was made evident by the early interests in and research efforts concerning MUDs and other graphical universes, such as the ones of the following scholars: Reid, 1996); Turkle (1995); Curtis (1996); Cherny (1999); Dibbell (1998); Schaap (2002); Jakobsson (2002); Mortensen (2003). These studies will be presented in more detail below.

This discussion reflects the general trend in the literature to see online games as places which engender communities. Next, I will present the current debates about community in general, followed by a review of the literature on online communities and, in particular, communities in online games.

2.2   The study of online communities

Before studying communities in MMOGs, researchers had to conceive of online settings as places where communities could form. Hine (2000, 14-27) describes extensively how, first, researchers thought of the interactions and communications on the internet as considerably different from those in face-to-face settings. Then, researchers moved to the study of internet as 'a culture in its own right, and as a cultural artefact'. As a result, internet is now seen as engendering communities, thus becoming a rich source of potential field sites for ethnography. The early studies of computer-mediated communication (CMC), mostly conducted from a social psychological perspective, proposed the 'reduced social cues' model (for more details, see Hine, 2000, 14-27). This model argues that computer text-based communication conveys little social context information (as gender, age, social status, race, physical appearance, facial expression, and pitch), leading to a decrease in inhibition and, thus, increasing equal participation. However, researchers like Lea et al. (1992) argued that the 'reduced social cues' model of CMC did not capture the phenomena taking place in online settings accurately. As doubts regarding the validity of the 'reduced social cues' model were raised, a new model of CMC as a rich environment fostering social relationships took shape. This acted as an impulse for the idea of internet emerging communities, which henceforth began to thrive. The enthusiasm of MUDs developers like Curtis (1996) and Bruckman (1992), who identified social structures in these online games, and of researchers as Rheingold (1993), who depicted the WELL (Whole Earth Lectronic Link) virtual community in terms of a dense network of social relationships, spurred a new focus for internet research: the online communities.

Nowadays, 'community' has become a concept which lost some of its tradi-

tional dimensions (which places an emphasis on the shared place where community is enacted and on the shared ethnicity, language and history of that community), while refining others which capture more of its essence (as we shall see below). Globalisation, encouraged by innovation, technology and electronic media, worked upon both the broadening and the transformation of communication and community. Perhaps the shared etymology of communication and community is the testimony of an intimate relation between the two. Both communication and community assume a shared component (which can be material or nonmaterial).

The very notion of community is challenged when one crosses the borders of virtual realms. If community was regarded in the past as intrinsically bound with territoriality, embodiment, and permanence, it no longer bears the seal of these traits. Rheingold's (1993) definition of virtual community witnesses this conceptual shift, by putting the stress on communication, feelings, and relationships, rather than on shared language, physical space, history or ethnicity:

> Virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace (Rheingold, 1993).

To understand what 'virtual community' is, a definition of the term 'virtual' is useful as well. Many definitions were ascribed to 'virtual' or 'virtuality', but perhaps the most concise and straightforward is the definition offered by Bartle (2003). Bartle (2003, 1) defined 'virtual' as 'that which isn't [imaginary] having the form or effect of that which is [real].'

The emergence of virtual communities is considered to be the result of an almost organic need to belong (Rheingold, 1993, 6; Stone, 1992, 111). Inspired by Haraway (1987, 1989), Stone (1992, 112) expands the metaphor of the cyborg to individuals who join cyberspace (see the definition below) and, implicitly, to virtual communities themselves: 'the participants in the electronic virtual communities of the cyberspace live in the borderlands of both physical and virtual culture'. Coined by the science fiction writer William Gibson (1984, 4), cyberspace is a 'new universe, a parallel universe created and sustained by the world's computers and communication lines' (Benedikt, 1992, 1) or, as Stone (1995, 36) defines it, a space of 'prosthetic communication' and complex humans-machines interactions. Moreover, Stone (1992, 111) articulates the idea that, 'historically, body, technology, and community constitute each other', which implies artificiality at the heart of all communities.

Furthermore, in his definition of virtual community, Lévy (2001, 108) emphasises the collective and collaborative dimension of a community rather than its spatiality: 'A virtual community is constructed from related interests and knowledge, shared projects, a process of cooperation and exchange, independent of geographic proximity or institutional affiliations'. Another one of his set of definitions attempts to unveil the mist around the word 'virtual' by stating that a virtual community is not 'unreal, imaginary, or illusory' (Lévy, 2001, 110).

Other views, such as the ones of Stone (1992, 104) or Rheingold (1993, 53-54), do not fully reject the idea of associating spatiality with the notion of virtual community. Rheingold (1993, 53-54) argues that 'in virtual communities, the sense of the place requires an individual act of imagination'. Thus, there is not really an opposition between the strong sense of space shared by traditional communities and that of virtual ones. In both cases it involves a mental model of space, even though in traditional communities this model is sustained physically by the locality where the interactions take place.

Rheingold (1993) found inspiration in Anderson's (1983) concept of 'imagined communities'. Originally, the concept of 'imagined communities' was applied to the process of nation-building. Nations, as well as communities, are mental and ideological constructs of citizens. The real existence of nations is conditioned and maintained by the citizens' acceptance of and belief in this common mental model and through shared practices, the so-called 'invented traditions' (including rituals and customs). This type of community is built on the basis of a shared identity which is also constructed by resorting to a shared symbolic apparatus. Also drawing on Anderson's (1983) view, Bell (2001, 95) suggests that these shared cultural practices (which do not necessarily take place face-to-face) characterise all communities, including virtual ones. Thus, face-to-face interactions do not define 'community'. For Bell (2001, 96), the notion of imagined community brings the idea of malleability and freedom to re-conceptualise and re-create community, and the internet is a site which encourages imagination.

Observing the nostalgia which so often overshadows the academic discourse about community (mostly referring to a romantic version of community thought to be on the verge of dying but still living in the collective imagery), Bell (2001, 94-95) recalls Tönnies' (1887) distinction between 'traditional' *Gemeinschaft*-type communities (rural, natural and under threat from urbanisation) and *Gesellschaft*-type communities (urban and artificial, closer

to the meaning of 'association' and 'society'). Bell (2001) urges for a search of the contemporary meanings of community in a time marked by profound social, cultural, economic, and political changes, which are leading less to the 'decay' of traditional community and more to its 'transformation'. Rheingold (2000: 54) also observed a transition toward a new concept of community on the internet, a move from community to society.

A way of comprehending the notion of 'community' could be the one that may be used when thinking about artistic styles, such as Classicism, Romanticism, Baroque. Elements of all styles coexisted over time, but one particular context favoured one to the detriment of the others. Communities possessed and continue to possess elements of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* (Redfield, 1960, 113–131), one type prevailing over other under certain conditions. However, what changes is our old understanding of 'community'.

Three connected phenomena, deemed representative for postmodern societies, are responsible, in Bell's (2001, 95-97) opinion, for the shift in contemporary perceptions of community: *detraditionalisation*, *disembedding* and *globalisation*. The role of the internet and its influence upon these phenomena is likewise underlined. *Detraditionalization* represents the departure from tradition and the embarking on the 'post-traditional' society, and is thought to be engendered by reflexivity and *disembeddedness*. Furthermore, *disembedding* is a consequence of innovations in the fields of transport and communication, which modified the way one conceives and experiences time, place and other related categories by 'unpacking' the time-space continuum. Finally, *globalisation* could be defined as: 'the sum of a series of processes that have forged a sense of increasing connectedness between people and spaces dispersed around the world' (Bell, 2001, 95). Ideally, globalisation erases distances and differences, creating the possibility of a global community, a 'global village', as McLuhan (1962, 69-70) calls it. The global village would be built through retribalization, the quest for unity of thought and feelings fostered by the 'electric age'. The internet facilitates this quest, up to a point, and takes the notion of global community or communities a few steps closer to its implementation.

In order to understand the complex web of factors concurring to the development of new communities on the internet it is useful to examine closely Bauman's (1998, 45-48) work on globalisation. In his essay, Bauman (1998, 45-48) evoked the work of Richard Sennett, deemed the first analyst of the modern city, to support the idea that the postmodern city is increasingly crashing the agora, the public sphere of debate and the place where all the social interac-

tions used to be developed and maintained. With all its aseptic spaces, this new city rejects and escapes from the unbearable presence of The Other, represented by people around us who become the 'enemy' within. Otherness is therefore isolated in and through space rather than confronted, while locality flourishes.

As a counterbalance to this architectural trend that weighs on the postmodern human being, causing individualist consequences and latent conflicts just waiting to surface, there is the idea that the internet might be the new agora. While many researchers embraced this idea, other researchers pointed gloomily to the 'digital divide', which means that access to the internet is plagued by economic, cultural and social inequalities. The digital divide is a gap in access to the internet or, increasingly, in the quality and sophistication of use (Livingstone, 2003; Park, 2009).

In an electronic discussion group, 'The WELL', Barry Kort (cited in Turkle, 1995, 249), one of developers of a MUD for children, shares the idea that computer networks are 'the modern Agora, serving a role similar to talk radio and tabloid journalism, but with more participation, less sensationalism and more thinking between remarks'. Similarly, Lévy (2001, 109) concludes that virtual communities are more than just places for anonymity-fuelled irresponsible behaviour and that they represent new forms of public opinion. The philosopher hints at events in the history of electronic media with an equal power to express and transform public opinion, for example, the invention and popularisation of radio and television, and wonders if this phenomenon should be deemed characteristic to certain environments when the obvious historical answer is a definite no. As Turkle (1995, 241,250) noticed, cyberspace provides a sphere where individuals can find and exercise their political voice or their civic call, even in game fictions like *Habitat*.

Scholars like Rheingold (1993, xxix-xxx) are reserved in supporting the image of a revived agora, maintaining rightfully that the same tool which promotes democracy can be distorted to serve tyranny. Other researchers think that the new type of agora formed on the internet allows a more active participation by the individuals who 'inhabit' this place in the sense that notions as *ownership* and *authorship* are now questioned in new ways. The mass audience changed from passive atomised spectators toward active communities (for instance, the communities of soap opera fans on the internet). For an example, see Jenkins' (1992) study, who presented a case of fans decentralising and re-centralising media texts from the official websites by using hypertext.

Aside from discussion boards and text-based MUDs, communities can be formed in other online settings, such as online games of the MMOG type. Much of the academic interest in online games seems to be engendered by their ability to develop and maintain both in-game and out-of-game online and offline communities in contrast to other forms of interactive gaming which only create out-of-game online or offline communities. Nevertheless, the in-game and out-of-game communities are regarded by researchers as connected in defining the universe of the game (Taylor, 2006b, 57).

It can be claimed, successfully, that online games, with their world-like appearance, for which they are also called 'virtual worlds', and their associated virtual communities (Taylor, 2006b, 28) are the perfect venues for the formation of a new type of citizenship and the dissemination of a specific form of public opinion.

Bartle (2003, 1) defined 'virtual worlds' as 'places where the imaginary meets the real'. Virtual worlds are shared and persistent environments, simulated by a computer (or network of computers), generally supporting thousands (or more) players who simultaneously interact with each other or with the environment. Based on the type of experience they offer (game-like or world-like), they can be divided into two categories, namely the Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs), such as *Ultima Online*, *EverQuest*, *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*), *RuneScape* or *Guilds Wars*, and the more world-like universes known as metaverses, such as *SecondLife* or the now defunct *EA-Land* (the re-branded version of *The Sims Online*).

From early times, researchers thought that the communities engendered around these virtual worlds were worthy objects of study (for example, Turkle, 1995). A more recent example is the ethnography conducted by Taylor (2006b, 160) on the MMOG *EverQuest*, which revealed that MMOGs are acting as 'a form of public space', 'spaces of social life' and 'sites of cultural production'. The dynamics of MMOGs, nevertheless, make it difficult to draw a distinction between player as citizen, player as consumer, and even player as employee, where sometimes the consumer is also the co-developer of the commodities consumed. However, Taylor (2006b, 140) warns that the 'community' around a game such as *EverQuest* is not a coherent whole and that it is made up of players with different interests and activities.

Some online settings (including online games) have many of the characteristics of the traditional public sphere in that they provide a place where people gather, form associations and perform various commercial, civic, social

and religious activities. Nevertheless, online games are not entirely conceived of as places of public debate and not always featured adequate for a serious polemic. What constitutes the paradox of this new forum is that while a decline has been observed in the citizens' involvement in real life public debates, many virtual citizens actively participate in the virtual community's politics (for example, in the political life of an online game like *Star Kingdoms*). This new expression of democracy may be seen as escapism, that is, a refusal of the members of some virtual communities to face real, daily problems or a coping mechanism by which problems are deferred until a solution is found. However, such views paint a stereotypical picture of online settings. To obtain a more faithful picture of online settings, we should ask ourselves to what extent the notion of real community changed to a mediated one or, better put, to what extent feelings and needs which, in traditional communities, were usually derived from or responded to by means of face-to-face interactions are now engendered or answered via these virtual settings (among other means). Since these real life and online communities respond to different needs and interests, one should ask how these communities manage to motivate and stimulate the involvement of their citizens in politics.

'Otherness' (defined as experiencing the other or interacting with the other) plays a key role in identity formation and maintenance (including community identity and cohesion). Nowadays, 'otherness' is often sought via the internet (among other settings), with people avidly seeking to meet and talk with others. It seems that individuals search for otherness even within them, when they take up multiple characters, with different personalities and stories, in an attempt to uncover their multiple selves. This causes a blow to the orthodox notion of identity, which proposes a centred, unitary version of self (for more details, see Turkle, 1995, 241). Once again we are reminded by Turkle (1995) that the inhabitants of the virtual communities live their lives at the confluence of many blurry frontiers, the boundary between the real and the virtual worlds being just one of them. As Doug, one of the mudders interviewed by Turkle (1995, 13), puts it: 'RL is just one more window...and it's not usually my best one'. Real and virtual intermingle to the extent that it becomes a matter of everyday competence to juggle them in a complex web of realities. In the light of this permanent instability, all kinds of identities are invented (Turkle, 1995, 10), both individual or community identities.

Turkle (1995, 49) speaks about an identity crisis in the virtual domain: 'In simulation, identity can be fluid and multiple, a signifier no longer clearly

points to a thing that is signified, and understanding is less likely to proceed through analysis than by navigation through virtual space'. A similar position is adopted by Stone (1995, 36), who characterises the identities engaged in cyberspace as 'fragmented' and 'complex'. Moreover, the identity of a virtual community, that is what distinguishes one virtual community from other communities, may be seen as fragmented and complex. Granted the circumstances of a permissive and permeable medium and the interconnectedness of online and offline realms, individuals belong not just to one community, but to multiple communities (real and virtual), each of them reflecting different needs.

Alienation is one problematic characteristic of the relationships between individuals and others. Alienation is believed to mark the withdrawal from traditional communities and, paradoxically, the same phenomenon is responsible for the search of a certain type of sociality (maybe not so different from the traditional one) on the internet. Among other social, economic, and political factors, Turkle (1995, 240-241) suggests that the lack of safety which some players experience in their present locality, coming from a tense relationship with the Other (materialised in alienation), may be the origin of this urge to join distant and secure communities.

Although the availability of online communities (rather than their safeness) may be the origin of their popularity, this is not always the case. A case where increased availability practically 'condemned to death' an online community was the one of *CommuniTree 1*, an early, text-based, online discussion group (Stone, 1995, 99-121).

Above, I presented some studies discussing online communities, in a somewhat self-contained manner. However, any discussion about online community cannot be entirely separated from studies of online games (or from studies of other forms of computer game). This is due to the fact that the players of online games (and other types of games) have been shown to form online communities. Hence, next, I will give an overview of the literature on online games and mention some of the relevant studies of other types of computer game.

2.3 Studies of computer games and online games

Although game studies draw on a wide array of methods, there are three major theoretical directions in which most of the research on online games can be inscribed: one which searches the appeal of the games in their form, one

based on the idea that the attractiveness of games can be captured through the close study of their content, and one which assumes that by focussing on the players (their motivations, identity or their social interactions) one can understand the gaming phenomenon. Nevertheless, form, content, players, developers, industry and other media mutually inform each other when it comes to the popularity of online games (or other games, for that matter) and it is difficult to clearly draw a sharp line between them. This is also visible in the fact that some studies attempted to reconcile these perspectives by following more than one theoretical direction. Within these large paradigms, the studies may be grouped in various sub-categories (most of which are not mutually exclusive and are presented to provide a broad and comprehensive overview of the field): studies with an educational and cultural focus (including those who question or advance the idea of games as forms of art), motivational and demographic surveys, ethnographic studies, studies of gender, game design studies and studies of sociability and 'playing together' practices.

When game studies were still in their infancy, scholars worked hard to prove that computer and digital games were not childish or unworthy of being an object of study because of their purported trivial content (more details on this aspect can be found in Carr et al., 2006, 2-3). Then, computer or digital games started to be acclaimed for their educational merits or further applications.

2.3.1 Studies with an educational and cultural focus

One approach belongs to education studies which focus on computer games as successful tools in the learning process (Carr et al., 2006, 2-3), with researchers such as Inkpen et al. (1995), Amory et al. (1999), Higgins (2000), Gee (2003), Squire (2004) and Lauwaert et al. (2007) following this path [an extensive literature review on educational games can be found in Wideman et al. (2007)]. For example, Squire (2004) shows that concepts and understandings ranging from world history, geography and politics can be learned through simulation games such as *Civilization III*. In addition, in a study conducted by Amory et al. (1999), elements such as logic, memory, visualisation and problem solving were considered essential aspects of games. In this study, a group of 20 students preferred adventure and strategy games over 'shoot-em-up' games. Since adventure games are already characterised by these elements (which are also required during the learning process), Amory et al. (1999) suggested that by studying and understanding these game elements, new educational games may be developed which (apart from knowledge discovery) could also teach visual-

isation and problem solving skills. Furthermore, Higgins (2000) describes how game elements could be employed for developing problem solving skills. Nevertheless, Higgins (2000) underlines that ICT tools, including games, should be complemented by other types of learning to obtain the desired effects.

Critics condemn computer games for being a waste of time and an expression of popular culture in dramatic contrast to high culture, or for their symbolic content, heavily saturated with sex, violence, and antisocial behaviour (Carr et al., 2006, 2-3). Gradually, the educational approaches began to fend off computer games from their critics and insist on more rigorous investigations of the possible negative effects which computer games might have on players.

Another group of researchers, including Jenkins (2005), dismissed the validity of critiques and brought computer games into the field of aesthetics. For these researchers, computer games are a postmodern form of popular art, the aesthetic qualities of which are not essentially different from the ones of a traditional work of art (Carr et al., 2006, 2-3). Poole (2000) acknowledges the 'potential' of videogames to metamorphose into a form of art, the truly aesthetic experiences of the players and the amount of creativity and thought invested in them. Nevertheless, he is still reluctant to deem them a 'tenth art'. The stance resonates with Kirkpatrick's (2007, 75) suggestion that a computer game is an interstitial form situated between traditional games and artwork. These researchers consider aesthetic experiences as the source of the player's drive to play the game. Similarly, Poole (2000) analysed the aesthetic experiences of Japanese players of online games enticed by a cartoon-like graphical presentation of avatars (the characteristics of which were megalocephaly and a certain 'cuteness'). His study provides a clear example of how form determines the desire to play a game. Avatars are 'digital messengers or graphical embodiments of persons' (Garau, 2006). From the perspective of literary studies (and sometimes even in cultural studies), games can be seen as texts or narratives. Games are seen as such due to the fact that they engender aesthetic experiences close to what one might obtain from reading a book, for instance (and many players I interviewed made this comparison). For example, Atkins (2003, 5) promotes a way of thinking about computer games as 'an independent form of fictional expression'. What is usually removed from the 'games as texts' metaphor is the 'passivity' suggested by terms such as 'readers' or 'audiences', for other types of text (passivity reminiscent of the way audiences were portrayed in media and communication research in the past). To mark the departure from this passivity, players have been re-conceptualised as 'interactive

audiences' (Jenkins, 2003), who do not only consume, but also re-appropriate, create and re-create content.

2.3.2 Studies of gender

Computer games, in general, and online games, in particular, have also been studied with a focus on gender. Overall, there are three directions of interest for the study of gender in computer games: (*i*) gendered preferences concerning computer games and how to design games to respond to these aspects better (Cassell and Jenkins, 1998; Kafai et al., 2008; Fullerton et al., 2008; Cherney and London, 2006; Yee, 2006b; Kafai et al., 2009; Jenson et al., 2007), (*ii*) general demographics of players and (*iii*) 'gender swapping' practices and their role in the construction of the identity of players.

An area of interest in computer games studies is concerned with obtaining demographic data on MMORPGs players (Griffiths et al., 2003, 2004a,b; Yee, 2006a), confirming, among other aspects, that the majority of players are male players.

Furthermore, gender can be an important aspect, among many others, in constructing identity. It also structures human interactions, and online realms (for example online games such as MUDs or MMORPGs) are places where this is particularly noticed and reflected upon (Bruckman, 1993). For these reasons, gender and 'gender swapping' practices benefited from special attention when discussing identity in online settings. 'Gender swapping', 'gender bending' or 'cross-gendered play' refers to choosing to play a character of a different gender than the offline one. Some popular media, such as television, often portrays gender swapping practices as deviant and primarily sexual in nature, thus constructing the 'otherness' of the players and encouraging prejudices towards them (MacCallum-Stewart, 2008). These practices may be seen as taking place and are sometimes discussed in the context of an increasingly challenged idea of a unitary self and sexuality. This challenge to the centrality of the self happens, perhaps, in the light of post-modernist thought (for an in-depth discussion see Turkle, 1995), although other social influences may be at work here. For some researchers, online games of the MMORPG type, such as *WoW*, offer players the possibility of exploring different identities through their feature which allows the players to select more than one character with which to play (not simultaneously) and choose their gender (Chappell et al., 2006).

Among the studies which approached 'gender swapping' one should men-

tion Griffiths et al. (2003, 2004a,b) and Yee (2006a). Although these studies provide credible hypotheses for why players swap gender and why there is a perceived gender and age difference (with female and younger players being less likely to swap gender), they do not focus on the reasons offered by the players. Hussain and Griffiths' (2008) study attempts to address this issue by investigating the reasons for gender swapping. Experimentation with identity [not distinct from what happens in MUDs, as described by Turkle (1995)] seems to be one of the reasons for which players choose to swap gender. Since 'gender swapping' is regarded by players as the norm in MMORPGs (Griffiths et al., 2004b), MacCallum-Stewart's (2008) study, which also includes the motivations of the players for choosing not to engage in gender swapping, represents a fresh and welcome approach to the study of the motivations of the players for this practice. This study focusses on one game, *World of Warcraft*, thus taking into consideration the characteristics of this particular game when discussing gender swapping. With few exceptions (see MacCallum-Stewart, 2008), choosing gender in online games becomes similar to choosing race or class and it is in fact a normative activity and not a subversive one, as usually suggested. MacCallum-Stewart's (2008) study also shows that, for the *WoW* players (female and male players alike), aesthetics, and in this case visual aesthetics, are an important factor in selecting one's gender (a fact also noticed in my interviews).

Gender swapping practices are important, in the context of my work, due to the fact that most of the studies suggest that online games provide multiple and variate pleasures and functions, which sometimes go beyond mechanical and instrumental views on online games.

2.3.3 Studies of the social aspects of online games and practices of 'playing together'

There is an extensive literature investigating the social aspects of online games, approaching the topic from a variety of perspectives, both with respect to the methods used and the meanings of 'social' in and around online games. Some of the studies investigating social aspects of online games are quantitative, mainly conducted through surveys, but some are ethnographic in approach. Next I will present: (*i*) *studies of the motivations, gratifications and preferences of the players*; (*ii*) *studies focusing on the social life of player associations*; (*iii*) *ethnographic studies focusing on MUDs, CMC environments and MMOGs*; (*iv*) *studies aiming to explore sociability* and (*v*) *social contexts of online gaming.*

Studies of motivations, gratifications and preferences

The *studies of motivations, gratifications and preferences* of players are mainly quantitative, but some are complemented by qualitative data as well. These types of studies are mostly conducted by psychologists. Cyberpsychology (or the branch of psychology which studies phenomena which revolve around the cyberspace) places the players at the centre of the analysis of online games. Most of the motivational approaches attempt to elucidate the motivations of the players independently of game elements or other factors (such as how the game responds to these motivations and support them, for example). However, there are some researchers who suggested that future research will take into account the role of the game genres for players' motivations and addictiveness (Wan and Chiou, 2006). The objectives of psychology is to identify and quantify the motivations of the players as well as to establish correlations between these motivations and usage patterns or other in-game behaviours (see Yee, 2006b). These studies can inform game design professionals and community managers, thus possibly leading to the adaptation of the games to respond better to the needs and motivations of the players. However, they can only account for a player-oriented fragmented perspective. There is an interplay between the player motivations, actual gratifications, behaviours of and interactions between players, the design of the game (with its three components: form, content, and the ideal types of player), the public image and prestige of the developer, game industry and gaming culture trends. All these interactions are mostly ignored by motivational approaches.

Online games achieve much more than responding to players' motivations; they have created some of these motivations and modelled them across the history of computer games. Moreover, the motivational approach focuses only on what players assert they want or need from a game (manifest desires or needs), or what players say they get from a game (conscious gratifications) reunited under the banner of motivations. It is not really clear to what extent the manifest desires or needs meet the conscious gratifications of the players, that is to what degree what players say they want or need from a game is what players admit they obtain by playing the game. The lessons of anthropology taught us that it is important to elicit and understand not only what players reveal of their game experiences to the researcher and to themselves, but also what they consciously or unconsciously hide from both the researcher and themselves. In practice, this it is extremely difficult to achieve as anthropologists study thoughts by looking at observable behaviours (which are

more or less the expression of thoughts). Thus, one way to do this is through careful observation and analysis of emergent patterns of behaviour. Another way is to ask the interviewees to reflect on their answers through follow-up questions. However, it seems to be even more difficult to reach the tacit or hidden knowledge of the interviewees through quantitative approaches. For example, it is not clear how (consciously or unconsciously) omitted desires, needs, or gratifications find their way out and can be retrieved in the study of motivations when such studies are conducted mainly through questionnaires with forced-choice answers.

The dangers of overlapping categorisation and quantification in motivational approaches may be exemplified by the results presented by Seay et al. (2004). Studying the communities of online players, they inquired about gamers' motivations for playing an MMOG and the main reasons for maintaining an on-going subscription to their most played game. Thirty-nine percent of the players revealed that the main motivation for playing MMOGs was the social experience. When asked about the chief reasons for maintaining a continuous subscription to their favourite game, 29 percent of the players indicated fun, 21% — character growth, 15% — social contacts, 10% — addiction, 9% — other reasons, 9% — relaxation, and 7% — participation in the game's world. Although these percentages may offer invaluable data for constructing an image of why MMOGs are so popular, they should not be considered in isolation. The problem with these measurements is the fact that the categories they refer to are not as separated as they seem to be at first glance. For instance, fun may emerge from character growth, social contact, social experience or from the participation in the game's world; 'addiction' may be a term that players employ for their need of communication and social contacts (see, for example, Curtis, 1996) or from character's growth.

Another example is the study of Griffiths et al. (2004b), which revealed that 35% of the players reported social reasons for playing *Everquest*, a known MMOG. Two of the least favourite features of playing *Everquest* were the immaturity (almost 19%) and selfishness (15%) of other players, which point as well to the social dimension of the game. These figures demonstrate that the social aspects which characterise online games have an important role in gameplay (although it is not the only aspect which can account for it). However, I suspect that these figures are higher, since there is always the issue of what exactly is 'social' in online games. Complex techno-social aspects such as group play in raids and dungeons (where the design of the game plays an

important role, but so do the players) are sometimes assigned to the game mechanics in some studies to the detriment of the social dimension. Thus, more qualitative explorations of how players conceive of these issues, taking into consideration the context of play, are needed.

The studies mentioned above explored motivation as a stand alone element, but other studies investigated whether there is a relation between motivational factors and gender. They found that female players scored higher on the social dimension, and male players on achievement (Williams et al., 2009; Yee, 2006d). According to Yee (2006d, 187–207) male players scored higher than female players on achievement and manipulation (players who enjoyed this latter factor liked to deceive, scam, taunt and dominate other players, objectifying them), while female players scored significantly higher on relationship, immersion and escapism: 'In other words, male users are more likely to engage in these environments to achieve objective goals, whereas female users are more likely to engage in MMORPGs to form relationships and become immersed in a fantasy environment.' Williams et al. (2009, 700–725) observed no difference between genders on the immersion dimension. This might be explained by the fact that, in comparison with Yee (2006d) who used databases catering for more games in his study, Williams et al. (2009) investigated a specific game, *EverQuest II*, which provided a universe where both women and men could immerse themselves.

Yee (2006b, 774) claims that age rather than gender explains the variation in the achievement dimension better and that 'male players socialise just as much as female players, but are looking for very different things in those relationships'. Perhaps, what (Yee, 2006b) refers to is the fact that there are social aspects pursued by male players which were subsumed in the achievement category under the 'competing with other players' sub-category.

The social dimension should not be reduced to an ideal place, infused with collaboration and peaceful behaviour in MMOGs or elsewhere in society. MMOGs are also places of conflict (Carr, 2009) and competition. Conflict and competition have fundamental roles in society. Max Gluckman and other anthropologists belonging to the Manchester School of thought, such as Victor Turner, held similar views on conflict or competition. For example, in his study of South-Eastern African tribes, Gluckman (1954, 3) talked about what he called 'rituals of rebellion', during which some social groups were expected and allowed to rebel against their rulers. In Gluckman's (1954, 3) opinion, these rituals of rebellion encourage 'instituted protest' against a specific dis-

tribution of power as a way to preserve the *status quo* of the social system in which these rituals take place. In an essay on carnival in Rio, (and elsewhere in his work, for example, Turner, 1969, 95–96), Turner (1983, 103–124) presented his view on the dialectic and dynamic nature of social structure, which moves from structure, which is its regular, recognisable form, to antistructure, during events such as carnivals, Olimpic Games, parades or even protests, and returns to 'transformed structure'. The transformation usually consolidates the *status quo* of the social system. Along these lines, Marvin and Ingle (1999) argued that violent blood sacrifices lead to the coherence of persistent groups such as nations. The results of an agent based social simulation of Casilli and Tubaro (2011) might be indicative that small amounts of civil unrest are essential for the correct functioning of the society. Casilli and Tubaro (2011) showed how attempting to suppress violent behaviour by censorship in times of civil unrest may lead to the opposite result of intensifying the violence. Returning to MMOGs, I suggest that they provide a safe environment to experiment with forms of competition and conflict which, although they are part of stereotypical views of gender (mainly attributed to masculinity), are usually prohibited or hardly accessible in real life. The 'duels' from the games are more or less reminiscent of the medieval duels or even contemporary brawls. Offline, direct and active involvement in competition is still available, via sports for example. Nevertheless, being engaged in a sport is not always possible due to a lack of talent, money, dedicated space, time or people with whom to compete, and MMOGs solve most of these problems.

Moreover, Weibel et al. (2008) showed that gamers who played against a human-controlled opponent reported more experiences of presence, flow (in this context, defined as an optimal experience when playing) and enjoyment than those who played against a computer-controlled character. This indicates that the social aspects of competition are important for players. The authors identified the strongest effect as being the experience of presence, but emphasised that they found strong relations between presence, flow and enjoyment.

In conclusion, the motivational approaches offer an idea of who is the typical player and free the academic discourse of the stereotypes usually circulating in the media. They are also important because they start to define a picture of games as more than games.

Online games are places where many players form relationships as close or similar to those in real life. Thus, because many relationships are not only formed online but also brought online from real life, these studies only set

the foundation for more detailed studies of the social interactions taking place within and around online games.

Studies focusing on the social life of player associations

While formal, voluntary and long-term groups in MMOGs have been considered the driving force of online games and worthy object of study, online games are not the only virtual settings which foster the formation of groups. Earlier, researchers focused on the internet as providing places for individuals to join groups and meet people with shared interests, hobbies, goals, etc. For example, McKenna and Bargh (1998) researched the internet newsgroups dedicated to concealable stigmatised identities. These groups are characterised by a relative anonymity, thereby providing individuals with concealable marginalised identities with an opportunity to belong (otherwise difficult to obtain). However, these internet groups generally function like other traditional social groups do and the participation within them has consequences for their members which extend to real life. For example, it led to a higher degree of accepting oneself and disclosing a secret identity to family and friends. Thus, membership in these groups effects important transformations on identity. According to the results of McKenna and Bargh's (1998) study, members of newsgroups for individuals with stigmatised-concealable identities (sexual and ideological) participated more actively in the newsgroups' discussions and modified their behaviour based on positive or negative reactions of other members in the group. This was not the case for members of stigmatised-conspicuous or mainstream newsgroups.

Another study of McKenna and Green (2002) analysed the similarities and differences which internet groups share with face-to-face groups. The authors note that, as in the case of traditional groups, an active participation of members of virtual groups is instrumental in establishing whether these members will gain personal and social benefits from the group. Among these social benefits, individuals may broaden their interpersonal relations and even transfer relationships and identities from online in real life. The internet may provide for people who are lonely and socially anxious a secure, less threatening place for meeting people and forming close relationships. Moreover, they argued that, whether one talks about offline or online settings, the persistence of groups is predicated on the group's success in responding to the needs and motivations of its members.

Now, returning to online games, one can notice that there are several play-

ing styles in these games (and players usually use a combination of these): solo play, where the gamers play mostly alone, and play in formal and informal player associations, where the players group together with other players, formally or informally, to tackle challenges in the game. Formal *player associations* are usually of two types: long term and short term associations. Long term player organisations from MMORPGs are commonly known as 'guilds' (but there are also other terms used for these social structures, such as 'allegiances' in *Asheron's Call*). A guild is a voluntary, relatively persistent and formal grouping, available by game design but established by players, via which gamers can play together and enjoy various benefits in the game. Short term, formal player associations (such as a party, in *WoW*) are voluntary, less persistent, but formal groupings, available by game design and initiated by players, through which gamers play together and enjoy some advantages in the game. Aside from these formal associations, some players group together informally, that is through none of the official types of associations available by game design.

In a study of *WoW*, restricted to players who were in a guild, Williams et al. (2006) found that slightly more than half the number of players in their sample were in this type of organisation, with small variations across the three types of server. Of the players who were in a guild, the majority of 60% belonged to a social guild and 35% to a raiding guild. No interviewee considered their guild to be a dedicated *PvP (player versus player)* guild (which is a guild that focuses on a style of play which entails fighting characters controlled by other players) and role-playing was considered as a meta-level for all other types of guilds (definitions of the notions of *server*, *raiding* and *role-play* can be found in the chapter which offers descriptions of the games studied). However, the authors note that these types of guilds do not exclude one another. Some of the social guilds (and this is especially true for small guilds) were extensions of real world relationships and they consisted of friends and families playing together as a guild or a group within a medium-sized guild. Moreover, Williams et al. (2006) states that while for many interviewees (in pick-up groups or guilds) guilds brought practical benefits, the social benefits could not be denied. Most importantly, for many, the game was a tool to maintain relationships with family, co-workers or friends (a third played with real life friends), especially for those located in different geographical regions. It would be interesting to find out whether these findings apply to players who are not in a guild. A more in-depth analysis, presenting why and how these phenomena appear, would be

welcome.

Researchers were also interested in the effects of belonging to formal player associations. For example, Axelsson and Regan's (2002) study investigated the influence of group affiliation in the MMORPG *Asheron's Call* on the online and offline social interactions of players. They found that players who were members of more groups interacted with players (adventuring and chatting) from the game, both online and offline, to a higher degree than players with no group affiliation. As far as the social behaviour offline was concerned, players who were members of two groups had more social contact with other players than all other fellow players.

Another example of research on the effects of group play (but, in this case, on gameplay), is the study conducted by Seay et al. (2004), in which 1836 respondents, aged between 12 and 68 and with 90% of the sample being males, participated in an online survey. Most responses were from *Everquest* players, followed by *Dark Age of Camelot* players and *Anarchy Online* players. Seay et al. (2004) showed that players who are committed to their guilds play more than those who are not, but warned that it was hard to determine the causal ordering of these factors even if the relationship between them was strong and predictable (because those playing more hours had more chances to be in guilds).

The issue of player associations in games is complicated further by the fact that although these groups are free to access, in the sense that players are not 'forced' to join these structures, the design of most MMOGs (including *WoW*) restricts the freedom of the players in such ways that if the players want to advance in the game and get access to the higher content they have no choice but to join guilds. This idea is supported as well by Ducheneaut et al. (2006), who identified two mechanisms in *WoW* by which the game encourages grouping, namely the complementarity of classes (types of characters specialised only in certain game actions) and the fact that some tasks which bring the best rewards (dungeons and raids) are too difficult to be approached alone. The authors reach to the following conclusion: 'Guilds are sparsely knit networks [. . .] as guilds grow, it becomes more difficult to know and play with most of the members'. Ducheneaut et al. (2006) argued that this can be explained by the levelling system in *WoW*, which makes grouping with players of 5 or more levels difference difficult, as visiting dangerous locations causes lower level players to die quickly and visiting lower level locations does not bring any experience points for higher level players. Thus, yet another game feature, the

levelling system (which also seems to generate social pressure within the guild to play as much as the most committed members) acts against guilds becoming more cohesive. However, in *WoW*, there are some classes which can be played solo and, surprisingly, those are the most popular. The authors also show that characters who never join a formal group (guild or party) are twice as efficient in levelling than those characters who do join. However, the authors indicate that large guilds are still beneficial in the sense that the bigger the guild, the greater the chance that their members have formed a stable core group available for playing together and tacking dungeons and raids.

Even if guilds appear not to be optimal for instrumental play, another reason for which people still join guilds is that there are different kinds of guilds (ranging from mostly instrumental to family-like guilds), which respond to different needs and objectives of their members. When guilds do not respond to the personal needs and objectives of their members, problems within the group appear, and it is not uncommon for them to be resolved by guild dissolution or by individual players leaving the guild (for an example, see Bainbridge, 2010, 131-3).

Beside guild-play being the prescribed way of playing, the fact that people still join guilds may also be explained by higher emotional and cognitive costs of having to deal with knowledge acquisition and the difficulty of carrying out tasks alone. Guild members can be a valuable and rich source of compiled and verified information, which would be difficult and expensive to gather otherwise (due to the massive amounts of useful, unrelated and redundant information). For example, Bainbridge (2010, 91) presented how players use the diffuse knowledge pool on the general chat (drawing on the knowledge of fellow players) for finding locations in the game world or use websites for step-by-step guides on how to kill monsters. However, for more a detailed knowledge on how the economy of the game works and how to make the most of the profession of herbalism, the master of the guild was the most useful.

Nevertheless, the guilds have not been the only focus of researchers. The less formal groups that formed in online games have been seen as places for communication, coordination and camaraderie as well. In his ethnography-based research of these practices in *World of Warcraft*, Chen (2009) discovered that social norms and responsibilities (engendered by social contexts, including the ones developed in games) manage to support and discourage certain player behaviours better than the motivations tied to the mechanics of the game. A special kind of trust was born among the members of a raid group,

based on the premise that its members were in it to play together and for the sense of fellowship and fun rather than for individual motivations having to do with collecting rewards. The social norm of camaraderie and their coordinated communication practices enforced this trust and made the existence of a group like this outside official incentives such as guild affiliation possible. One method used by the raid group to foster trust was to select members only from players already having friendly relationships with existing members of the group. Another method was for the group to negotiate collaboratively its goals and present them openly on the in-game chat and on the Web forums and then consider how the group's behaviour respected these aims.

The ethnographic tradition focusing on MUDs, CMC environments and MMOGs

A more nuanced approach to the social aspects of gameplay is offered by the ethnographic tradition, ranging from studies of MUDs and other CMC environments to MMOGs. Ethnographic studies are concerned, among other things, with eliciting and identifying the underlying assumptions of the studied populations regarding the boundaries of the field (for example, what is viewed as a game and what is not), instead of assuming definitions *a priori*. Some internet researchers, many of whom are ethnographers, feel very strongly that a comprehensive study of a particular online setting includes the study of all accessible communities, activities and materials related to that setting or topic of interest (Taylor, 2006b, 57; Hine, 2000, 27). Similarly, I contend that an online game and, by extrapolation, gameplay, extends beyond what is traditionally viewed as the game's boundaries, to include activities such as creating fanfiction, being involved in fandom activities (such as participating in real life meetings and events), maintaining web sites, blogs or pages dedicated to the game on social networks, searching the web for strategies, cheats or add-ons ('helpers' for the in-game tasks), creating and playing MODs (modified versions of the game), as well as using instant messaging or voice over IP applications for game related ends. In addition, talking about and making plans about the game and gameplay with friends, co-workers or family members outside the game itself can be included as well. Some of these extensions of gameplay outside the game can be affected by the game design (for example providing a built-in voice application), but others simply emerge from the needs of the players and are an important part of the playing experience. Nevertheless, it may be difficult to study all these activities and settings dedicated

to a specific game only through participant observation.

Many of the ethnographic studies of MMOGs were concerned with studying the communities which developed within and around them, and some were already presented in the section about online communities. Here, I will describe the studies of other computer games with which MMOGs share a historic bond, namely the MUDs and other virtual environments (technically speaking still MUD-style games, but with more graphical elements). As Mortensen (2006) noticed in the case of *WoW* (but with a valid point for other MMOGs), the textual MUDs and the MMORPGs are historically and formally connected: they cater for much of the same niche of players and have many features in common, such as the game structure and story, character development, questing, types of characters, options of gameplay and social interaction.

In her study of MUDs, Reid, 1996) investigated the variate social and cultural interactions within these spaces. The author suggested that MUD users are forced to dismantle and reflect upon many underlying assumptions, understandings and socio-cultural constructs at work in more traditional social settings. The reduced presence or lack of physical cues (their presence was very useful for constructing meaning), led users of MUDs to replace or circumvent them by finding ways of transforming non-verbal communication into a textual one (often by exaggerating their character descriptions). What Curtis (1996) described as a case of wish-fulfilment in the exaggerated character descriptions, Reid (1996) saw as a consequence of the limited capacity of a one-channel medium to provide as many social cues as necessary. Reid (1996) suggested that the reasons for such exaggerations, called 'virtual cosmetic surgeries', may be 'dramaturgical' or egoistical. Hyperbolic and theatrical effects have been observed not only in self-presentations, but also presentations of events or actions in *SK* (Ghergu, 2007) and they might be a relic from the time of MUDs. Since players are able to reinvent themselves at any given moment by selecting a different gender and physical features for every additional character that they choose, the physical traits and gender can be conceived of as fluid. Due to this fluidity, aspects such as body and sexuality can engender a host of new issues in MUDs, e.g. what Reid (1996) terms 'the erosion of gender'. In addition, Reid states that the MUD users developed new systems of meaning and new cultural expectations, but also new methods and structures of social control, thus adapting to the medium and becoming a distinct cultural group.

From the perspective of the developer and administrator of a MUD (but with an ethnographic approach), Curtis (1996) explored the behaviour of play-

ers and groups of players in *LambdaMOO*, an object-oriented MUD with no other goal than socialising. Although Curtis (1996) considered that MUD communities have a weak continuity, he reached the conclusion that MUDs became home to true community in time, with players sharing a common specialised language, standards of appropriate behaviour or misbehaviour or a common understanding of the roles assigned to various areas (what spaces are public or private and to what social purposes areas should or should not be used). The MUD acts as a place for social gatherings (with players enjoying chatting with or meeting new people) and displays many of the social interactions and mechanisms of the social settings in real life. Sometimes, however, the players' behaviour and the strategies involved in their interactions are totally different from the real life ones, and this can be attributed to the features of the medium. For example, in the case of conversational rules, players took advantage of the '@who' command (which listed all the players connected) to see if and where their friends were. Using the same command they could also spot which places hosted the most players (these were considered the 'hot' places to be, where interesting conversations took place).

Another specific mechanism was the 'gagging' tool (usually considered rude), by which each player could mute the communications of a set of other players. Among the social activities available in MUDs, Curtis (1996) mentioned various games and puzzles, such as machine-mediated Scrabble, Monopoly, Chess and games more difficult to organise outside a virtual world, such as 'food fights'. For example, he described a game of Frisbee where players competed with each other over their descriptions of the tricks they 'did'. These social activities are similar with those of *SK* players in their various mini-games (the 3 word story, see the *SK* game description) and social gathering places (the existence of a Flaming Bar-Inn) (Ghergu, 2007). In addition, Curtis (1996) stated that the game rules concerning the game etiquette were the result of a societal consensus. However, from his example, rather the demand for the existence of such rules was the result of some consensus not the rules themselves. He noted that there were MUDs where the only rule was that there was no social contract. Interestingly, his suggestion that, despite the popularity of this 'anarchy', it will gradually disappear is challenged, to some degree, by what I found in *SK*: a balance between official, 'almost' anarchy and self-regulation (see the chapter on subversive ritualisation).

Another way to investigate community is from the perspective of communication practices. Cherny (1999) analysed the speech community formed by

the players of a social MUD. The members of the community described share a specific use of language tailored to the communication situation called 'register' (comprised of a specialised vocabulary, certain abbreviations, specific repair strategies, meaning-making practices, turn-takings and routines) and a history with their members or other online communities. Through this register, users managed to go beyond the limitations of text-based communication and even create and master communication competencies specific to the medium.

Anthropologist Schaap (2002) conducted ethnographic fieldwork within a role-playing MUD with the aim to describe how the socio-cultural constructs of gender and identity shape the interactions and social life in MUDs. The book described how players take different approaches to construct and present believable male or female characters and identified 'cross-gender' practices. In the context of this thesis, the most important aspect raised in Schaap's (2002, 2) study is that it was not only the interesting environment which the MUD provided that made the game fun for its players, but the fact that the game was focused on the social relations and interactions between players/characters. There is a striking similarity between the earlier MUDs and MMOGs in this respect, even if in the latter the social interaction is not a goal in itself officially. Most of the current MMOGs have a sensory-rich environment both visually and aurally, but developers and the players continue to pay considerable attention to the existing and developing social relations and social interactions within the games, which weave unique communities. In today's fast-paced technological world, it is the social realm of the online games (including in the case of the games investigated in this thesis) which makes the difference between various virtual environments.

Finally, another important aspect of communities in online games, which was studied through ethnography, is the hierarchical structure within the game. Informed by participant observation, Jakobsson's (2002) study recounts how a bot (an automated program acting as a character) has been 'killed' and parts of a virtual world named the Palace (a sort of graphical MUD) have been erased or defaced. Following these actions, Jakobsson sets out to discover who were the persons responsible for them and offers milder punishments than he originally considered for the culprits (Bart and his younger sister) by understanding that he did not take into account the role of social status in the virtual world. On this story Jakobsson based his ideas that offline settings and online ones do not differ too much in terms of persistence of identity and tendency to form hierarchical social structures governed by the laws of social status, for

instance, 'god' (as Jakobsson calls himself, as the supreme administrator of the game), the 'wizards' (administrative helpers with 'god'-like powers) and the common players. In addition, Jakobsson (2002) describes how players made a creative use of their name tags to show that players, once they get accustomed to a virtual world, discover and use its unique features to enrich their interactions in ways unintended by the developers. He rightly points out that these interactions are dynamic and they cannot be identified *a priori.* This is where his analysis can serve as a starting point for the discussion about the creative actions undertaken by players (in the chapter Subversive ritualisation). Like Schaap (2002, 2), who stressed the reality of the interactions in these virtual worlds even when they are role-played via the characters, Jakobsson (2002) emphasises on the reality of the intellectual, behavioural and emotional experiences within these environments. Thus, both authors dismiss the 'just a game' framing of those who argue that the interactions and relationships formed online are not real and this paves the way to understand online games from the perspective of ritualisation.

Studies aiming to explore sociability

Many of the above mentioned studies of MUDs conceive them as places where the main activity is meeting players to chat for the sake of chatting. Thus, sometimes without overtly declaring it, one of their goals was a study of sociability in these settings. As a recognition of the fact that historically and formally MMOGs are based on MUDs, one can observe a continuation of this line of research through studies aiming to explore another aspect of the social spectrum, *sociability in MMOGs.* Moreover, some of these studies are interested in the way that space structures the social interactions in online games. Inspired by works such as the discussion of 'sociability' of Simmel (1949) or the analysis of 'third places' of Oldenburg (1999) (for definitions of notions such as 'sociability' and 'third places', see below), some authors (Steinkuehler and Williams, 2006; Brown and Bell, 2006; Ducheneaut et al., 2007) used these notions to approach the social aspects of MMOGs.

In an essay on 'pure' sociability, Simmel (1949) defines 'sociability' as an ideal, democratic play-form of association, providing equal joy to its members and which people join for the 'togetherness' and conviviality it offers.

Tightly knotted with the notion of sociability, the 'third places' of Oldenburg (1999, ix) are "those happy gathering places that a community may contain, those 'homes away from home' where unrelated people relate", such

as the skating rink, the Italian *taberna*, the British pub or the beer joint of the middle-class American. These places, where people congregate without any other purpose than enjoying each other's company, serve functions vital for the informal public life of the community and the society as a whole, being "the people's own remedy for stress, loneliness, and alienation" Oldenburg (1999, 20). MMOGs and their social spaces possess more or less of the characteristics of 'third places'. Oldenburg (1999) describes 'third places' as being: (*i*) hassle-free, neutral grounds where people have the freedom to come and go, without feeling obligation to stay or invasion of their intimate space; (*ii*) spaces where the rank and status from the world outside do not count for being accepted as participant; (*iii*) spaces where conversation, valued for its playfulness and wit, is the main activity; (*iv*) places which are accessible and accommodating for their visitors; (*v*) and which are frequented by regulars who attract newcomers and make up the specific atmosphere of the place; (*vi*) spaces with a low profile, homely and lacking sophistication; (*vii*) where the mood is playful, frivolous, filled with word play and sparkled with wit and, most importantly, (*viii*) homes away from home, generating feelings of warmth, 'rootedness', possession and regeneration.

Informed by these concepts, Steinkuehler and Williams (2006) explored two MMOGs (*Lineage I* and *II* and *Asheron's Call I* and *II*) and showed how these environments have a potential to function as a new type of 'third places' (Oldenburg, 1999) for informal sociability. In particular, although these environments are capable of engendering close relationships and strong social bonds, weak ties and relationships (also known as 'bridging social capital') are usually formed within MMOGs. By contrast, 'bonding social capital', represented by close relationships and stronger ties, is said to be rarely encountered in MMOGs. Earlier research by Wellman et al. (1996) showed that the social networks enabled through computer-mediated communication engender and sustain strong, medium and weak ties, thus fostering virtual communities. These ties are useful sources of information and support in different kinds of relationship. Moreover, Constant et al. (1996) found that the weak ties relationships established through electronic means were valid and useful sources of information for remote individuals who were looking for information and had no prior connection with the people who helped.

Returning to MMOGs, Steinkuehler and Williams (2006) suggested that although these weak ties are not a source of deep socio-emotional benefits (such as support), they perform, nevertheless, an important role: that of familiarising

the individual with different, numerous perspectives upon the world. Genuine concerns expressed by players about the safety or well-being of fellow players in MMOGs were not uncommon and these environments sometimes had the 'home-like' feature of third places (with players providing support, which generated a sense of homely warmth). The authors stress, however, that the playful nature of MMOGs generally wards off the possibility of any seriousness or grave real life issues being brought into the game. Players usually spin these stories into humorous or light-hearted conversations before they even begin to affect the general playful mood (except during guild dissolutions or large scale raids, which are marked as separated events as if through a magic circle).

Another approach is to consider certain spaces within online games (and not the whole game) as 'third places', designed for and supporting sociability. In their study of social spaces in *Star Wars Galaxies (SWG)*, Ducheneaut et al. (2007) analysed the interactions in two *SWG* 'cantinas'. While these places were conceived of as social places by their designers, they did not support sociability too well since their designed instrumental purpose engendered a conflict with sociability. On the one hand, 'cantinas' are instrumental places, failing to retain visitors (coming across as too neutral), who come there less to interact and more for specific, game-related purposes (healing battle fatigue, getting mind buffs, 'grinding' experience points or advertising). Thus, the 'cantinas' do not efface the roles of the visitors, as 'third places' are supposed to do. The few regulars who visit the 'cantinas' repeatedly are believed to be there to acquire in-game points and not to socialise with other players. In addition, the authors found that playful conversation only accounts for a proportion of the activity observed in 'cantinas'. On the other hand, the merit of 'cantinas' is that, since they are heavily populated, a small of fraction of 'socializers' are attracted here and interact with other players in a genuine fashion. Although only one of the 'cantinas' was closer to a social hangout, in both 'cantinas' players interacted with four to seven new people (which is similar to third places of 'real life'), numbers which are much higher for regulars.

In *SWG*, Ducheneaut et al. (2007) observed an impoverished communication within 'cantinas' and attributed it to problems with the design of the communication channel, which was one for the entire building. This leads to other possible social activities being overwhelmed by the instrumental activities (mentioned above) which generate a lot of 'noise' and make sociability-oriented communications impossible other than through private 'tells' (which

are only known to the two individuals involved in them). The authors suggest that, while some players are satisfied with short, instrumental interactions, the design of the game might be the one which draws back those wishing to interact in a more sociable fashion. They identify another two problems: lack of suitable social spaces and inability to signal the intention regarding the type of interactions they were seeking.

An important conclusion of Ducheneaut et al. (2007) is that MMOGs are characterised by relationships between players which are more of the 'weak ties' type than of the 'strong bonding and longer-lasting' type. They suggested that it is the instrumental nature of most activities in these games which foster this type of relationships. Similarly to Muramatsu and Ackerman's (1998) study of what constitutes social activity in an adventure MUD, Ducheneaut et al. (2007) arrived at the conclusion that players are engaged in activities which are 'social without being sociable'. Although an adventure MUD had a similar playfulness as other types of MUD, unlike them, it was shown to display few conversations which did not revolve around the game, such as personal disclosures, intellectual or political debates (Muramatsu and Ackerman, 1998). More importantly, Muramatsu and Ackerman's (1998) study of adventure MUDs (which is also applicable to MMORPGs) showed that the main activities in a game focused on combat, having not only cooperation but also organised conflict at their centre. A similar point about the instrumental nature of play was made by Manninen (2003), who argued that, in MMOGs, instrumental and strategic actions dominate other types of actions, such as the normatively regulated, dramaturgical, communicative and discursive ones: 'The majority of the interaction forms were not based on language, but rather, they were based on the actions and non-verbal behaviour of the individuals involved'.

Other researchers tied the different pleasures that players seek in games, including sociability, to gender and types of players, such as power gamer, moderate gamer and non-gamer. The study of Royse et al. (2007), consisting of 15 in-depth interviews, focused on the gaming experiences of adult women (aged $18 - 37$ years) and aimed to identify differences in their level of play and genre preferences. The female power gamers (many of whom enjoyed FPSs) pursue specific genres to satisfy their desires for specific pleasures, such as sociability, intellectual stimulation, competition and control from exploring new meanings of gender and self. For moderate gamers (enjoying some RPGs, puzzles, cards and problem-solving games and a few competitive games) one

of the pleasures is controlling the environment or its outcomes. Among the moderate players, there were some for whom the games were an escape from day-to-day life.

The social aspects are considered crucial for MMOGs. Even if players choose to play solo, the fact that they select a MMOG type of game signifies that they are particularly receptive to the social aspects of these games. Depending on the design of online games or the types of player, social aspects do not always mean intense communication or direct interactions (Ducheneaut et al., 2006). Ducheneaut et al. (2006) suggested that it is the design of the game (*WoW* in their case), which does not support a more casual type of social play, that leads to gameplay which is social but not sociable (or, as one player described the situation: "*WoW*'s subscribers tend to be 'alone together' "). What the authors mean is that gamers play *surrounded by* other players, but *not with* other players. However, their analysis seems not to take into account direct competition and regulated conflict from the practices of playing against other players (they too belong to the social aspects of online games within 'this is a game' frame), more visible in player versus player play. In addition, the design of their research does not consider playing together practices which are not formalised through official affiliations to guilds, such as pick-up groups or informal groups (for example, those groups tied through real life connections or *ad-hoc* groups between strangers). Another aspect which is disregarded is that, in some cases, socialising may take place outside the game, through instant messaging, voice over IP applications, real life voice or a combination of some of these.

Furthermore, Ducheneaut et al. (2006) argued that *WoW* appears to be social only at later stages, as the 'end game' becomes too difficult to be tackled through 'solo' play. Especially for the earlier stages of the game, the social aspects which are important for the players appear to be not so much playing with others, but the fact that other gamers provide an audience for their progress and achievements in the game, a spectacle which is entertaining and sometimes humorous and a diffuse but accessible pool of information and chatter. This is one of the rare occasions when competition, albeit in its indirect form, is mentioned. In his study of *twinking* practices in *WoW* (when a lower lever character has armour and weapons which, officially, are not available at their level), Glas (2007) argued that, even at a later stage, there are practices which go back to instrumental play, appearing to be less oriented towards sociability and more on domination of other players, for instance, twinking can

be one of these practices.

Even in these cases, the 'social' does not lose its importance for the game-play. Playing with or against other players, competing with real people (not only against computer controlled opponents), is what makes playing the game enjoyable, even when the competition or play are not direct. The 'social' manifests itself, if only by the players' abiding to a shared set of rules, some of which are unwritten. However, some of the social aspects of online games are not so easy to discern, thus, there is a need for more qualitative approaches to data collection and analysis.

Social contexts of online gaming

The social aspects of online games also refer to people forming and sustaining relationships within and around online games and *the social contexts of online gaming*.

While online games, with their world-like appearance, are fecund places for investigating social aspects, research has been carried out on the relationships created and maintained in other virtual settings as well. For instance, in a survey of internet newsgroup posters, McKenna et al. (2002) showed that there was a higher likelihood for those who disclosed their 'true' self to others on the internet better compared to face-to-face settings to have formed close virtual relationships and transferred them to a face-to-face setting. In addition, they found that majority of these close internet relationships were enduring, still persisting two years later. Moreover, undergraduates liked each other more after an initial encounter on the internet compared to an offline one. The results of another study (Bargh et al., 2002) found that, during internet interactions, undergraduate students accessed their true self in memory better whereas, during offline encounters, they accessed their actual self better. Individuals were also able to express their true self better in internet versus face-to-face interactions. Thus, the relationships formed in online settings seem to benefit from certain features of their environment, which afford a better expression of true identity (whatever that may be).

Another important social aspect of online games is the personal relationships developed in these settings. An earlier study of Parks and Roberts (1998) examined the personal relationships in a MOO and concluded that these type of online settings offer a powerful social context for the creation of personal relationships. The survey found that the majority of the players interviewed had ongoing personal relationships on MOOs, which were mostly close friendships,

friendships and romances. In addition, the majority of relationships were with individuals of opposite sex and most of these relationships were transferred to other online settings. In addition, a third of them yielded face-to-face meetings. An interesting finding is that, on average, the degree of development of MOO relationships was higher than that of newsgroup relationships, but lower than offline relationships. This should not be taken to mean that offline relationships are, necessarily, more important than online ones, as individuals may expect different things from and satisfy different needs through relationships formed in various settings.

Even though such studies are fairly moderated in their claims that virtual settings would possess characteristics which distinguish them from face-to-face settings, most of them tend to offer a somewhat unidirectional flow of influences from online to offline, focusing on relationships formed online and transferred offline or with effects on the offline life. There are some studies, however, concentrating on cases where offline relationships are performed and maintained through online interactions. To name some of these exceptions, the studies of Wellman et al. (2001) and Haythornthwaite and Wellman (2002) suggested that internet communications supplement and enhance those with close and distant others (friends, family and co-workers) in other settings.

Other studies investigated the social contexts of online gaming from a predominantly qualitative perspective and with an emphasis on the relationships created or sustained through games. Even though addressing computer games and not online games, one notable exception in this respect is Mitchell's (1985) study, in which twenty families received Nintendo game consoles which led to most families using the devices as a shared play activity. The video games had a positive influence on family life and interactions, with striking resemblances to the effects of other popular games, such as Monopoly, checkers, card games or jigsaw puzzles. This use of games to support family interactions starts to project an image of games as 'tools to relate with' family, friends and peers, to paraphrase the famous 'tools to think with' of Turkle (1995).

Following this trend, an interdisciplinary project led by Bleumers and Jacobs (2010) explored whether virtual worlds are suitable for remote intergenerational interactions between family members (specifically between children and their grandparents, but which included parents as well). Using two methods (storyboards to elicit attitudes and letting family members use a virtual world at home), they found that family members expressed concerns about virtual worlds (for example, regarding the fact that virtual activities

and connections may substitute real life ones), but also considered that these offer individual and shared activities of play, exploration, experimentation and learning. Nevertheless, family members participating in the project did not believe that the virtual world that they used was appropriate for interaction with remote family members because of many factors, such as difficulty to first establish contact (because of the circumstances of their family and features of the application), the mediated characteristic of interactions and public nature of the virtual world leading to negative experiences. However, the families enjoyed the fact that participation in virtual worlds led to more offline interactions "because it helped to bridge the children's and adults' worlds". A critique that can be brought to this study is that these families were families which volunteered to use the technology but did not normally use virtual worlds as part of their daily lives. Thus, this study resembles more a lab-style experiment, where the subjects are separated from their usual socio-technical contexts, with the difference that the lab was built in their own homes and, for this reason, was more flexible.

Among the first studies which investigated the relationships of the players formed or expressed in MMORPGs is Yee's (2001) study of *EverQuest*. The study represents a stepping stone for the study of social play in online games extended to the more permanent relationships that players have, bring, develop or maintain in the game. According to this study, a quarter of EQ players play the game with a romantic partner and approximately another quarter play with a family member (of which 8.1% play with a parent or child and 15.9% with a sibling). Additionally, Yee (2001) noticed that significantly more female gamers play the game with a romantic partner than male players (69.5% of the female gamers versus only 16.4% of the male players). It is important to underline that approximately one-third of the *EQ* gamers who play with a romantic partner and 6 of the 51 players who play with their parent or child bought the game as something they could do together. In particular, one-third of the *EQ* gamers who play with a romantic partner reported that they group with their partner almost always and another 20% that they group often. Most of the players, who play with their parent or child, group with their parent or child only sometimes or seldom. Moreover, Yee (2001) also added the descriptions offered by the players regarding the practices of playing together (which are sometimes intertwined with how players were introduced to the game), portraying relationships as enhancing or deteriorating the gameplay, but also the game as strengthening or damaging relationships or

offering avenues for exploring roles and personality traits (theirs or belonging to their important others) which are unavailable or inaccessible offline.

Another study of Yee (2006a) shows that 26.9% of female players (420) were introduced to MMORPGs by their romantic partner (boyfriend or girlfriend, fiancé/e and husband or wife), compared with 1.0% of male players (1778). This article combined data from more studies and, compared with materials posted online at Daedalus project, the above data are most probably based on *WoW*. According to the same article Yee (2006a), 15.8% of male players (1589) and 59.8% of female players (311) participated in the environment with a romantic partner, while 25.5% of male players and 39.5% of female players participated with a family member. Thus, Yee (2006a) indicates a high likelihood for individuals to play together with people who are close to them emotionally and suggests an interesting possible avenue of research - investigating the differences between offline and online interactions and the effect of the online relationships on the offline ones. I add that equally important is why and how the online and offline settings (together with the roles assumed and actions undertaken in them) offer important resources for forming and performing relationships in general.

The practices of 'playing together' are often conceived of by researchers as collaborative activities, which is especially true for non-competitive environments such as *There*. One such study is Brown and Bell's (2006) one, which examines how meaningful, yet, playful social experiences form in the graphical, virtual world of *There*. The authors describe the social life of *There* as consisting of two main features: sociability (chatting) and interacting (playing together) around objects, with the former supporting the latter. In this game, play and sociability are made possible through complex interactions around objects, talks, topics and identity. Additionally, they argue, that because it is a non-competitive game, *There* offers a more playful environment than other, more competitive environments. Their approach is informed by the notion of sociability of Simmel (1949), revolving around the idea of conversation, but moves beyond it, to an interaction-centred sociability. The main merit of their approach is a performative approach to sociability. They argued that, due to the fact that these virtual worlds provide opportunities to do things with others, friendships can be 'performed' in these environments (meaning that they can be enacted). The authors stressed the importance of shifting the focus in the literature of online games from social bonds (by which they mean counting how many new friends one has and assessing how important they are) to key

aspects where friendships are performed, such as shared activities like chat and interaction around objects.

Prior to this study but on a similar line, Manninen (2003) argued that, in multiplayer games, 'the majority of the interaction forms were not based on language, but rather, they were based on the actions and non-verbal behaviour of the individuals involved'. The idea that actions (and the emotions associated with them) are central to MMOGs can also be found in a more recent paper of Golub (2010), which rejected the hypothesis that the sensory realism of games such as *WoW* led people to become 'immersed' in virtual environments. To support this, he argued that the games become real not through their aural and visual realism, but through people undertaking collective projects of action and showing care for them.

One aspect of the relationships developed or expressed in online games was friendship. However, friendship is just one of the types of relationship which can be performed in these virtual worlds, irrespective of whether they are goal or non-goal oriented. Another aspect which was investigated is that of couples playing together.

Some of the studies addressing this aspect are quantitative and only show that gamers play with important people from their lives, but not why do players engage in these practices or how. In a study of a sample of 912 self-selected MMORPG players, Cole and Griffiths (2007) concluded that MMORPGs can be very social places due to the fact that a high percentage of gamers establish good friendships, romantic relationships and play with real life friends and family. Moreover, Cole and Griffiths (2007) also showed that women tend to play with their family and real life friends significantly more than men do whereas men have significantly more online friends in MMORPGs than women.

Other studies, are qualitative and detailed but embrace mostly a sole perspective in their research. For example, Carr and Oliver (2009) used a combination of semi-structured interviews and participant observation and studied the practices of couples playing together in *WoW* predominantly from the perspective of cognition. They show how couples constantly manage and negotiate ludic, material and social resources in their play and describe the constant interference of life in play and play in life. Among the material resources negotiated by couples, the authors mentioned negotiating childcare, who gets the best computer or chair, sharing an account because of reduced financial resources, having the possibility of talking offline and switching languages according to the offline or online context (for those sharing also a physical space).

In addition, time was seen as another resource, in the sense that couples negotiated the appropriate amount of time dedicated to the game or admitted that being in a guild can be time-consuming. Moreover, real life commitments made real life friends quit playing only for their place to be taken by online friends. As ludic resources, couples used 'alts' (alternative characters) to level at the same pace with their partner and be able to play together in the future.

Carr and Oliver (2009) also mentioned that when a player has been playing for longer and their partner joined the game afterwards, the 'older' player would create a new character to level up with the 'newbie' for support (taking up a specific role, such as a healer) and company. They described as well the 'social learning', which is not the main objective of many of the practices of playing together, but accompanies them often.. To define the characteristics of the support that the novice player would get, Carr and Oliver (2009) used three metaphors for the mentors; they can be 'tanks' (aiding and protecting the novices in a dungeon), 'chauffeurs' (leading the novices to a quest location) and 'backseat drivers' (a situation in which the mentor offers advice all the time and even takes over the character from the novice, potentially leading to tensions between novice and mentor). In addition, the mentors may provide information on developing the character or on getting the right gear and weapons.

An important aspect of playing together practices noticed by Carr and Oliver (2009) is that they are multifaceted and engender specific pleasures, such as 'sharing a specialist language, sharing an understanding of the game, undertaking shared in-world experiences and developing joint friendships'. Illustrative in this respect is the idea advanced by one interviewee that "having a shared knowledge of the game was a form of 'togetherness' that transcended game-play". Thus, while Carr and Oliver (2009) described various fundamental aspects of playing together, they focus more on how players manage diverse resources and less on the effects or role of playing together on the relationships or gameplay. Moreover, the role of current or past relationships in the player's introduction to the game is only briefly mentioned.

A different perspective on romantic relationships and online games comes from communication and media studies. In a study of college students who played video games, Ogletree and Drake (2007) found that more women than men complained about their romantic partner playing too much. In addition, a greater proportion of men rather than women reported that their romantic partner complained about their video game playing. The results of Ogletree and Drake's (2007) study confirmed a 'displacement effect', meaning that play-

ing games may diminish the time spent on other activities, such as spending time together as a couple. In other words: 'gaming time' displaces 'couple time'. The displacement effect is evident in relationships where one romantic partner is a frequent gamer and the other is not. Thus, because men spend more time than women playing video games, a gender difference in relationship conflict is observed. Interpersonal conflict resulted from the fact that heterosexual romantic relationships were influenced negatively by 'couple time' being displaced by 'gaming time'.

In addition, Ogletree and Drake (2007) advanced the idea that, because men would have an activity-based intimacy, in general, whereas women would have an emotional one, the time spent with men while they are playing video games may not be conducive to feelings of closeness for some women. However, in the stated scenario, when one plays and the other watches, there is a limited case for 'doing things together or sharing' (perhaps, in a male-male dyad, the assertiveness of each of the partners would ensure that there is really a shared activity going on, in which both individuals are almost equally involved).

Moreover, Ogletree and Drake (2007) based their suggestion on generalising the results of previous research indicating that men have a style of intimacy with same-sex friends which involves sharing activities and doing things together whereas women have more emotionally intimate relationships with same-sex friends which privilege talking about feelings and problems (Aukett et al., 1988). However, the research of Aukett et al. (1988) focused on friendship, not on romantic relationships, and men reported that they also derived emotional support and therapeutic value from friendships, but more from the ones with opposite-sex friends.

A very interesting hypothesis proposed by Ogletree and Drake (2007), which is worthwhile investigating, is that women may have different pathways to gaming participation, with some women getting involved in gaming due to their own interest, and others participating in gaming as a way to spend time with important people in their lives (for example brothers or romantic partners).

Research also focused on exploring how playing with a romantic partner affects the gameplay, the relationship and the happiness of the partners. In their study of *EverQuest II (EQII)*, Williams et al. (2009) hypothesised that, since females and males perform stereotypical roles in other situations involving joint consumption of media, such as in the case of couples watching horror films (Zillmann and Weaver, 1996), players who choose to play as a couple would dis-

play stereotypical patterns of behaviour. This study was based on a stratified sample (rather than a convenience sample) of $7,129$ players ($5,719$ males and $1,406$ females) of *EverQuest II (EQII)* and combined surveys with unobtrusive behavioural measures of 1 year of play. The results confirmed the above mentioned hypothesis, as male gamers played for achievement-related reasons and scored higher for aggressiveness when their romantic partners played as well. In addition, the data indicated that it is more likely for women (61.52% of all women) to play with a romantic partner than for men (24.77% of all men). It is also more likely for those playing with a romantic partner to be older, earn less, play more hours per week, be healthier and have more characters than those who are not playing with a romantic partner. More importantly, those playing with a romantic partner reported higher enjoyment of the game and a better quality of relationship. However, men who played with a partner were less happy and much more socially motivated than men who played without a partner. On the other hand, women who played with a partner were happier and slightly less socially motivated than women who played without a partner. While this research offers invaluable quantitative data suggesting that games are more than games in the sense that they might be used as settings for romantic relationships, it falls short of providing a detailed description and analysis of playing together practices or a reason why these practices occur.

2.4 Towards ritualisation in online games

Before exploring the literature on ritualisation in online games, I first need to describe what ritual and ritualisation mean from a classical point of view. The concept of 'ritual', more precisely that of 'secular ritual', is important for understanding what 'ritualisation' means. Many disciplines have their own interpretation of the notion of 'ritual'. There appears to be a convergence in that ritual refers, usually, to a certain stereotypy or formality characterising a behaviour. In psychiatry, ritual is either employed for pathological stereotyped behaviours or for conventional interactions between people (Rappaport, 1999, 24); in ethology, it is used for animal behaviour such as the courtship dance (Bell, 1992). In sociology and anthropology, the notion of 'ritual' is used in connection with the one of 'ceremony' for an ample spectrum of social events or their formality (not necessarily included in the religious sphere): Malinowski (1926), Bell (1992), Houseman (2004), Rappaport (1999), Goffman (1967), Goody (1977), La Fontaine (1986), Moore and Myerhoff (1977) and Severi

(1993).

When the term ritual is brought into a casual conversation, one tends to think only of its more prominent and widely known facet, the magical-religious ritual. This leads to forgetting, temporary, an equally important type of rituals, the secular ones. This facet of ritual, however, was not ignored by the academic discourse, which recognises that either magical-religious or secular, rituals are deeply embedded in society, mutually moulding each other.

Scholars from various disciplines, ranging from philosophy of religion, to anthropology, media studies, communication studies, psychology and sociology, observed the existence of rituals outside the religious sphere. In an early study, the historian of religions and philosopher Eliade (1959, 15,24) named them 'degenerated' rituals, suggesting both their religious ancestry and their 'distorted' religiousness. In the opinion of Eliade (1959), the non-religious mankind preserved their religious residues in the secularised ceremonies celebrated on special occasions in their lives, such as the symbolic cutting of a ribbon during an inauguration of a new building, graduation ceremonies or initiation rituals which take place when changing the workplace or school. Other researchers, such as Rappaport (1999, 24), defined ritual in a fashion that leaves out religion and belief intentionally, suggesting that there is life outside religion for ritual (but, perhaps, not entirely out of the religious sphere). Rappaport (1999, 24) conceived ritual as a 'structure' or 'form' composed of 'the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely coded by the performers'. In addition, Rappaport (1999, 29-30) underlined one of the main characteristics of the ritual, the unity between form and substance: 'The formalization of acts and utterances, themselves meaningful, and the organization of those formalized acts and utterances into more or less invariant sequences, imposes ritual form on the substance of those acts and utterances, that is, on their significata'.

The form, content, meaning and relations may have changed in contemporary rituals, but the social practice and academic research strongly affirms the existence of ritual in various secular contexts: the planting of a tree, maturity rituals such as army enrolment, illegal motorcycle racing in Taiwan (Liang, 2001), the house warming ritual, the parties celebrating a new yacht or car or the initiation rituals engendered by a new job. Most of the approaches to rituals in secular contexts speak of metaphors of rituals not of rituals in their own right, for example, in the case of internet rituals observed in chat rooms or in cyber-cafés (Liang, 2001) or the one of teaching rites of passage (Mills

and Haris, 2003). The term ritual seems almost too demanding to be applied to secular actions which may seem frivolous, such as those that one encounters in everyday life.

Now, turning our attention to online media, one needs to understand how ritual is perceived within media anthropology. Most approaches which come from media anthropology distinguish three approaches to ritual: 1) an identical and habitual behaviour; 2) acts of simultaneous reception of messages (in the case of community rituals), and 3) a certain content with a dramatic charge, which owns the power to interpret the world (Coman, 2003, 58). Moreover, Coman (2003, 58) inscribes the three categories listed above in two large classes: public rituals (at a macro-social level) and group rituals (at micro-social level), the latter including consumption habits, which cover rituals referring to television. Thus, many of the rituals performed on or around online settings could be considered a part of group rituals.

2.4.1 Ritualisation in online settings

In modern or post-modern societies, such as online settings (including online games), it would be better, as Bell (1992, 89) advises us, to speak of ritualisation instead of ritual, which is understood as traditional, religious, 'contaminated' by sacredness. With this view, Bell (1992) followed in the steps of Hobsbawm (1983), who shifted the accent onto the process (ritualisation) rather than the products or the constitutive elements of this process (that is the rituals or the elements of rituals). Hobsbawm (1983, 4) mentioned ritualisation as one of the two phenomena involved in the process of inventing traditions in modern societies: 'Inventing traditions . . . is essentially a process of formalization and ritualization, characterized by reference to the past, if only by imposing repetition'. Given the constant overlapping of the notions of ritual and tradition, the essay of Hobsbawm (1983) is illuminating with respect to ritual change. The rituals or elements of rituals that may develop in MMOGs sometimes resemble these invented traditions, which include rituals, ritual elements or other ritualised materials:

> 'Invented tradition' is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to

establish continuity with a suitable historic past (Hobsbawm, 1983, 1).

Traditional views on ritual may, in part, justify the move from ritual to ritualisation. One such view is the one of Gluckman and Gluckman (1977, 242-243), who insisted on a clear cut distinction between 'rituals', which 'move the spirit world', and other types of collective formality or ceremonial, which do not (for example athletic games). In addition, Gluckman and Gluckman (1977) do not agree with applying the label of 'ritual' to those events where a sense of brotherhood is derived or the occasions characterised by collective formality. Moreover, in a previous essay, Gluckman (1962, 30) distinguished, within the broader spectrum of 'ceremonial', between the 'ceremonious' and 'ritual' actions, which he states that they are similar, with the exception that the latter would contain 'mystical notions' in addition.

Another scholar concerned about the over-use of ritual is Goody (1977), who saw little utility for the academic world when the notion of 'ritual' is either restrained to religious manifestations, either broadened too much in the 'manner of ethologists (the rituals of copulation), archaeologists (with their ritual objects), the sociologists (discovering rituals of family living) and the anthropologist (rituals, more rituals, yet more rituals)' (Goody, 1977, 26). Concluding that all social behaviour is normative and to a degree repetitive and formal, Goody (1977, 33) questioned the validity of 'ritual' itself as a unifying leading title for all kind of consecrated sociological notions which imply the above mentioned characteristics: 'custom, habits, etiquette, norms, expectations, structure, continuity, solidarity'. To defend ritual, one may argue that if ritual is not used to unify, but rather is unifying, then it is more than a 'heading' for existing sociological concepts, as Goody termed it, for ritual may involve all these notions. Neither is ritual a simple sum of its composing elements, as Rappaport (1999, 24) noticed; ritual is relation and motion. Goody (1977, 26) rightfully raised his critique against what he terms the 'catholicity' of the perspective 'that ritual forms an aspect of all social action', which, he says, cannot bring any light for those who deem 'rituals as a category of action requiring some special kind of interpretation'. Furthermore, Goody (1977, 27) agreed that the following activities should be excluded from the definition of ritual: "hand-shaking, teeth cleaning, taking medicines, car riding, eating, entertaining guests, drinking tea, or coffee, beer, sherry, whisky, etc., taking a dog for a walk, watching television, going to the cinema, listening to records, visiting relatives, routines at work, singing at work, children's street games,

hunting and so on". Indeed, in many circumstances, most of the above activities fall in the sphere of ceremonies, routines or habits and they should not be considered rituals.

In addition, Goody (1977, 34) criticised Goffman's (1967) approach to ritual (see below) and doubted the need for adopting a formulation that involves ritual for 'small behaviours' (as facial expression). However, the remarks of Gluckman and Gluckman (1977) or those of Goody (1977) fail to realise that neither religiousness nor the size of the behaviours are necessary conditions for these to be rituals, unless this is how one chooses to define ritual. Thus, sacredness or spirituality may be encountered in secular behaviours and no social behaviour should be disregarded from the point of view of ritual on the grounds of size. Further, activities as trivial as going to the cinema or even routines may, in the right context, be ritualised if they come to stand for something else (pointing to a spiritual dimension, for instance), beyond their instrumentality.

Returning to ritualisation, in a critique addressed to the stance of Eliade (1959) that ritual is the re-enactment of myths or immemorial events, Bell (1992, 123) opposed the creativity of the ritual, visible in ritualisation, to this static view on ritual: '(...) the ritualization is, in itself, a creative act of production, a strategic reproduction of the past in such a way as to maximize its domination of the present, usually by particular authorities defined as the sole guardians of the past and experts on ritual'. This creativity, manifested through ritualisation, seems to characterise not just one particular age in the history of humankind, but all. Rituals are as alive as the social aggregations which perform them. Thus, there appears to be no reason for which ritualisation, be it religious or secular, would simply disappear from one increasingly prominent aspect of contemporary life: the internet and its associated cultures.

One could ask to what extent the use of *ritualisation*, understood here as a generic term for the processes of creation, transformation, selection, dissemination, maintenance and abandonment of rituals or elements of rituals in the communities of online players, is useful in the study of online games. By using this concept, is the whole spectrum of ritual deprived of its meaning? In reply to this question I begin by stating that I strongly agree with the stance that not all actions are rituals. Just as not all formalised social actions are rituals in 'real' life, not all formalised social actions are rituals in virtual worlds. Furthermore, online games communities are as valid sources of rituals as 'real' communities are. My argument is that if one dares to conceptualise ritual

outside the religious sphere, in everyday life, why then exclude it from the virtual realm (which is only an extension or an augmentation of the 'real life'). Why would the virtual world with its virtual communities be different than 'real' world and traditional communities from the point of view of 'inventing', maintaining, and transmitting rituals? In the essay entitled *Introduction: Secular Ritual: Forms and Meanings*, Moore and Myerhoff (1977, 3-4) pleaded for a secular ritual and ceremony which construct, structure and legitimise social realities by offering 'unquestionability' in the modern world. Similarly, I plead for ritualisation within communities of online games players, offering not necessarily 'unquestionability', but rather 'apartness' derived from more than purely instrumental actions.

If one thinks about online games in terms of 'just games', she or he will certainly be surprised by the notion of ritual applied to online games. The idea of joining the two notions may be based on the similarities between game and ritual, which reside in their original identity or their common origin (Caillois, 1958; Huizinga, 1949). However, there is more to this connection between online games and ritual than this primordial identity, as media anthropology observed rituals in relation to the consumption of other types of media, for example television, radio or film (for example, the studies of Dayan and Katz, 1992; Zillmann and Gibson, 1996, discussed in the next section).

In the literature, I have identified two main directions regarding rituals within online games. On the one hand, an online game may be seen as a ritual (Tomas, 1992; Hammer, 2005; Walton, 2005). On the other hand, an online game may be envisaged not as a ritual in itself, but as a place where 'ritualized play' (Danet, 2005) or elements of rituals develop or fall into oblivion (Ghergu, 2007). This latter perspective draws on the 'world-like' appearance of online games. However, while online games are not rituals in themselves, playing an online game may become a ritual or part of a ritual within a certain context. This does not exclude the other perspective, which sees online games as places where rituals or elements of rituals form and become extinct.

Of great utility for my endeavour is the players' perspective on the games. Players themselves consider online games to be 'more than games', a veritable 'way of life' as one of the players of *Star Kingdoms* put it in a previous study (Ghergu, 2007). It is this view that places the stress on online games as home for both play and community and helps to strengthen the case for rituals in online games. In my view, there is no principled difference between the capacity of 'real' life communities to create and perform rituals in secular contexts and

the one of virtual communities.

Given the reduced presence of a genuine religious sphere (other than the pseudo-religious or pseudo-magical in-game elements like priests or spells, which may be found in *World of Warcraft*), the rituals from online games as *Star Kingdoms* and *World of Warcraft* are mainly secular rituals (more precisely, rituals or elements of rituals which have more secular characteristics than religious ones, see below). Nevertheless, in games such as *Second Life*, besides secular rituals, there may be religious rituals due to the fact that the creators of the game sustain the institutions which choose to open accounts in the game, offering various incentives. An example of a religious initiative in an online game was the foundation of the first Habitat church, 'Order of the Holy Walnut', apparently by a player who was a Greek Orthodox priest in the real world (Turkle, 1995, 250). Forcing a demarcation between secular and religious rituals to underline that some online games maintain a relative distance from religion, I use the term 'secular ritual' although I share the opinion of Myerhoff that:

> Rituals are not either sacred or secular, rather in high rituals they are closer to the sacred end of the continuum, entirely extraordinary, communicating the *mysterium tremendum* and are often associated with supernatural or spiritual beings. Or, they are closer to the mundane end of the continuum, perfunctory genuflections to form, 'good form,' meaning good manners that acknowledge and punctuate social interactions, smoothing them, eliminating potential disruptions, unpredictability and accident (Myerhoff, 1977, 200).

Another operationalisation of secular ritual was proposed by Erving Goffman (1967), who ascribed a special meaning to ritual. By *interaction rituals* Goffman (1967) understood behaviours intended to maintain the face of the individuals in their immediate interactions with others. The notion of *face* needs further explanation: 'Face is a an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes – albeit an image that others may share, as when a person makes a good showing for his profession or religion by making a good showing for himself' (Goffman, 1967, 5). Individuals are, in the opinion of Goffman (1967, 31-32), 'sacred objects', and everything that characterises or represents the individuals, as their face or self, is likewise sacred and must be protected from desecrations or restored after such events occur. Although the online interactions from online games may display differences from face-to-face

ones, this does not mean that the paradigm of Goffman concerning interaction rituals (discussed below) does not apply in mediated settings. Goffman used *ritual* mostly as an adjective and rarely as a noun (as evidenced below). This implies that ritual is a metaphoric resource in constructing the mental image of the underlying structure of a 'social occasion' (an event such as a dinner party) as similar to (or having the same origin with) the structure of a ritual. Furthermore, 'ritual' or 'ceremony' are used by Goffman to characterise behaviours or rules which seem to transcend the transient significance of a *social occasion* through symbols, in expression such as: 'the self as a kind of player in a ritual game' (1967, 31), 'ritual code' (1967, 32), 'ritual care' (1967, 40), 'ritual order' (1967, 42), 'ritual equilibrium' and 'the ritual organization of social encounters' (1967, 44), 'status rituals' or 'interpersonal rituals' (observable in salutations, compliments, and apologies) (1967, 55,57), 'ritually organized system of social activity' (1967, 57), 'deference rituals' subdivided in (1) 'avoidance rituals' and (2) 'presentational rituals' (1967, 57-71), and 'ceremonial profanations' (1967, 85). While highly criticised, the merit of this approach is to have discovered a certain 'sacredness' and 'worthiness' in 'small' social occasions and even individuals. In addition, the complexity of the social life in online games led some researchers to consider the interaction rituals which develop in these virtual worlds, in the manner of Goffman (1967), for example the following study by Danet (2005).

In online settings, ethnographers observed how ritualisation, communication, and play intermingle. Brenda Danet (2005) conducted an ethnographic study of a site called *rainbow*, a hybrid form of internet-based communication and art (the participants interacting through pre-fabricated images and messages created by typing symbols from a computer keyboard). The notion of interaction rituals of Goffman (1967), the one of *communitas* of Turner (1969) (a discussion of Turner's concepts of *communitas* and *liminality* will follow shortly) and the concept of secular ritual of Moore and Myerhoff (1977) were applied to the particularities of this community and lead to characterizing these types of communication and activities as 'ritualized play', not as a 'full-fledged ritual', but nevertheless engendering communitas. Thereby, Danet (2005) suggested that this genre of communication is characterised by a double liminality, due to the status of both ritual and play as liminal phenomena. Playfulness would be encouraged, among other factors, such as the qualities of the medium or the influences of hacker's culture, by the 'masking of identity'. Danet (2005) identifies various degrees of formality (understood as 'formulaic predictability'

and repetitiveness), more or less invariance, a repertoire of communicative acts (as 'honorings', requests for love or attention, etc.), and the performance of 'scheduled "shows"'. However, the author draws the attentions that the beliefs in friendship and communitas found on *rainbow* convey to a greater extent the meta-message of pretence, which is more related to play than to ritual.

A slightly different take on ritual in online games is the essay of Anita Hammer (2005). Hammer (2005) sees something essentially similar in the way computers cordon off the imaginary worlds of MOOs (object-oriented MUDs), spatially and temporally, and the manner in which theatre and ritual perform the same operation, delineating their space from everyday life experiences. To the contrary, in an essay on online and offline role-playing practices in the Netherlands, Copier (2005) argues against the applicability of the notion of 'magic circle' (explained below) of Huizinga (1949) to the role-play practices and that this strict delimitation of play from other areas of day-to-day life is artificial. Copier (2005) suggests that role-playing (including the one from role-playing computer games) can be conceived of as a series of performances or ritual acts, in the sense that the space of the game/play, identities and meaning are constructed through the performance of these rituals. In addition, Hammer (2005) conceives of MOOs as the new places of worship, the player experiencing quasi-religious states, as the state of trance, or almost metaphysical phenomena which may be perceived in notions like 'identity change' or 'multiplicity of self'. This time, the MOO itself is a ritual in its own right, acquiring a purely supportive and guiding function: 'MOOing may be viewed as a ritual whose purpose is to reinforce a belief system in which human interaction and shared participation outside everyday life may provide purpose and direction' (Hammer, 2005).

As one could see above, the tripartition and notions of Turner (1969) are very helpful for describing, characterising and analysing ritualisation in MMOGs or other settings. Using the topology of rites of passage of van Gennep (1960, 21), comprising *preliminal rites*, *liminal (or threshold) rites*, and *postliminal rites*, Victor Turner (1969, 94) distinguishes three phases of a rite of passage: separation, margin (or limen, which signifies threshold in Latin) and aggregation. This tripartition led enthusiasts of rituals in online games to declare the whole experience of play as a ritual (Hammer, 2005; Walton, 2005), or to acknowledge only ritualisation, understood more as a family resemblance between play and ritual in Wittgenstein's fashion or as a propensity for ritual of certain online settings (see Danet, 2005). The stress is put on *liminality* and

its relations with communitas, another concept introduced by Turner (1969). Revolutions, carnivals, rituals or other events ostensibly undermine the established social order by proposing another (the creative order of chaos, the *anti-structure* which begets the structure, the homogeneity engendering difference). The above mentioned events are liminal phenomena, characterised by liminal representations of space and time.

'Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial' (Turner, 1969, 95). In the view of Turner (1969, 96), there are two alternating ways in which society exists: the one which is highly structured, normed, bounded by laws, and the one which 'emerges recognizably in the liminal period, is of society as an unstructured or rudimentary structured and relatively undifferentiated comitatus, community, or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders'.

An example of a ritual element from *Star Kingdoms* is the avatar (Ghergu, 2007). Like the mask, the avatar is meant to disguise the real-identity of the player, which can endanger the fragile playing experience, and facilitate the 'make-believe' (of the player who owns it and of the other players) in the game. The secrecy (engendered by anonymity) implied by the avatar may be envisaged as part of the 'magic circle' (Huizinga, 1949, 10), which separates both ritual and game from real life and constitutes the play-community as 'being "apart together"' (1949, 12). Games such as *Star Kingdoms* do not force you to choose an avatar, assigning to the player a default one (a picture with the game's abbreviation - *SK*), therefore the selection of an avatar is a matter of personal choice. Nevertheless, players devote time and energy in finding or creating avatars which represent them in the world of the game better. Avatars may be pictures (rarely of people, and usually of others), cartoon-like figures, corporeal representations which mimic the body or stylised inscriptions. The important element is to state something about the player, the character or both. Caillois (1958, 20-21) creates a parallel between mankinds desire to disguise themselves, to wear a mask, and the *mimetism* of insects, which have the same purpose - the change of appearance to produce fear. For Caillois (1958), the purpose is not the make-believe, but the fear that is derived from the fact that 'the mask disguises the conventional self and liberates the true personality'. Choosing an avatar may also be envisaged as an important phase in the initiation ritual of playing an online game, being one of the first actions undertaken in an online game. For example in *Star*

Kingdoms, selecting an avatar is one of the few actions allowed in the 'newbie state' (a period of time of 72 hours in which the player is not allowed to attack other players and other players will not attack her or him). In this liminal state, a virtual metamorphosis (the official transformation of the individual into a player) takes place, and choosing an avatar is a vital step in this phase. As an important element in the construction of the *face* (defined by Goffman, 1967), the avatar may be deemed as well a ritual element. The interactions of other players involving the player who chooses a certain avatar will be shaped by their perception of her or his face as mediated by the avatar. The avatar as a part of face has a double function: to distinguish the player/character from others (to give her or him consistency throughout the game or round of the game) and also to isolate the player from the frame of everyday life. According to the conventions of online games, it is not unusual to have more than one face, creating and operating many characters and displaying more than one avatar (depending on the game).

2.4.2   Ritualisation in the current study

In this section, I present my approach on ritualisation and ritual, restricting my interest to secular rituals (simply called rituals from now on), and place the notion of ritual within the larger context of ritual studies.

The presence of ritual in day-to-day life was noted, among other disciplines, by media and communication studies. These approaches focused on rituals in connection with media. Moreover, these rituals concentrated mainly on media events and large ceremonies and their relation to politics and society. For example, Dayan and Katz (1992, 119) investigated ample rites de passage taking the form of great 'media events' (political or sports contests, conquests and coronations). Although describing mostly secular events, the authors demonstrate that media events have a similar temporal (marking a suspension of the usual calendar, a breach of routine), spatial [creating the liminal space – a concept coined by Turner (1969, 94) referring to a marginal state during the ritual, inspired by the topology of rites of passage of van Gennep (1960, 21)] and social function (positioning the viewers as to enable them to participate in and practice the ritual order) as religious rituals (Dayan and Katz, 1992, 120,207). By identifying these common functions, the authors reduced the perceived gap between religious and secular rituals even more. They also imply a quasi-religious state embedded in these secular ceremonies which allow citizens to participate in what they call a 'civil religion' (Dayan and Katz, 1992, 16).

Focussing on another medium, film, Zillmann and Gibson (1996, 15-32) suggest that it is possible that the contemporary horror films are a last residue of ancient rites of passage. The films seem to fulfil a similar socialisation function as horrifying story telling, that of accustoming the children to the dangers of the world within the safe confines of a story.

Media and communication scholars were usually more concerned with the rituals staged by the media themselves or reflected by media in a ritual form, rather that those which emerge around the reception of certain media products or those which simply use the media. Of course there are a couple of notable exceptions such as Carey (1989), with his ritual view of communication. Carey (1989, 18) states that there are two views of communication, the ritual view of communication and transmission view of communication. On the one hand, the 'transmission' metaphor of communication presents a notion of communication based on the idea that information is transmitted to others in a similar way to how goods are transported between distant geographical locations. On the other hand, the ritual view of communication places the emphasis on sharing, participation, association, fellowship and a common faith. This latter view is visible in the common etymological roots of 'community', 'communion', 'commonness' and 'communication'. The ritual view of communication 'sees the original or highest manifestation of communication not in the transmission of intelligent information but in the construction and maintenance of an ordered, meaningful, cultural world that can serve as a control and container for human action' (Carey, 1989, 18-19). According to this ritual view on communication, in the opinion of Carey (1989, 20), the act of reading or writing a newspaper resembles a ritual (for example a mass), where the main purpose is to present, engage in and consolidate world views and social roles, not the transmission of pure information.

Other studies are concerned with consumption rituals (see the collection edited by Otnes and Lowrey, 2004). For example, Shrum (2004, 39-58) describes practices of what he calls 'ritual disrobement' or nudity in exchange for beads at a festival in New Orleans. For Shrum (2004, 57), the ritual practices reflect a reaction to the economic and social changes in the contemporary society, with women entering the marketplace. Through these ritual actions, the old social order is restored for a brief moment when women become again objects of worship and sexual desire for men. Moreover, the consumption of alcohol was envisaged in terms of consumption rituals by Wolburg and Treise (2004, 3-20). The authors described the drinking rituals among the heaviest

drinkers and identified the functions of these rituals such as: the community function (which fulfils the need for intimacy and connectedness), functions regarding a spatial and temporal order (which fulfils the need for security) and the transformation function where alcohol is consumed as a drug (filling the need for escape from stress and thrill while offering a rite of passage). Many of these phenomena are activities not normally viewed as rites (including others such as giving birth, house cleaning, canoeing, watching television), and Grimes (2004, 21-38) states that the process of treating these activities as if they were or could be rites is called 'ritualization'.

The studies of rituals of reception or those on rituals of consumption place the emphasis on collective rituals, which mobilise solidarities towards contesting, transforming or affirming the *status quo*. For example the rituals following the death and funeral of Pope John Paul represented and staged by the media, led to many people from all over the world experiencing feelings of brotherhood and intense emotions (Wulf, 2005). Rituals performed by individuals or small groups are largely ignored by these studies (with few exceptions) as the scholars focused mainly on exemplariness. In their view, exemplariness is taken to mean the prominence of an event and the interruption of the ordinary life for large numbers of people by this event. Exemplariness (the quality of being exemplary) attained by moments from the life of the individual is often disregarded (perhaps because, at first glance, they appear to be more or less habitual and trivial). Moments such as a father bonding with his son or daughter by taking them to a football match or a family gathering for their favourite TV show or film are all instances of ritualised behaviour. In a similar fashion, playing an online game with your family, partner or friends is an example of ritualised behaviour from online games.

These latter kinds of ritual were extensively studied outside online settings by communication scholars and social psychologists who draw on Goffman's interactionist approach on ritual and view it as repetitive and meaningful behaviour performed by one or more individuals. Thus, a line of inquiry which focuses on the role of rituals developed in relationships was born. This includes family rituals (see Baxter and Braithwaite, 2006; Fiese et al., 2002, for a history of the concept), couple rituals (Campbell, 2003) or friendship rituals (Bruess and Pearson, 2002). Conceiving of ritual as a genre of communication events, Baxter and Braithwaite (2006) explore a variety of family rituals, from formal events such as weddings or religious confirmations to less formal, such as 'the adoption day' celebration, 'family game night' or the use of nicknames.

In addition, Baxter and Braithwaite (2006) identified some of the functions and roles of these rituals. Although non-instrumental, family rituals are involved in constructing and sustaining the family identity and bringing cohesion, closeness (bonding) and affection, expressing and transforming the social roles of the family members, evaluating and prescribing certain family values (thus, imbued with 'sacredness').

Previously, Wolin and Bennett (1984) examined family rituals. The results of their study (for example, that an intergenerational transmission of alcoholism happened when parental alcohol abuse produced an interruption of family rituals) suggested a connection between family rituals and the health and well-being of family members. Another study supporting this idea is the one of Braithwaite et al. (1998), who found that blended family rituals, which paid homage to both old and new families, seem to promote a better adaptation of children in blended families (resulted following divorce and remarriage). In addition, rituals were found to have important functions in friendships and marriage relationships (Bruess and Pearson, 2002). For married couples, Bruess and Pearson (2002) identified several categories of ritual functions, including: Relational Maintenance, Fun/Enjoyment, Togetherness and Talk-Time. For friendships, Bruess and Pearson's (2002) study proposed several ritual functions, including the following: Personal and Relational Stimulation, Personal Improvement, Support and Self-Affirmation. Moreover, higher quality relationships (translated in partner satisfaction), higher intimacy and commitment were associated with greater enactment of rituals among committed partners and married couples (Pearson et al., 2010; Bruess and Pearson, 2002; Fiese et al., 1993). Another study supporting the idea that rituals are important for relationships is the one of Berg-Cross et al. (1993), indicating that married couples reported a higher frequency of rituals than divorced ones.

Little attention has been paid to rituals or ritualisation in online games, and even less so in graphical MMORPGs, although efforts have been made towards conceptualising rituals in online settings, for example, see Danet (2005), Hammer (2005) or Copier (2005). In addition, in previous work, as part of the thesis submitted for my master's degree, I identified some of the rituals and elements of rituals in text-based MMOGs (Ghergu, 2007). In the virtual worlds of less graphical online games (where game mechanics are arid and the social interactions on the forums are, according to the interviewees, the most exciting part of the game), these elements are vital for the gameplay. However these studies were not concerned with relationship rituals such as the ones

mentioned above.

Up to this point, I described various uses of ritual, but I need to define ritualisation (ritualised) and ritual in this context. Since the terms audience or public are too restrictive for the MMOG players (who actively co-create their world through playing), perhaps the rituals of reception associated with the traditional media would be better called ritualised play or ritualised gaming. My definition of ritualised play is the following: a type of play which stands for something else, bigger than the immediate picture of 'just' play. It may stand for relationships (with the close or distant other) or for (social or individual) identity. Ritualised play is a concept which can explain some of the not yet elucidated phenomena surrounding MMOGs. For example, even players who are most focussed on the mechanics of the game (the rules more or less coded in the game structure) and view the game in an almost pragmatic manner admit that they do not play the game only for the game's sake. Sometimes, players do not fully understand the reason behind some of their actions in game. Although seeming somewhat out of place to the players who are focussed on the functionality of a game, these actions are still performed even by these players. Only rarely, an MMOG is 'just a game' and the actions performed within the game have no other meaning that transcends the game. If it is just a game, why does it matter whether one plays with their family, friends or romantic partners, alone or in random groups? If play consists only of sets of rules and one's allegiance to them, then that person should play the game in any circumstances where nothing tampers with these rules. If it were only a game, these other factors should not matter. But they matter. They matter to the point that they affect one's play and that person may even decide to stop playing temporarily (or altogether) if any or all of their preferences are not met. Moreover, in many cases, these factors make them play in the first place.

Actions such as playing due to and together with friends, partners or family are so distant from the rhetoric of 'the game is just a game' that they call for a new framework to explain them. This framework is ritualisation.

From a wider perspective, ritualisation is a phenomenon pervasive throughout human history and culture and its scope is not limited to online games (Bell, 1992). Nevertheless, for the purpose of this thesis, ritualisation will be defined as both a process and framework. As a process, ritualisation refers, on one hand, to creating or generating ritualised play (which relies heavily on secular rituals or elements of rituals) and, on the other hand, to the ritualised

play itself. As a framework, ritualisation will be used to describe and analyse some of the practices of playing together in two online games. The secular rituals and elements of rituals are acts (or performances) and elements which produce effects beyond causality, meaning that the ends are by far dispropor-tionate compared with the means used. This definition of ritual is based on the account of ritual of Zeitlyn (1994, 69)[who used the definition of Sperber (1975) for symbolism and completed it with the requirements of ceremonial and formality]. Rituals are more or less formalised and repetitive, but their most outstanding feature is being 'models', in the sense of the 'models and mir-rors' of Handelman (1998). Rituals do not only reflect the social reality and social order (by doing this they are 'mirrors') in a prescriptive (what ought to be) or subjunctive way (what would be), they create the social reality and social order (by doing that they are 'models'). Through ritualisation and its 'model' creation function, doing equals existing or creating to exist.

2.5   Discussion

In this chapter, I review the studies focusing on the social aspects of online games, with a special focus on research on practices of playing together. Re-search on gender swapping and on demographics, motivations, gratifications and preferences was also included, as it suggests that games are more than games, veritable spaces where relationships are formed and expressed.

One aspect of playing together explored by researchers was the social life of player associations. Previous research on other virtual settings established that they can foster the formation of groups, with functions similar to those of groups from real life, but characterised mostly by loose social ties. Online games also witnessed the formation of various player associations, some of them formal and official and others less so, and researchers found them invaluable as a resource for study. Much of the research concentrates on the formal and more stable groups which form in these environments, with few approaching less stable and less formal groups. However, most of the studies of player associations or the social aspects of online games revolve around cooperation and disregard contest and conflict as fundamental traits of these environments, with important functions for games and society at large. Thus, it is essential to include competition and conflict as well when investigating social aspects in online games and, in particular, playing together practices. More specifically, it is important to understand how conflict and competition influence grouping

and cohesion in online games.

Another social aspect of playing together investigated in online games was sociability. Sociability was also explored through ethnographic studies, for example those focusing on MUDs, CMC environments and MMOGs. Many of these studies envisioned sociability in the way Simmel (1949) envisioned it or focused on the closely related concept of 'third places' of Oldenburg (1999) and include authors such as Steinkuehler and Williams (2006); Brown and Bell (2006); Ducheneaut et al. (2007). Often, this leaves unexplained many of the social interactions in these games which, although having some communicative and expressive features, do not pertain to the dimension of verbal communication. Those social and emotional aspects which are expressed through actions other than communicational are largely ignored by most studies or reduced to quantitative approaches which identify the number of friends and family with whom one plays in the game (for example in the study of Williams et al., 2009) or validate pre-assumed negative or positive effects on relationships (Ogletree and Drake, 2007; Williams et al., 2009) or gameplay (Williams et al., 2009).

Although having a prominent importance (evidenced by the attempts to include these aspects), the social contexts of online gaming are the least investigated social aspects. While there has been some research showing that gamers play with their friends (and many of them are 'real life' friends), family and romantic partners, these studies are currently limited to (1) quantitative data, (2) one specific category of the three mentioned and (3) descriptions presenting some of the practices of playing together and their effects. Few of these studies considered the fundamental role of these activities of playing together for the initiation, maintenance, performance and enhancement of relationships and for gameplay (with the exception of Yee, 2001, 2005b,a, 2006c, 2008).

Since many of the 'social aspects' are expressed in online games through shared actions around objects, there is a need for more studies which take into account the action-oriented practices of playing together as well. One notable exception, is Carr and Oliver's (2009) study of couples playing *WoW*, which identified but did not analyse in depth various pleasures of playing together practices. This study focused on sharing things together (language, understanding the game, friends), learning together and, most importantly, on being and doing things together. Given that the complex web of interactions between playing together practices, relationships, introduction to and initiation in the game and gameplay only begin to be sketched, a more detailed analysis is needed.

Moreover, to the best of my knowledge, there is no unified interpretive framework accounting not only for why gamers play online games with friends, family and romantic partners, but also how and why online games play such important roles in forming, performing, maintaining and enhancing relationships.

It is precisely here that, I argue, ritualisation is very useful due to combining communicative, expressive, cognitive, affective and behavioural approaches to online games, players and their relationships and interactions. In addition, ritualisation reunites 'virtuality' (how things should or ought to be) and 'actuality' (effecting things to be or how the things are). In other words, it provides a way of looking at games not only as tools to effect transformations on relationships and roles, but also a way of establishing, performing (by this term I understand those actions through which relationships are effected and expressed) and maintaining them. Moreover, ritualisation sets a framework which legitimises conflict and competition as functional ways to express and regulate the 'social'.

Hence, ritualisation (in its mainstream and subversive forms) will be used to further analyse emergent playing together practices (including the creation of subversive social structures). Therefore, a review of the literature on ritual and ritualisation, which is the analytical framework of this thesis, together with my operationalisation of the concepts were included in this chapter.

Based on the ritualisation framework, I will explore some of the types of ritual from two online games and identify their functions from both the perspective of the gameplay and the relationships formed online or offline. In this context, concepts from the ritualisation domain which could generally be described as relationship rituals [such as *family rituals* (see Baxter and Braithwaite, 2006), *couple rituals* (Campbell, 2003) or *friendship rituals* (Bruess and Pearson, 2002)] are particularly suitable for the analysis of playing together practices in and around online games.

Chapter 3

Methods and ethical considerations

Ethnography was selected as the methodological framework of the present study due to its malleability, translated in adaptability to novelty and reflexivity about the method (Hine, 2000, 13,65). Whether referring to traditional or other types of settings, ethnography is usually described as a 'thick description' (intellectually pitted against a 'shallow description', which would limit itself to mirroring observable behaviours without dwelling too much on finding the meanings behind these), as Geertz (1973) proposed. The 'thick description' points to the aim of ethnographic endeavours to attempt to discover if there is a deeper meaning of observable behaviours (which often involves taking into consideration the context and symbolic universe in which certain behaviours occur). A definition of ethnography which best captures its effort to make visible that which is not visible and make familiar that which is unfamiliar (although it may also attempt to analyse behaviour and its underlying assumptions in familiar settings), is, perhaps, the following:

> Doing ethnography is like trying to read (in the sense of 'construct a reading of') a manuscript – foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherences, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behavior (Geertz, 1973).

Usually credited to having at its heart, among other methods, participant observation as a method for data collection and analysis, ethnography usually benefits from the latter's characteristics. A working definition of the participant observation method is the following:

> ...*participant observation* shall be defined as a field strategy that simultaneously combines documents analysis, respondent and informant interviewing, direct participation and observation, and introspection (Denzin, 1970, 185-186).

In particular, participant observation brings to ethnography a continuous refinement of its research design and hypotheses as well as the participation of the investigator in the world, activities and symbolic universe of those being studied (Denzin, 1970, 186-187). In choosing ethnography, I followed the tradition set forth by other ethnographic studies of online settings (where online and offline converge), ranging from blogs to virtual worlds, such as online multiplayer games and a metaverse (for example, Hine, 2000; Taylor, 2006b; Pearce, 2006; Consalvo, 2007; Boellstorff, 2008). The general principles of ethnography were followed, but were adjusted to the specificity of this research, as one shall see in this chapter.

Broadly used in anthropology and sociology, ethnography migrated lately to other fields of social inquiry, such Computer Mediated Communication (for example Hine 2000, 21; Bell 2001, 195). In the study of online settings, ethnography came to bear different names. Thus, the terms 'virtual ethnography', 'the ethnography of the virtual', 'cyberethnography', 'cyberspace ethnography' and 'the ethnography of the internet' refer to a variety of forms of ethnographic enquiry, more or less uniform in the way they designate the same area of research practices.

Hine (2000), for example, selected virtual ethnography as the research method employed. Rather than offering a static definition of virtual ethnography, I deliberately choose to let its principles, as they were identified by Hine (2000), operationalise the concept in action. Although referring to virtual ethnography, overall, the principles and features of virtual ethnography speak of ethnography in general (apart from the 'not quite'; see below). Among these principles, Hine (2000, 63-66) includes: the 'sustained presence' and the deep involvement of the ethnographer in the quotidian existence of the studied population; the de-localisation of ethnography and its transformation into a mobile ethnography; the shifting of the focus on 'flow and connectivity'; a rethinking of the fixed ethnographic object in terms of a pragmatic decision which can vary throughout an ethnography and the temporary engagement of both researchers and inhabitants of the online settings. Apart from these principles, Hine also mentions an undesired 'not quite' assigned to ethnography (Hine, 2000, 63-66), thought to be implied by the term 'virtual'. However,

the growing ethnographic tradition, in recent years, of doing ethnography in virtual settings meant that such methodological doubts are less and less the case.

However, for those who may still argue that the method used in this thesis is 'not quite' ethnography because of a temporary engagement of the researcher with the field, there is a powerful counterargument. Both the investigator and inhabitants of or voyagers to online settings have such a temporary relationship with the field (Hine, 2000, 63-66). In fact, they maintain such a temporary relationship with many of the settings in their life, either online or offline, and perform various roles in these settings. Each day, one traverses a multitude of settings in fulfilling their roles: one may be a wife at home, a researcher, a colleague or a friend in various circumstances at work, a student and a teacher at the university, a friend either face-to-face or through various media which allow communication, a customer in shops or a player of various online and offline games.

The malleability of (virtual) ethnography is its most invaluable asset. The characteristics of MMOGs as well as the particular issue investigated, that is ritualisation (as well as its subversive type), make them difficult to approach through methodologies other than ethnography because of their complexity.

The main technique used in the current research was to conduct interviews with respondents-players of the two games, who have various degrees of knowledge of the games being studied (with most of the interviewees having an extensive knowledge of the games). The interviews were mainly semi-structured, open-ended and only as a second choice, conversational. They were undertaken either through instant messaging software programs or by e-mail, each lasting approximately between one and three hours. Although loosely structured, open-ended interviews are preferred in ethnographic research, the preference of the players for more structured interviews was observed in a previous study on *Star Kingdoms* (Ghergu, 2007). A compromise was reached and open-ended, semi-structured interviews (for chat and face-to-face interactions) as well as open-ended, structured interviews (for e-mail) were designed. They had largely the same structure, but with the difference that the semi-structured ones featured more questions depending on the answers of players. Follow-up questions were often sent, mostly in the case of the structured interviews, to clarify some aspects or ask for more details.

Additional techniques, such as observation and participant observation (on the forums and in the games) were employed to: (*i*) to familiarise myself with

the highly specialised language used between the players (in and out of the game), prior to conducting the interviews; (*ii*) gain insider knowledge about the culture, the social aspects within and around the games and the rules of the games, (*iii*) as well as get to know the basic game mechanics and more about the world of the games. These were invaluable during the interviews, as they allowed to tailor the interviews and focus on certain aspects and also allowed me to relate my experiences to the ones of the interviewees and see where they converge and where they diverge.

Thus, it was possible to triangulate the data from the interviews with data from observation and participant observation. Therefore, a definition of 'triangulation' must be provided to offer an idea of its place in the design of the research. Triangulation is a powerful device which allows the researcher to verify the reliability and address the limitations of any method or technique used. It is usually considered to be already embedded in the participant observation method due to the fact that the latter may consist of a series of techniques ranging from observation, participation, structured, semi-structured or unstructured interviewing to the collection and the analysis of written or audio-visual materials (Denzin 1970, 297; see also Mann and Stewart 2000, 87-88).

Having additional perspectives upon the aspect under scrutiny is desirable, as it is a challenging task for the ethnographer not to equate what people think or say with their actual actions. As reminded by Forsythe (2001, 138-139), anthropology was and still is concerned with the inconsistencies between the verbal representation and action. An ethnographic study of online settings (including MMOGs) does not differ too much from this point of view, requiring particular attention to the elicitation of the verbal and mental representations of players relating to the game experiences. In addition, care is usually necessary when the researcher deals with the observation of the behaviours, expectations, feelings, motivations and gratifications of the players, which are situated at the boundary of consciousness, constituting what Forsythe (2001, 138) names the 'tacit knowledge' of the insiders. This is where the flexibility of ethnography plays a central role, mainly through the method of participant observation. This tacit knowledge is difficult to elicit only through interviews and without actually playing the game, as, most of the time, neither the interviewees, nor the researcher are aware of such knowledge. It is accessible through the reflexive observation and participation of the researcher (although a good informant might be able to convey it to the researcher).

There are many advantages for exploring ritualisation in and around MMOGs through ethnographic research. Among these advantages, an important one is the multidimensional perspective on the games, which considers the players (how the players conceive of, experience and modify the game), the researcher (the researcher as player and its particular experiences with the game) and the game (the choice of design concerning the game mechanics and rules, which conveys the point of view of the developers with various degrees of adjustment to the desires and expectations of the players). Not only was ethnography considered the most effective with respect to qualitative data gathering, its methods were viewed as the most adequate to deal with the sensitive nature of the experience of play. When pursuing research from an ethnographical perspective, the unobtrusiveness of the researcher depends on the ethnographer's knowledge and talent to negotiate consent (Forsythe, 2001, 137). Thus, the researcher must know how to balance obtaining consent with the respect due to any human activity, including play. In the view of Huizinga (1949, 60-64), play is an experience which is envisaged frail or 'labile'. While participant observation is not truly an unobtrusive method for conducting research (especially when the emphasis is on the participation aspect), the ethnographic approach entails flexibility and empathy from the researcher's part. The degree of observing, participating and employing other methods as well as the appropriate place to employ them is not fixed. Thus, the methods or techniques must always be balanced to obtain the desired result, that is, conducting the research without posing any unnecessary burdens on the subjects. For example, contrary to my original intention of conducting interviews within *WoW* or *SK*, the interviews were held mostly in online settings, but outside the games themselves. The games were not considered suitable for hosting interviews due to many reasons, including the possibility that the interviews could endanger the entertainment function of games, the fast pace of the in-game interactions in *WoW* (which would have made interviews difficult and biased the sampling process further) and the fact that the developers may have had access to communications (within the games or from the games' official forums). Thus, there was the risk of compromising the anonymity of the interviewees, with possible consequences for their gaming experiences.

By employing observation techniques combined with the researcher's immersion in the social environment of focus, traditionally, participant observation offers a viable solution to the issues of authenticity and reliability of the accounts of the interviewees. The difficulty of this task is also increased

by the fact that the whole initiative would now weigh on the discernment of one person, the ethnographer. She or he is the one who will ascertain the reliability of informants and their stories. Nevertheless, the solution offered is not infallible for the ethnographer is subject to error as all human beings are. Moreover, authenticity in the virtual domain should be regarded as connected with the issue of identity on the internet (where, in many cases, anonymity is the accepted norm rather than an exception) and treated as such, rather than problematic and central (Hine, 2000, 49). Informed by this perspective, I did not try to investigate if my informants were who they said they were (although they often offered data from their offline lives), as it is believed that this aspect does not have a significant impact on the results.

Many researchers, especially ethnographers, feel very strongly that a comprehensive study of a particular online game includes the study of all available communities, activities, and materials related to that game or topic of interest (Taylor, 2006b, 57). Sometimes, this is difficult to achieve or simply not possible due to the large number of communities and materials. By directing the attention toward all instances where a certain community is enacted or toward all facets of a studied phenomenon, the ethnographers work to overcome the restrictions of the medium and to achieve the cultural anthropology's ideal of a comprehensive description. Their view is also motivated by the fact that the researcher's access to many of the activities and communication patterns characterising online in-game communities is technically bounded (for example the 'whisper' mode of communication between players, where what is being said is 'heard' only by some of the players). Attempting to address such issues, beside observation in the game and on the official forums, participation in the game and on the forums and conducting interviews, I observed out-of-game forums (run by the players of the two games or belonging to private companies), read posts on the official sites of the games, including official press releases, viewed audio-video, game-related materials (videos, parodies and comedies on *Youtube*) or documents from mass media (articles). Indeed, these materials allowed me to get in contact with the wider culture surrounding these games, its intertextuality as well as the stereotypes which circulate in other media. The latter explain why some interviewees expressed their concern about being misrepresented in the study through the usual stereotypes (among which one can mention addiction, loneliness and deviance).

Participant observation method, has been argued, has many benefits for the study of MMOGs. Not only that the immersion in the researched social

settings brings the ethnographer closer to what sociality means in these settings and how it is achieved in that culture, but also into the experiences of an insider almost from an insider's point of view, for the researcher undergoes first a socialisation phase. The description resulting from participant observation provided an autoethnographic insight, bringing forth the feelings, desires, projections, anxieties, motivations and experiences of the investigator as player. However, the intention of this thesis was to foreground the experiences and perspectives of other players and not to emphasise on the researcher's own experimentation with playing MMOGs. Defending autoethnography against the label of self-indulgence frequently attached to it, Sparkes (2002, 222) enumerates its multiple benefits: 'autoethnographies can encourage acts of witnessing, empathy, and connection that extend beyond the self of the author and thereby contribute to social understanding in ways that, among others, are self-knowing, self-respectful, self-sacrificing, and self-luminous'. Some of these benefits were enthusiastically embraced, but not without precautions being taken against converting the thesis into a self-portrait of the ethnographer's playfulness. A reflexive perspective is welcome for its ability to confer manageable pre-testing grounds and a grasp on the gameplay and game world. For both data gathering and analytical processes, reflexivity may prove to be a reliable adjacent tool suitable to uncover what is taken for granted by players or the researcher. In addition, it can expose or leave out the covert or assumed biases. Likewise, Hine (2000, 65) notices the reflexive dimension of virtual ethnography (conceiving the researcher as informant), indicating that "the ethnographer's engagement with the medium is a valuable source of insight". Thereby, playing is the only way of understanding this experience, because the game by itself is only a part of it (Newman, 2004, 2-3).

3.1 The fields: advantages and challenges

The games studied are *Star Kingdoms* (*SK*), which is a real-time strategy game (with a graphical interface but still text-based), sometimes with added elements of role-playing, and *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*), which is an adventure role-playing game (graphical). A more detailed description of the two games of the MMOG type will be found in the chapter entitled 'The description of the games' and, for *SK*, in the chapter on 'Subversive ritualisation'. Next, I will present some of the advantages and challenges associated with doing fieldwork within and in relation to these games, but more challenges will be

found elsewhere in this methods chapter.

These games were selected due to their longevity, ability to form and maintain communities and for their differences. Since I wanted to see if ritualisation is specific to one particular type of game, for example, the browser-based strategy games, such as *SK*, or if it is a phenomenon characterising other genres of games as well, I chose two games representing two very different types of games, *SK* and *WoW*. In addition, these two games seemed and proved to be very suitable for the aim of this thesis to explore various types and functions of ritualisation, as they engendered communities with rich cultures.

Turning from the ethnography of remote places to the ethnography of the familiar involves multiple transformations with respect to the methodology. The apparent online or offline partition of the field and, subsequently, of the fieldwork is just one of the challenges which have to be surmounted by the methodological approaches. From early on, the researchers of online settings have been preoccupied with how to best fit such perceived online or offline division of the field with the data collection practices. In a response to the earlier ethnographic approaches to computer-mediated communication (CMC) as a bounded social space where online cultures manifest themselves, some ethnographers studying online communities draw the attention to the artificiality of a forced boundary between online and offline, to the detriment of the latter or of both of them (Hine, 2000, 27). One solution offered would be to attempt to incorporate into analysis as much as is possible from online, but also offline interactions or to limit any barren dichotomy such as 'game and nongame, social and game, on- and offline, virtual and real – [which] not only misunderstands our relationship with technology, but our relationship with culture' (Taylor, 2006b, 153). Another solution would be a sustained investigation of whether players make such delimitations: "Boundaries are not assumed a priori but explored through the course of ethnography. The challenge of virtual ethnography is to explore the making of boundaries and the making of connections, especially between the 'virtual' and the 'real' " (Hine, 2000, 27). I attempted to include all these solutions in the design of the research. Hence, open-ended questions have been created and the players were offered opportunities to express their opinions on the topics they considered fit to be included in the study. Additionally, conversational interviews in face-to-face settings were held. All these 'probing' devices were used to reach to the perspectives and assumptions of the players.

Although acknowledging the value of a holistic approach and the role of

offline context in shaping online interactions, other researchers cordon off the online from the offline world, for example Mason (2007), who deliberately chooses to concentrate his analysis solely on the online aspect of community to explore the limitations of this methodology. In her ethnography which explores the relationship between online and offline, Hine (2000, 76) has narrowed her perspective solely to online interactions mainly for practical reasons. She states that asking people about their offline behaviour would not have been useful and would have implied an *a priori* difference between online and offline. Supporting her approach to online, Hine (2000, 65) draws the attention that 'virtual ethnography is necessarily partial', a holistic perspective on a culture being more an ideal than an achievable reality (which is true of all ethnography).

In a similar vein to Turkle (1995, 324), I attempted to triangulate data from participant-observation with offline interviews. As expected, given the international player base (and differences between the researcher and the interviewees in terms of geographic locations), such an approach turned out not to be feasible in most cases. Hence, only two of the semi-structured interviews were face-to-face and several other face-to-face interviews were conversational. However, it is not likely that much data have been lost by using online interviews.

3.2 Types of data and ethical considerations

Several data types were collected:

- DT1: interviews;

- DT2: written fieldnotes;

- DT3: screen shots;

- DT4: logs (see definition below);

- DT5: written, audio, and video materials.

The interviews were held mostly online via popular instant messaging software or e-mail (in this latter case, the questions were sent by e-mail and, upon receiving the answers, follow-up questions were delivered), but also face-to-face (in the case of two semi-structured interviews and several others which were

conversational). Only one face-to-face semi-structured interview was stored as an audio recording.

This research focussed on collecting and analysing qualitative data. Hence, I chose a sampling method which privileged finding interviewees willing to participate in in-depth interviews and share their experiences related to the game, discuss their relationships and interactions born around the game or their opinions or knowledge about how others play, rather than meeting strict representativeness criteria. I did not aim to offer a perspective on all the social facets of *World of Warcraft* or *Star Kingdoms* nor to investigate the most frequent behaviours. Rather, I wanted to explore aspects of ritualisation and its functions, without any claims that this has been treated exhaustively. Thus, representativeness was not central to this study.

To construct a sample of players for the interviews, a non probability sampling method, namely purposive sampling, was used. This means that a sample was constructed with the purpose of this research in mind (see above). From the purposive sampling techniques I have selected the snowball sampling, which consists in approaching players that are recommended by other players interviewed, combined with a convenience sampling (Mann and Stewart, 2000, 78-79). The samples were relatively small, especially for *World of Warcraft*. Small samples are a common practice in virtual ethnography (for example, Hine used 10 interviews in her virtual ethnography), which is less concerned with a strict methodological stance and more with identifying the underlying phenomena (Hine, 2000, 71-76). For a discussion about the validity of the results based on this type of sample, please see Section 3.4.

The written field notes were preferred for recording observational data to logs or screen shots, which were considered to pose more ethical and technical problems concerning the quality of image, proper storage, archiving and retrieval, and, not least, anonymity. However, techniques from visual anthropology, which involved taking and saving screen shots, were used. Logs are threads of communication which preserve some identifiers, such as the date, the hour of the conversation, the game's structures to which the character-player belongs and the screen name of the player. The logs were employed mainly to record the in-game communication on the chat and forums of *Star Kingdoms*. The logs from the game which were used were processed in the form of written field notes. Usually, direct quotations from the logs were avoided. However, when used, all identifying information was treated as in the case of the excepts from the interviews: it was dissimulated (nicknames were given)

or removed, unless otherwise requested by the players. Quotations (from logs or interviews) linking to 'real' screen names or real names of the players were used only at the express desire of the players.

The issues of processing, collecting, and archiving the data were considered as indissolubly connected with the data gathering methods from an ethical point of view. One of the most important issues, from an ethical standpoint, is the one of negotiating informed consent. This needs to be discussed apart, but not separately from the methods employed.

The two games studied have different policies[1] toward monitoring conversations on their realms, which reflects a wider pool of opinions on this topic within the game industry. The developers of *Star Kingdoms* conceive the in-game communication as belonging to the public domain, and draws the attention of the players that everything being done or said may be under scrutiny and used by everyone. On the other hand, to the best of my knowledge, the developers of *World of Warcraft* say nothing about the status of the communications in their game. They do mention that they disallow using automated tools to extract information from the game (but this seems to refer to pieces of software which disturb the game's functionality by getting some of the game's data by force), how they treat the information they receive from the customers (general privacy issues) and warn parents to guard their children from offering information online.

Regardless of these policies and in accordance with the anthropological ethical guidelines, I have been upfront about who I was and the fact that I was conducting research, via in-game postings (repeated periodically when necessary, but not too aggressively), apart from brief encounters and in less stable social groupings, where it has not been practical to do so (see also Karlsen, 2008, for a similar approach). I asked the consent of the players whose behaviours I studied and conversations monitored in more stable social groupings, with the exception of those brief encounters characterised by fast paced action mentioned above. Moreover, I always asked and was given the consent of the people I interviewed (for formal, informal and conversational interviews). When arranging the date and place of the interview, a message was sent to the player, comprising: the identity of the researcher, her affiliated institution, the purpose of the research, the issues regarding confidentiality, the possibility to withdraw from the study at any time until the submission of the thesis and to access the data regarding the progress and final results of the research, at a later stage (via blogs). When holding the actual interview

I asked the interviewee to confirm one more time that (if) they were over 18 years old. I decided to select only participants in the interviews that were over 18 years old due to the difficulty of obtaining parental consent over the internet and the unreliability of such consent. As a result, the data may not reflect the experiences of younger players and their motivations (although it is still possible that they do).

Protecting the identities of the subjects entails, in addition to disguising critical data, treating the nick-names of the players' characters and their real offline data with equal importance (Hine 2000, 24; Turkle 1995, 324) when they desired so. Beside dealing with such issues, any study on games should include a sort of 'play' ethics. For the players of MMOGs, the experience of play deserves the utmost attention, and the ideal objective for researchers is to conduct investigations while disturbing their subjects as little as possible (for research purposes or otherwise). My commitment to the 'play' ethics is visible from the methodological approaches in the sections detailing the methodological aspects of studying ritualisation in the two games.

3.3   Analytical methods

Ethnography itself (and even participant observation) is considered both a data collecting and analytical framework. In addition to having an ethnographic approach to the analysis of the data, I employed a qualitative content analysis method, namely a thematic analysis applied to the text of the interviews (both with and without the use of software to assist the analytical process). Moreover, general and specific guidelines and principles drawn from the ethnography of communication and ethnography of speaking were employed for analytical purposes and data gathering techniques.

The ethnography of communication and ethnography of speaking underline communication as an important part of the socio-cultural system (Bauman and Sherzer 1974, 6; Gumpertz and Hymes 1972, 13). Speech is deemed to be 'the principal instrument of social interaction' by the two approaches (Bauman and Sherzer, 1974, 6) and, by extending its sphere, communication plays an equally central role. The aims of both sub-disciplines is to uncover the social aspects by looking at their visible manifestations: speech, in particular, and communication (in its verbal and non-verbal forms), in general. Therefore, their general principles are very useful in the study of many online settings where the sphere of other types of behaviour (for instance, actions or emo-

tions) is limited to or expressed mainly through communication (for example in *SK*). Other researchers also noticed the heightened orality of some online settings (Mason 2007), and online games are among these. Note, however, that orality does not necessarily refer to verbal communication, but rather to the transience of the speech (here, meaning simply 'utterances', but usually understood as verbal utterances of a particular language) and a focus on conveying the message faster by shortening the form (i.e, the abbreviations used online).

Another advantage for using virtual ethnography is the long established tradition of ethnography in ritual studies. This tradition has strong influences on both the methods used for data collection and analysis.

3.4 Methodological aspects of studying ritualisation in World of Warcraft

World of Warcraft was selected as one of the games investigated in this study due to its large, international subscriber base, its long-time existence and popularity, enduring traditions and wealth of culture. The fact that *WoW* caters for multiple styles of play, attracting a wide variety of players, is also one of the reasons for which it was selected. *WoW* is a sizeable phenomenon and the following information will give an idea of the extent of its popularity. On 22nd January 2008, *Blizzard Entertainment*, the developer and publisher of *World of Warcraft* announced in a press release that *World of Warcraft* reached 10 million subscribers, with more than 2.5 million players in North America, 2 million in Europe and approximately 5.5 million in Asia (Blizzard Entertainment, 2008a). Approximately one year afterwards, on 23rd December 2008, Blizzard Entertainment announced a record level of subscription for *WoW*, which reached 11.5 million players (Blizzard Entertainment, 2008b). In this press release, the company links this record to the success of the launch of its expansion '*Wrath of the Lich King*' (which saw a 4 million first-month sale), on 13th November 2008. The same press release goes into some detail about the company and lists its most prominent achievements. *Blizzard Entertainment, Inc.*, a division of *Activision Blizzard*, is a well known developer and publisher of entertainment software which created many successful games and has its own online gaming service, '*Battle.net*', which they claim to have millions of users and be one of the largest in the world. Besides *World of Warcraft*, among the popular games developed by this company, one can mention the *Warcraft*,

StarCraft and the *Diablo* series. The company also boasts several 'Game of the Year awards' and eleven 'number 1-selling games'.

Both *WoW* and its publisher (Blizzard Entertainment) have dedicated pages on *Wikipedia* and several forums and databases have content based on the *WoW* universe, including *wowhead.com*, *thottbot.com* and *wowwiki.com*. A *Google*[2] search on 'world of warcraft' yielded 187,000,000 results on 5th November 2011, which may indicate the popularity of the *WoW* phenomenon.

The study on *World of Warcraft* was conducted between October 2008 - April 2010. The research focussed on undertaking semi-structured and structured interviews with players from *WoW* (between January 2010 - April 2010). Although the original intention was to conduct the interviews in *WoW*, it soon became apparent that the fast pace of the in-game interactions between players were hardly suitable for holding an in-game interview. The very stage of constructing a sample of interviewees was made difficult by this highly dynamic environment. Most likely, it would have been challenging to include in the sample the players who were very focussed on the game. Most players were there to enjoy the game and relax (some interviewees emphasised on the escapism as the reason for playing the game) and attending an interview was considered to contradict this objective. Moreover, it would have been hard to find a place in the game, accessible to both the investigator and the interviewee, where an interview could be held without interruptions from other players (who might have disturbed the conversation, at least on a visual level).

The qualitative and quantitative results obtained from the interviews were combined with data obtained through observation (of the gameplay, both in and out of the game, and on the forums) and participant observation in the analysis. The participant observation resulted in field-notes and was conducted in two ways: first, by playing myself (by creating two characters: Eufonia, a female Human paladin, and Adeea, a female Human warrior) and secondly, by attending two playing sessions of a gamer starting to play the game for the first time who consented to being observed (in the period end of January 2010 - February 2010). The data from the participant observation and observations (which took the form of written field notes and screen shots) were collected in two phases: the first phase was between the beginning of October 2008 - beginning of January 2009 and the second phase was between end of January 2010 - February 2010. For this, two pre-paid game cards with a duration of 60 days and one free extra month were purchased (separately).

The sample for the interviews was chiefly self-selected, although the snow-

balling technique was also used. Originally, 76 players offered to be interviewed, but only 50 went through with the process (from them, players under 18 years old have not been selected due to ethical considerations). More about the general focus on qualitative findings rather than on the representativeness of the sample was discussed previously.

Most of the interviewees were recruited on *WoW*-related *Facebook* groups, with many of them targeted to female players. Because of this and the fact that the sample was self-selected, a larger cohort of female players was obtained when compared with male players. This did not reflect the accepted gender ratio among *WoW* players from previous studies (Yee, 1999). Because the sample over-represented females and under-represented males in the population, weighting was considered and used as a way to compensate for this sampling bias (see Johnson, 2008). In most cases, the results have been weighted to reflect the gender ratio proposed by Yee (84% males and 16% females) and to offer a better perspective on how my sample compares to data considered to reflect the general population of *WoW* players.

The sampling might be biased toward a more social player, but the pool of players interviewed for this thesis included also 'solo' players (who preferred to play by themselves). Other types of biases might have been countered by the fact that the players, many of whom were experienced and knowledgeable about gaming, were also asked to give their opinions in relation to other players and their preferences. In addition, many of these players qualified as experts, some of them being game developers themselves, beta testers (the testers employed before the official launch) or leaders of official player structures.

For *World of Warcraft*, 50 semi-structured and structured interviews were conducted in formal settings, in which 21 males and 29 females (49 via email or instant messaging and one face to face) participated. A few other, mostly informal, face-to-face interviews (3 males and 1 female, among whom there was a couple who were playing together) were held. When conducting semi-structured interviews, a general design was followed and most of the questions addressed pre-established topics or themes. However, these questions were open-ended and the interviewees were able to choose their own focus when answering each of the questions. In addition, follow-up questions were asked to clarify some answers or to explore some of the areas uncovered by the answers of the players. On many occasions, the players were also asked to feel free to add something that they felt was missing in the questions or was relevant to the game or their experiences in the game.

A large amount of time was spent to promote my research on *Facebook* groups to recruit interviewees. This involved activities which had much in common with advertising and marketing techniques. I targeted the 'audiences', in my case represented by the potential interviewees, by designing specific messages in ways consistent with the declared aim of the group, its policies and etiquette and, simultaneously, paying attention to any issues raised. The initial message contained a summary of the study as well as methods to contact me for more details. Once the potential interviewee contacted me, a new message would follow. The new message would offer more details about the study (if asked), contain arrangements for a date and medium for the interview and ask for (informed) consent. The threads had to be renewed constantly (by posting new content) to keep the thread on the first two pages of the group (which are similar to a discussion board).

The interviews were analysed mainly using qualitative content analysis, with the aid of an open-source piece of software designed for assisting in the analysis of textual data, *Weft QDA* (Fenton, 2006b,a). I selected this software due to it being a free, relatively flexible, easy to use piece of software with a simple and intuitive interface and my commitment to using software offering a public domain licence (because of the portability and access issues which most commercial software packages have).

Since the interviews were semi-structured and structured, the answers were already divided into themes (each theme corresponding to a group of questions referring to the same issue). A thematic analysis was performed to identify sub-themes (sub-categories) corresponding to each of the themes (categories). Additionally, quantitative analysis (mainly by computing frequencies) was also employed. The quantitative data presented in this thesis should be taken with due consideration and care because of the very small size of the sample and the non-probability sampling method used (that is it was not a random sample) which do not allow strong claims of representativeness. However, it is suggested that they provide a quantitative background for the qualitative data, which can be compared with more quantitative studies employing bigger samples (although still self-selected) from the existent literature, for example with data from the *Daedalus project* (Yee, 1999, 2005d) or from the study of Williams et al. (2009).

The average age of the *WoW* players who were interviewed in this study is 29.2 (with standard deviation of $SD = 9.1$ and sample size of $N = 49$). The current average age is similar, but slightly higher than the one from the

literature (compare to 28.3 below) and can be explained by the fact that I did not take into consideration the category of players who were under 18 years old and those players who contacted the researcher initially, but it has not been possible to contact them again. (From this latter category, if those who gave their age are included, an average age of 28.7, $SD = 9.7$, $N = 60$ was obtained.) As expected, female players are older (with a mean of $M = 29.9$, standard deviation of $SD = 8.8$ and sample size of $N = 29$) than male players ($M = 28.3$, $SD = 9.8$, where $N = 20$). On average, the players interviewed spend 26.7 ($SD = 16.3$, $N = 46$) hours per week playing *WoW*, with males spending approximately 29 hours and females 25 hours per week. The above data were computed with *QtiPlot* (Vasilief, 2004), a software for data analysis and scientific visualisation and the OpenOffice.org spreadsheet application. The results were close to the ones provided by Yee's (2005d) study, although certain differences were noted concerning the age of female players and average playing time per week.

According to Yee (2005d), the average age of the *WoW* player is 28.3 ($SD = 8.4$), 84% of players are male and 16% are female. Female players are significantly older ($M = 32.5$, $SD = 10.0$) than male players ($M = 28.0$, $SD = 8.4$). On average, they spend 22.7 ($SD = 14.1$) hours per week playing *WoW*. The author also observed that there were no gender differences in hours played per week. It is possible that the successive new patches added to the game to have increased the desire of the players to play the game, thus resulting in more hours played per week or it is simply a consequence of sampling biases. For instance, the differences could be explained by the fact that the current study does not include players under 18, but in another study, Yee (1999) did not observe any difference in playing time among generations for MMORPG players in general.

3.5 Methodological aspects of studying ritualisation in Star Kingdoms

Star Kingdoms was chosen due to its fair amount of popularity (for an extended period), long-lasting existence, sense of community and variety of traditions. This makes it perfect for investigating the history of the creative actions of its players. Due to the game being based on rounds, at the beginning of which the game starts anew, some of its players return to the game from time to time. This means that the origin of some traditions was not forgotten, the

researcher being able to trace it and also track down one of the originators of some of these creative actions and ask about her motivations.

One of the methodological challenges encountered was that exploring the emerging, unofficial social structures such as the UAs was a delicate task because of their secrecy and tendency to exist in a grey area. They stirred a lot of controversies in *Star Kingdoms'* world and it was difficult to find players involved in these structures willing to talk about their experiences. Most probably, some players would not want their name or nickname associated with these secret structures and risk the current or future gaming experience by drawing punitive measures from the game developers and, possibly, from fellow players. Because of the controversies surrounding UAs, the current research settled, with two exceptions, with reports about these structures which fall in the category of social representations (for a definition see the chapter Subversive ritualisation).

I became familiar with *Star Kingdoms* when the game still enjoyed some popularity, while conducting research for my Master's degree (October 2004 - August 2005 and 1st January 2007 - 29 January 2007). In that study I investigated elements belonging to the ritual dimension of *SK* (Ghergu, 2007), but not the Underground Alliances. Thus, the chapter about subversive ritualisation is based mainly on research conducted during 30 October 2008 - 1 January 2009 and 2nd January - 2 March 2009, period characterised by low number of players and decreased activity on its forums. The research consisted of participant observation and observation within the game and on the in-game forums, combined with obtaining 7 in-depth semi-structured and structured interviews with players from *SK* (1 by e-mail and 6 by instant messaging software). The interview by e-mail was with an influential (female) ex-player and consisted of a series of e-mails sent back and forth between the researcher and the interviewee. Overall, the interviews consisted of open ended questions, which touched on the topics of interest. If an issue was brought to my attention, it was investigated further, through follow-up questions. For sampling, self-selected sampling was used (the interviewees were recruited by sending an in-game message to which several players responded) in conjunction with a snowballing technique. Most of the interviewees were knowledgeable, prominent players (and one ex-player), with multiple connections or friends and holding important political functions in the game.

The average age of the *SK* players who were interviewed in this study is 26.5 ($SD = 6.4$, $N = 6$). (By taking into consideration other players who

submitted their age and sex, an overall average age of 24.2 ($SD = 5.1$, $N = 12$) was computed. There were no female players in the sample, which reflected the overwhelming majority of the male population in the game. The above data were computed with *QtiPlot* (Vasilief, 2004). The players interviewed spend from a couple of minutes daily to almost 10 hours per day playing *SK*.

The analysis of the interviews was qualitative content analysis of the text of the interviews. I also drew on the ethnography of communication (Bauman and Sherzer, 1974; Gumpertz and Hymes, 1972). As with the interviews focussing on *World of Warcraft*, a thematic analysis was performed to identify sub-themes (sub-categories) corresponding to each of the themes (categories) already embedded in each set of questions. This time, due to the smaller volume of texts, software was not employed to assist with the analysis.

Chapter 4

The description of the games

Before embarking on investigating aspects of ritualisation in the games selected, *World of Warcraft* and *Star Kingdoms*, this chapter offers an overview of the two games. I will present aspects related to the history, general rules and gameplay of the games (a more detailed presentation and analysis of the rules of *Star Kingdoms* can be found in the chapter on subversive ritualisation). In addition, the researcher's play will be described in both games.

4.1 Short history and description of World of Warcraft (WoW)

World of Warcraft (*WoW*) is a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (abbreviated MMORPG) owned by Blizzard Entertainment, which draws on and expands the fantasy universe of the *Warcraft* series of strategy games (Blizzard Entertainment, 2011). In turn, the series finds inspiration from the *Dungeons and Dragons*, table top, role-playing games. *WoW* was released for North America on November 23, 2004 (Van Autrijve, 2004). On the same date, the game launched as well in Australia and New Zealand, followed soon by Korea. After its successful debut in North America and Korea, the European launch of *World of Warcraft* took place on 11 February, 2005 (Blizzard Entertainment, 2005).

This description is based on data from the Beginner's Guide posted on the `http://eu.battle.net/` website (which was considered the developers' view) combined with details from the participant observation and the players' experiences as they resulted from the formal and informal interviews. The game has a medieval feel and is described by its developers as 'an online game

where players from around the world assume the roles of heroic fantasy characters and explore a virtual world full of mystery, magic, and endless adventure' (Blizzard Entertainment, 2011).

World of Warcraft has manifold goals (with players often describing it as being akin to many games in one). The players control one or more characters to, for example, take part in quests, fight other players or monsters (also called 'mobs'), gain experience points or gold, learn abilities and professions, find or craft artefacts and sell them at the Auction House or to vendors, obtain weapons and armour and explore the vast world of Azeroth (the principal world where *WoW* adventures take place).

WoW requires a connection to the internet and the purchase of a card with the game client (the game client can be downloaded over the internet as well) and a timecard which gives you access to the game for a specified amount of time. Alternatively, one can set up a subscription, by paying a fee in blocks of one month, three months or six months. New content is continuously added to the original game, in the form of regular patches (which solve bugs and address design issues as well) and expansions. There are four extensions available for purchase (online and offline) at the moment of writing this thesis (and there were only two available at the moment of undertaking the research): *The Burning Crusade* (*BC*), *Wrath of the Lich King* (*WotLK*), *Cataclysm* and *Mists of Pandaria* (presented in a chronologically ascending order). Overall, the developers boast 'hundreds of hours of gameplay content' available for players in *WoW* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2011).

While *World of Warcraft* can be played solo, much of the advanced content of the game (called 'endgame' content by the players) is focussed on groups of gamers playing together as a team in view of defeating powerful monsters (or 'bosses') located in dungeons (a view shared by both developers and players).

Ideally, the game offers 'persistent online personae' and a persistent world (Blizzard Entertainment, 2011), which means that the game's data are automatically saved and stored online, allowing the player-character to continue from where the game was left when logging out. The levels that characters reach in the game and the goods and abilities they acquire in the game are automatically saved online for the next gaming session.

Like many other MMORPGs, *WoW* is set in a fantasy universe, which draws on Tolkien's[3] universe (inspired, in its turn, by the Germanic mythology), populated by Men (humans), Elves and Dwarves. The following excerpt suggests the fantasy atmosphere that the developers of *WoW* wish to create:

> Azeroth is a world of swords and sorcery. Its lands are home to a vast number of races and cultures, led by kings, chieftains, lords, ladies, archdruids, and everything in between. Some of Azeroths people share bonds of friendship reaching back thousands of years; others are sworn enemies with long histories of bitter hatred. Among all these different kingdoms, cultures, tribes, and territories, two major power blocs [Alliance and Horde] are locked in a struggle for dominance. [...] Epic as they may be, these wars between the mortal races pale in comparison to the malevolent forces threatening Azeroth from within and without. Deep beneath the surface of Azeroth, the terrible Old Gods mastermind the release of untold horrors upon the world; in the frozen wastes of the northern continent, a being of pure evil commands a vast army of undeath, ready to snuff out all life; and far across the stars, deep within the warped realm of the Twisting Nether, an unstoppable force of chaos and destruction thirsts to lead its demonic legion to Azeroth and to put the world to the flame (Blizzard Entertainment, 2011).

In *World of Warcraft*, the story line underpinning the game is focussed on the battle between two opposing factions, Alliance and Horde. Although their constant war is not meant to be taken as a battle between Good and Evil, some of the players consider Alliance to be 'the good guys' and Horde – 'the villains' (Nardi, 2010, 16). The aesthetics of the appearance of both Alliance and Horde races (with one exception from both sides at the moment of the research – Draenei for Alliance and Blood Elves for Horde) suggest 'good' (for Alliance) and 'evil' connotations (for Horde). Most of the Alliance races are designed with an 'anthropomorphic' focus (following a human-like form), while most of the Horde races are 'touched' by 'Otherness' (being either 'zoomorphic' – having an animal-like form – or being affected of some form of decay). Their native territories present similar aesthetics (Rausch, 2004b), with most Alliance lands being aesthetically pleasing and the Horde lands being in ruins (again, with the exception of Draenei and Blood Elves territories).

In order to start playing *WoW*, the player must choose first the realm (a server containing an identical copy of the game world) on which his or her character will be based. Although not strictly speaking a step in the character creation process, it may be considered as such because the realm choice may affect the gameplay significantly, since the whole realm has a focus on a particular style of play. *WoW* is a massively multiplayer game, which means it can

support thousands of players within its universe. However, for a game such as *WoW*, which has millions of active players, having all the players within the same game world would lead to overcrowding and technical problems. Thus, the *WoW* population is spread across different realms, which means that players cannot usually play and interact with players from other realms (because of this, players who intend to use the 'Recruit-A-Friend' feature of the game and want to play with a friend and gain benefits are advised to make sure that they select the same realm for their characters). There are four types of realm, linked to four different gameplay experiences: (*i*) 'NormalPlayer Versus Enemies' (player-versus-environment in other online games) is the standard type of realm, where players have, first, to consent (by either flagging themselves as available to fight any time or by accepting invitations to fight) before participating in player-versus-player fights and role-playing is optional; (*ii*) 'PvPPlayer Versus Player' where the players from the opposing faction are able to attack a player in most of the areas of the realm without prior consent and role-playing is optional; (*iii*) 'Normal-RPPlayer Versus Enemies – Role Playing' is a realm on which, in theory, the role-playing practices (defined and discussed below) should be the norm (in practice, according to some players, they only are in dedicated role-playing guilds), and the participation in player-versus-player fights is, again, subject to being accepted by all the parties first and (*iv*) 'PvP-RPPlayer Versus Player – Role Playing' realms are like the normal PvP realms, except for the fact that role-playing should be mandatory.

A next step in the character creation phase is to choose the race and class (defined below). The character creation part of the game is very important (both in the opinion of the players and developers). The Beginner's Guide cautions that race and class can affect to a great degree how one will play *World of Warcraft* and draws a difference between selecting the character's race which is seen as 'mostly a social choice' and the character's class, which is considered 'a gameplay choice' (Blizzard Entertainment, 2011). However, aside from purely instrumental reasons, the players offered idiosyncratic motivations for the selection of all three aspects of their character, for example, race, class and faction, ranging to affective, social and purely aesthetic. In *WoW*, the players can have many different characters, and many do choose to have more than one character. Their most frequently played character (or their most advanced) is usually referred to as their main and other characters as their 'alts' (although there are players who have more characters, but do not

have a main, or have more mains). Ducheneaut et al. (2009) indicate an average of 8 characters per *WoW* account, with one main and several 'alts'. Currently, players can have up to 50 characters (according to the players, the limit was much lower at the time of the research, somewhere around $10 - 20$ characters). Both the players and the developers see the process of creating multiple characters as a way to have a taste of different game experiences, by varying their 'race' and 'class', with the players adding even 'gender' and 'faction' among the variables. Some players do so to keep the game interesting and prevent boredom or when the game stalls because it gets too difficult.

The physical traits (general physical appearance) and faction (Horde or Alliance) of characters are determined by their race. Selecting the race is called by the developers 'a social choice' because it locks the character in a faction and the characters of a different faction cannot communicate and form groups. They are, however, able to perform a couple of emotes (gestures that a character produces when a certain command is typed or selected from a list). Note, though, that race affects available class in the sense that not all the classes are available to all the races (for instance, dwarf characters cannot be druids). The classic *World of Warcraft* (the one which I played) has eight races (the expansions adding four more). The race of the character should also offer what it is called 'racial abilities' (extra talents in a particular area). The Alliance races at the time of the current research were: Dwarf, Gnome, Human, Night Elf (with Worgen and Draenei being added later), and Horde races – Blood Elf, Orc, Tauren, Troll (with Goblin and Forsaken as later additions).

The class of a character is meant to be an extremely important decision in character creation in that it sets limits to what a character can or cannot do in the game, namely the character's abilities, strengths and weaknesses. The classes in *World of Warcraft* are: Warrior, Paladin, Hunter, Rogue, Priest, Death Knight (available at level 50), Shaman, Mage, Warlock, Druid. The Death Knight is a special class called a *hero class*. This class becomes available once a player has at least one character at level 50 (and players can have only one death knight per server), thus all Death Knights start at level 50. The class seems to have been introduced (with the launch of *WotLK*) to aid players getting to endgame with a new class without having to grind (strenuous levelling) for a long time. The talk about class also brings into discussion the role-playing characteristic of *WoW*.

According to the official view of *WoW* developers (Blizzard Entertainment, 2011), 'role-playing' refers to three different aspects in *WoW* (which is consid-

ered a role-playing game). They are related, nevertheless, in the sense that the 'table top' role-playing tradition on which they draw had at least two of these three aspects (the first and last). The first is concerned with the fact that each character has a particular role which consists of a specific set of skills and abilities (that is the character's class). The second aspect (connected to the first) refers to the role that a type of character may serve in a group setting. In a group engaged in an attack on a monster, a character may be either a 'tank' (who is able to withstand the damage that monster produces and can protect the more frail members of the group by taking the attacks upon themselves and drawing the monster's attention), a 'damage dealer' (who can inflict most damage in the shortest time and from a distance to the monster, but are vulnerable in close combat) or a 'healer' (who can heal and keep themselves and members of the group, mainly the tanks, alive through magical spells, but are usually not able to outperform other classes in terms of damage). A warrior can be an excellent tank, a mage would make a good damage dealer, and priests are perfect healers. While some character classes have strict roles they can perform in groups (for example, the warlocks and rogues can only be damage dealers), druids or paladins can be efficient in many roles (which means they are a hybrid class). The third aspect of role-playing means to assume and act out the role of a character living, exploring and fighting enemies and monsters in a fantasy world (henceforth, when mentioning 'role-playing', I will only refer to this third meaning). Role-playing would include immersion in this world of fantasy, creating background stories for one's characters, speaking and acting 'in character' (which entails, among other things, adopting a consistent persona and constantly adjusting one's actions and communications to the background story as well as current and past role-playing events). Although players mostly focus on this sense of role-playing, this aspect is, according to the players interviewed, the least encountered in *WoW* (even on the servers specially reserved for this practice because, players say, it is very difficult to find guilds dedicated to role-playing).

The next phase in the character creation process is the selection of more specific details of the physical appearance of the character. In *WoW* there is no principled difference between female and male characters in terms of gameplay mechanics except for the aesthetic of the physical appearance (Blizzard Entertainment, 2011). Thus, selecting the gender is treated by the developers as a matter of aesthetic choice with respect to the visual traits of the character, rather than seeing it as an 'open field' on which identity (including but

not limited to sexual identity) can be explored (mentioned by many academic studies, but also by a few players, see for example Turkle, 1995). Admittedly, in *WoW*, many players choose a gender or another for aesthetic reasons. For example, both female and male players dislike the way male players are designed in *WoW* (see also MacCallum-Stewart, 2008). At this stage, depending on the race, other aspects concerning the character's appearance can be modified to the players' taste, such as hair style, earrings, tattoos, beard styles (for dwarves) or horn types (for taurens). There is also a randomize button which can help with selecting an appearance for a character by providing random suggestions each time it is hit, which can, then, be customised by the players.

Another action which has to be performed as part of the character creation process is choosing a name for the character. This is a mandatory action by design, meaning that the players cannot simply choose not to have a name and continue to play. To play the game, they have to select a name of their own choice, abiding by the game rules and etiquette (for instance, the name must not be offensive), or use a name generator. When using the name generator, the player can always customise the name until they get a name that they like. However, if the players decide to choose names by themselves (and customise them) and the chosen names are already taken by other players/characters, they cannot proceed further and they have to either think of another name or pick one from a list of suggestions. Once a name is chosen, it is then displayed above the head of the character for others to see and, in the earliest versions of *World of Warcraft*, it could not be changed (at the moment, it is possible to change the name of your character for a fee). Unlike other games, such as *EverQuest* or *Second Life*, which give players the opportunity to have a surname or a family name, *World of Warcraft* only allows one name. Moreover, the name choice can reflect the type of play or social experience for which one wants to use the character (for example, compare the use of a 'silly' name, indicating a character for having fun by behaving 'silly', with the use of an old Irish name, suggesting a character for more heroic deeds).

At this stage, the character is created, and the players can either review their choices or, in case they are satisfied with the result, they can press the button to enter the game and begin playing.

As already mentioned, there are many ways of playing in *World of Warcraft*. However, the game is focussed on undertaking quests and fighting monsters. The quests are tasks given by non-player characters (NPCs) which offer rewards after they are completed. In rare cases, the quests may originate from various

objects (such as wanted posters or items held in containers) found in the game (when clicking the right button of the mouse on them). Quest givers have an exclamation mark floating above their head, which signifies that they have quests for one's character, and a question mark to show where one has to hand in the completed quest and get their reward. Most rewards are items (in some cases, players can choose between the type of items with which they want to be rewarded) or gold (money). The items taken from dead mobs and from chests are usually referred to as 'loot' (this term is also used as a verb when referring to the action of getting the reward). However, some quests (for example, the class-specific ones) rewards abilities or spells; other quests reward 'mounts' (creatures used for speeding the transport in *WoW*). The reward usually includes experience points (XP) or gold instead of XP for characters who cannot benefit from the experience, with the exception of repeatable quests which do not offer XP nor gold, but offer reputation instead.

It is through quests that most of the *WoW* lore (published separately as books available for purchase) gets to be narrated and experienced by players, especially through the so-called chain quests (quests which lead to other quests). Many quests are rather repetitive and do not have a very well developed story line, being of the type 'get X (number) of the Y (type of item)' (for example: 'Bring 8 Diseased Wolf Pelts to Eagan Peltskinner outside Northshire Abbey') or of the type 'kill X (number) of the Y (type of creature or monster)' (for example, in *Elwynn Forest* area, killing a certain number of the Kobolds, rat-like humanoid monsters that infested the Jasperlode Mine and Fargodeep Mine, in order to help the quest giver or quest master). Some quests involve delivering letters or objects to various NPCs (usually in other areas than the quest giver) or simply send the players to explore new areas and report back (which just means to return to the quest giver). These quests are called 'breadcrumb quests' due to acting as incentives for players to leave the starting areas in order to avoid 'player collision', situations where overcrowding takes place and players compete for the same resources (potentially leading to grief play in the sense that advanced players could gather all the resources and leave the new players frustrated). An interview with Jeffrey Kaplan, associate designer at Blizzard Entertainment (at the time of the interview), mentions these 'breadcrumb quests' (Rausch, 2004a). Other quests are more heroic in character (for instance, a quest which asks the players to rescue a dwarven princess from the Dark Iron Clan).

The Beginner's Guide lists more types of quest: normal quests, group

quests, dungeon quests, heroic quests, raid quests, player versus player quests and daily quests (Blizzard Entertainment, 2011). Most often, the quests can be performed by a single player (for instance, the normal quests), but there are quests which require the combined and complex effort of more players (for example, in dungeons and raids). For these latter quests (comprising group quests, dungeons, heroic quests and raids), fighting monsters is rewarded better than the regular quests. The group quests are more difficult, need a number of players to group together, but offer better rewards than normal quests. The dungeons are locations (which can take about half an hour to explore) where groups of up to 5 players fight against stronger and more intelligent monsters than in normal quests. The heroic quests are similar to dungeon quests, but with deadlier monsters. The raids resemble the dungeons as well, but are more difficult to tackle and they reward the players with the most sought after armour, weapons and items (due to being powerful and rare). Raids have more powerful monsters, take place in larger areas and need more time and larger groups of players (of 10 or 25) than dungeons. Player versus player quests send players in battle against other players (Blizzard Entertainment, 2011). Daily quests are repeatable quests that can be completed for income or resources only one time each day.

Another way of playing *World of Warcraft* is represented by situations in which players fight against other players, called player-versus-player combat (PvP), which happen regularly in *WoW* against the background of the constant battle between the Alliance and the Horde. On the one side there is the 'open-world PVP', whenever one encounters players from the opposing faction. The player guide warns that these situations may start as a one-to-one combat, but a group of players may join in, causing the conflict to grow in proportion (Blizzard Entertainment, 2011). On the other side there are the 'battlegrounds', which are battlefields specialised in PvP fight, where two teams (belonging to the two opposing factions) confront each other until one team wins over the other, gaining powerful weapons and armour. To win, the teams must accomplish some pre-established objectives: for example, capturing the enemy's flag or getting into the other team's stronghold and killing its leader. Another type of PvP is 'the Arena', where teams of two, three or five players battle each other in more formal settings with the sole objective of vanquishing all the members of the opposing team. Players participate in these tournaments to gain special equipment fine-tuned for PvP and for their team to be classed among the first on the list ranking the arena teams.

According to the players, Blizzard Entertainment has taken steps to accommodate the content of *WoW* to a more casual player (a player who comes online occasionally and does not invest too much time in forming persistent groups with which to try and approach the more difficult instances which required large groups of players to defeat the monsters inside) by lowering the required number of players to form such groups and making the monsters less difficult to tackle. Some players were satisfied with the changes and even asked for more modifications along the same lines, such as having dungeons with powerful gear, similar to those from raids. These players complain that raids require a different level of commitment (which they are unwilling to invest in the game) and are difficult to approach because of the high number of players which they require. The more competitive players, however, decried the changes because they argued that they take away the challenge from the game and may drive away committed players like themselves. Their dissatisfaction comes mostly from the fact that they invested a lot of time in acquiring skills which were made redundant by the changes.

In *World of Warcraft* players can communicate with other players in writing, but also by voice chat (when in groups, usually for raiding purposes) through a complicated chat system provided with a complex chat interface (with the exception that players belonging to opposing factions cannot communicate with each other). Via this chat interface players can manage (join or remove the character from) and moderate the chat channels: (*i*) they can set up private channels to communicate solely with their friends; (*ii*) they can select the local or global chat channels to be able to chat with smaller or larger number of players and (*iii*) they can choose the chat channel of the guild, for player-characters that are in a guild (Blizzard Entertainment, 2011). These channels are meant to separate all communications into related topics and can be used via typing commands such as `/1 message` for communicating in the General chat channel (visible to all the players on the server), `/2 message` for the Trade channel (visible to all the players on the server and only available in cities), `/3 message` for the Local Defense channel (visible to all the players on the server), `/4 message` for Looking for group (party) channel (visible to all the players on the server), etc. There is also a Guild Recruitment channel which facilitates guild formation and growth. Besides channels, there are many types of communication (which are accessible via commands, such as `/say message`), for example, `say` (used to communicate within a close range), `yell` (to communicate within a wider range), `whisper` (to communicate with

a player located anywhere in *WoW* privately), `party`, `raid`, `guild` (to communicate with party, raid or guild members respectively) or `officer` (to talk to guild officers).

Because of the way *WoW* was designed, much of the content which has a higher degree of difficulty requires the players to group together to tackle the challenges (Blizzard Entertainment, 2011). The players can join groups when they are invited, invite other players, form their own groups or use the Dungeon Finder to join a group formed of 5 players automatically (a feature which was added recently). The Dungeon Finder is another bone of contention among the players, on the forums, as some say that it takes away the social element from the game with further devastating consequences for the gameplay (as the automatic allocation of players to groups eliminates the need for social interaction or communication) and others that it is the only reason they continue to play *WoW* (as it facilitates forming groups). A 'party' is a less permanent type of group (up to 5 players) which can be initiated via chat, through the friends list or by clicking on the characters of the players. A more persistent form of group is the guild. Guilds 'are permanent and much larger groups of players united under one banner to help each other and play the game together' (Blizzard Entertainment, 2011). They can either be joined (upon invitation, by signing a charter or by submitting an application) or founded by the player if enough people sign the founding charter. Players' reasons for joining guilds are varied and include joining to be with friends or partners, to play together with the same people, learn together and help each other, chat and be able to find partners for raids (and dungeons) and thus to access the higher content of the game. Having access to their own guild chat channel, shared guild bank and special guild achievements and bonuses are among the advantages of which guild members can benefit (Blizzard Entertainment, 2011). Another form of temporary group is the raid group, consisting of up to 40 players (generally composed of 10 or 25 players). Forming groups is supported by a Friends List feature, which allows players to add friends or acquaintances to their list to see if they are online, and where they are when in *WoW*.

While, at first sight, the players in *WoW* are free to play as they like (for instance, roaming around in *WoW* and not taking quests), not learning and not following the prescribed way of playing will result in slow advancement in the game (in terms of levels that your character acquires) compared with fellow players who do follow it and this may lead to a diminished playing experience (Rausch, 2004a,b). Learning how to play means also understanding

the abilities of one's character. In theory, one can learn about their character's abilities from reading guides and websites detailing the abilities for each class, but it is mainly by playing that players start to understand them.

4.1.1 Playing as Eufonia, a female paladin

This part has a strong auto-ethnographic character. It is meant to flesh out some of the details offered in the above game description, which may be seen as rather arid, and provide a closer look (although by no means exhaustive) into how the game is played. As well, it may help to illuminate some of the assumptions or biases linked to my interpretive framework. Any interpretive framework may have some underlying, inherent biases which may affect it. By knowing the context which contributed to the elaboration of an interpretive framework it is possible that the effect of these biases and assumptions be estimated and, thus, attenuated.

Although not the first graphical virtual world in which I ventured to enter (as I had been experimenting with *Second Life* before realising that it is a virtual world too different from *WoW* and *SK* to be included in this study), *World of Warcraft* was the first MMORPG that I played. My story of socialisation to *WoW* is not uncommon from this point of view, as for many of the women interviewed, *WoW* is their first online game of the MMORPG type. However, from the point of view of how I was introduced to the game, my story diverges from the more common route of initiation of female players into *WoW* (the majority of female players being initiated by friends, family and partners). It is mainly here that the artificiality of any participation of the researcher in the activities of the community which is being studied is visible. I approached this game due to my research and I selected it based on criteria fitted for my research purposes (which stands in contrast with how the majority of the female players were introduced to the game) even though I cannot deny that I often had fun playing. Although artificial, this participation allowed an understanding of how the various media in our lives and their design (not only previous games) shape our current and future reception, use and understanding of media. Each of our current experiences with specific media is not only influenced by the type of medium, but also by past and current practices and assumptions disseminated and learned through the usage of other media. Thus, the quality of being a player of a certain game is not a fixed role that people take on, but rather a process of becoming a player of that particular game (through socialisation) modelled by various practices which may or may

not have anything to do with gaming. Since, soon after starting the game, I become increasingly aware of the artificiality of my relationship with the field of study, I tried to mitigate this by acting as close to a self who was 'mainly a player' as it was reasonably possible without losing the self who was 'mainly the researcher'. Hence, I attempted to reduce the number of practices in which I engaged only for research purposes to a minimum possible and play the game as a player who has never played an MMORPG before.

For some reason, which became apparent in my 'adventures' in *Second Life* (shortly before embarking on this research), I tend to identify with my character. On an identity continuum which has identification (the player is identical with the character) on one end and representation (the player is represented by the character, but the player does not have the feeling of being the character) at the other, the relationship between my avatar and my self is closer to the identity end of the continuum than the representation one. This identification draws a distinction between fact and fantasy, but I seem to be the character to the same degree that the character is me. It was not a voluntary, conscious act as some events unfolding in *Second Life* made this identity visible for me. I mentioned this to emphasise that my awareness of being the character was triggered outside and before playing *WoW* and carried on in *WoW* (somewhat muted and latent, but present nevertheless), without me being subjected again to stimuli powerful enough to re-activate that experience to its full potential. This supports the idea that players start building their identity long before being introduced to their game of choice (at a given moment in time) through their contact with various media (not necessarily games). Players' desire to achieve a connection with their avatars was discussed in the chapter on mainstream ritualisation.

Before presenting one representative day of play for me, I would like to describe some of my first impressions in *WoW*, starting with how I created my first character. Influenced by previous studies in designing the research (such as Taylor, 2006b; Markham, 1998), I intended to let the research direct my play. Thus, I wanted to create a healer (or 'roll a healer' as players say, in a reference to the table top role-playing, when the abilities of a character were established by rolling a dice), as healers were thought to be highly prized in groups and this would have assured me a spot in a guild. Ideally, that would have solved the issue of recruiting interviewees and would have provided me the opportunity to observe group play. However, when reading short descriptions of what healers do, they did not appeal to me at all. As well, 'healing' did not fit well with the

ideal image I had formed about *WoW*. My imagined ideal MMORPG looked more like a cross between FPS (which I would have liked to try), *Mortal Combat* (which I enjoyed) and *World of Warcraft*. From the official *WoW* forums I found out that the priests and druids make good healers, but also that paladins are a hybrid class which could be healers, but also inflict damage and attract monsters. From this description, I reached the understanding (not accurate, because they cannot perform all these roles at once although they can heal if they get trained) that paladins are a sort of 'three in one deal' and I was happy to choose paladin as the class of my character. Thus, part of the decision making process happened before actually getting the game. When the game arrived, I copied the game client (the software containing the copy of the game, which ended up occupying a surprising 10GB on my hard disk), opened an account with Blizzard Entertainment and proceeded to create my character as I decided: a paladin. Before actually playing I did what I always do with technology which seems complicated: I read the manual (another fact, perhaps, not truly representative for all *WoW* players, who have more a 'trial and error' approach to the game). However, like many of the players I interviewed, I found that the very short and not really detailed game manual, which contained only the basics of the game play, was not very useful. I felt frustrated and even more so when I found out that a common feature for MMORPGs and computer games in general is to have more extensive manuals sold separately (Consalvo, 2007). I imagine that if I had paid from my own money to buy the game, I would have felt betrayed and even robbed.

The first choice was selecting a realm on which to base my character: and the realm was *Elwynn Forest*, which I chose because I liked how the name of the place sounded, for instance, it sounded 'magical' (based on aesthetic considerations), and it was a normal realm which meant that I had to play versus the computer controlled monsters (based on functional considerations) not against real people. From the way the official guide described the PvP realms, they seemed a source of constant harassment of players, which is exactly what many players prefer, but I disliked. It is possible that my tendency to identify with the character played a role in my choice of a normal server, as I felt I would have had to be too confrontational or alert for my taste on the PvP servers. In addition, I have a tendency to equate other players with their characters and by attacking their characters I would have felt that I attacked the players. As well, the perspective of role-playing (having to stay in character and creating a background story), although fascinating, appeared a

bit exhausting for me. I lean towards an effortless play, so I always aim to get rid of any unnecessary mandatory actions in a game.

After selecting the realm, I decided that humans (Alliance faction) were best for me after seeing some of the other races in the character creation panel and deciding they were ugly for me. Blood Elves, although more beautiful, had elongated elvish ears and were Horde (even if, aesthetically, they had more in common with Alliance than with Horde, a fact noted as well by some Horde players who classed them as 'not very Horde'). I was not truly satisfied with *WoW* characters in general because they looked more 'cartoon-like' than I expected, but I had no other choice. The cartoon style is deliberate as it allows the game to run well and still be attractive visually even on a hardware of a lower capacity when the settings are turned low. However, in my case, since the graphical interface of my laptop was not adequate for gaming, I felt that the images lost a lot of their original quality. The choice of the race and my being unhappy with the cartoon-like appearance was probably the result of my tendency to identify with the character. The less realistic and farther from the actual human appearance the characters were, the less likely I was to choose them as my characters. Then, I played a bit with my character's appearance and, not being sure if I can change it later, I chose a face and hair-cut which I regretted afterwards (I was not aware, at that time, that one can change their hair style at a barber shop for an in-game fee), see Figure 4.1.

As far as the face was concerned I felt there was not really too much variation (although I admit that I must have been impatient). It took a while until I was able to find a name that I liked: Eufonia (which is a Romanian-based spelling of 'euphony', which means 'beautifully sounding', and hints both to my ethnic identity and my musical interests).

Elwynn Forest is a vast, idyllic woodland bordered by the foothills of the Burning Steppes to the North (see Figure 4.2). The forest has the Redridge Mountains to the East, and Duskwood to the South, across the Nazferiti Riveris. It is said to be 'the heartland of the human Kingdom of Stormwind' and 'the starting point of all human characters' (WoWWiki, 2011). *Elwynn Forest* is a beautiful area, with fertile meadows, picturesque forests, river, sky and usually sunny weather and cheerful chirruping during the day and peaceful silence at night. Many farmers, loggers, and miners live and work (one is able to see them at work when wandering in the world to complete quests) in the region, which is guarded by the Alliance guards of Stormwind (main

Figure 4.1: *World of Warcraft: Eufonia* — image withheld

city). The region is generally peaceful, but 'sometimes' the locals face small problems and the guards need the player's help to defend Stormwind from the various creatures posing problems. For example, some young diseased wolves upset the loggers, the 'kobolds' (rat-like humanoids) infested some mines, giant spiders crawled in the forest, giant bears walked around in some areas and 'murlocs' (amphibian-like creatures)which migrated in some of the lakes and rivers of this area. The problems raised by these creatures are never eradicated and as soon as players manage to kill many of them, they re-appear or 'spawn' (in the game's terminology).

Figure 4.2: *World of Warcraft: Elwynn Forest* — image withheld

One can find out about these threats and creatures from the text of the quests. At first, I read the text of the quests carefully, but later, alike many players, I did not like to read the whole (admittedly small) text of the quest because of its tendency to mimic archaic literary English language.

To complete the quests, I usually skimmed their text to find out the place to which the quest referred and the objective of the quest (which was a short summary that was always present in the text of the quests and on the quests log, the latter being a place on the user interface where all the quests which have not been completed would appear). Hence, I found out about many of these creatures either from the voyages towards a quest place, when stumbling upon them they attacked me (sometimes even not allowing me to continue with completing a quest as was the case with some big spiders), or from completing the quest itself. Usually the main roads are safe enough, but some of the smaller roads can be perilous. The region is also under constant attacks from a group of bandits with red masks called the Defias Brotherhood. Among the Quest givers in this area, one can mention Marshal Dughan and Marshal McBride.

From here on, my approach to learning the game was a combination between knowledge from the game manual, seeing what other players did and trial and error. I did not like using the websites, not even the official forums, as I believed that there was something akin to cheating in using them probably due to the way I was socialised to computer games. I missed out on the magazines that used to offer advice on gaming and cheating codes and, subsequently, on the websites that took their place; see Consalvo (2007) for a discussion of these magazines. Nevertheless, most players use a combination of trial and error and seeking advice from official and, most often, unofficial specialised forums (and guides), such as `http://thottbot.com` and `www.wowhead.com`, as well as from other experienced players). At first, I fiddled with the arrows on the key board of my laptop, and quite fast I was able to learn how to move and walk my character through the game easily (the manner was similar to how one journeys with the character in *SL*). Then, I wanted to complete a quest (I knew about quests and Quest masters from my previous readings, although I was not quite sure what they were and how to complete them). I searched for a Quest master (Quest giver) and since I started in the human capital called Stormwind (close to another town named Goldshire) I figured (quite true) that the Quest masters can be found there. By clicking on the Quest givers with an yellow exclamation mark over their head, they talk to you and a quest window with several available quests for your character to choose from opens up.

Once I started doing some quests I scrolled the middle button of the mouse accidentally and found out that this way you can modify the camera view. The camera view is basically the way players see the game. I played with the

camera view until I chose a third person camera view at a medium distance from my character. The top-down, third person view appears as if you look at your character from a distance and down. I selected this instead of a first person view (one in which you look through the eyes of your character) because it was easier to see the monsters that were about to attack you (this was also the reason of other players for selecting the third camera view). While it would have been better to select the third view at a maximum distance (which the majority of the players reported that they did), I liked to see my character clearer (probably not being able to see her would have detracted from my tendency to identify with the character). However, I wanted to see what a first person view felt like and I experimented with this while walking but I felt a bit dizzy (it is what players call 'motion sickness' and some reported that this is the reason they do not choose first person view). In caves, I kept the camera distance smaller than in wider areas to be able see the monsters hidden behind the turns of the cave.

One of my first impressions as a level 2 (9th October) was that everyone was busy with performing quests and no one was speaking with each other (in a manner reminiscent of the study of Ducheneaut et al., 2006). However, the players probably communicated through other channels than the visible ones (such as guild or voice chat). Later on, when I logged in at evening times, I found that people did talk to each other in the General chat as well (but, perhaps, not as much as I expected). Moreover, many players reported that levelling, especially through the first levels, is mainly a solo experience (which is consistent with my first impression). Others start grouping with high level friends at a very low level (for example, around level 10) to get their characters through higher level dungeons and gain experience points rapidly.

Another puzzling aspect for me was the *WoW* interface for communication. The chat window gets quite confusing sometimes, because its texts, although of a different colour depending on their type, are mingled with other events important for the character, such as gaining experience points or levels, losing duels, etc.). In addition, for communicating, the players have to use / followed by a command (usually referring to the type of communication preferred or the channel) and the text of the message, which has a striking resemblance to communication in earlier MUDs. I, who missed out on those types of games and started using the internet when the instant messaging software began to be popular (where one writes the message in a text box and then presses the 'enter' key), had and still have difficulties in adjusting to this programming

style of communicating as it gave me countless and confusing possibilities for customising my experience. In *WoW* the 'enter' key is for attacking and, many times after pressing this key by habit, I received the error message of the system: 'I cannot attack that!'. Initially, I assumed that the fact I found the system of communication in *WoW* daunting and unintuitive might stem from my reduced contact with computer games in general, but two other players (both of them worked in the IT sector and played computer games in the past) reported having problems with it. While I realised that having multiple possibilities to communicate is beneficial, not being able to use them to their fullest potential was a major downside, given how entangled a chat window can be if everybody uses the same channel for communicating.

That being said, I will present one representative day from the life of Eufonia, a female paladin, 21 October, 17:00-18:00, when she started as level 5 and progressed to level 6. The description was based on the field notes. As one can observe, I did not notice when I progressed to level 6 (or, in the game's jargon, 'hit level 6') although, on these occasions, text appears detailing your achievements and golden sparks flow out of your character as if the character undergoes some sort of magical transformation. On many occasions, players said that they did not notice when they progressed to a level; not even when the level was high enough to be noticed (for example, level 60 or 80, when these were the maximum levels). If levelling up gives the character new abilities, a message will tell the player to visit their class trainer.

The text in the square brackets contains either supplementary information or an interpretation of the events unfolding and was added afterwards.

> In Goldshire (a town in the *Elwynn Forest* area) I acquired a quest to go and explore a mine. Apparently I gain points of experience every time when I explore some new terrain. [One can gain some experience points by exploring, but the amount of experience points per area scales with the area level. Thus, lower level characters will die by walking in higher level areas where powerful monsters dwell and which yield most experience points. According to the developers, more experience points can be gained from what I call 'structured play', that is by taking quests. Visiting all areas gives an achievement and the title 'the Explorer'.]
>
> I had just arrived in the game and I was on my way to the centre of the city when some player put a spell on me by changing my head into a Halloween pumpkin [literally, the head of the character

transformed into a pumpkin]. On the spell [which appeared as well as a button on the top of the screen] it was written 60 min so I assumed that the spell will last 60 min. Ten minutes later, however, when I clicked on the icon indicating the spell, it disappeared [Any joke effect cast by another player can be dispelled at will by clicking on it. It would naturally have expired after 60 real world minutes, if that player 'wanted' to walk around with a pumpkin head for that time.].

[Usually, on special occasions, *WoW* developers release special themed, in-game events, activities or dress in addition to the usual contests taking place outside the game. Thus, it might have been a special spell available only on Halloween to player-characters or to NPCs to enhance the celebration atmosphere. It happened so fast that I did not have any time to check whether it was a player or a NPC. On Valentine's day, for example, one of the interviewees said that she and her partner worked hard to complete a list of special achievements for the 'Love is in the Air' in world event to get 'the Love Fool' title. On another one of these special occasions – caused this time not by an out-of-game holiday, but by events preparing the launch of the new patch *Wrath of the Lich King* – a disease spread among the Alliance characters, transforming them into Undead (Horde) characters, which made them susceptible to be attacked by their own faction. Eufonia too was both witness and victim of this plague, dying several times because of her obstinate refusal to stay away from the towns or cities and determination to perform her quests. According to the interviewees, some players, like me, felt frustrated about the plague, but others joined in and had fun spreading the disease on purpose and being able to attack players from their faction. Some interviewees said they stopped playing for a while, waiting for the expansion to come out. If Eufonia had been a better paladin, she would have been able to cure herself, as it seems that it was within her abilities to do that.]

It turned out that I confused the task of the quest or at least it wasn't clear enough for me. Because I approached the mine that I was supposed to explore and then returned to the quest giver to report the result considering that it was enough. But it was not. Then, I entered the mine, but this wasn't enough (the yellow sign

upon the head of the quest master was grey). I had to return.

In the mine [which looked abandoned], I met a guy [who had a male character, but this was no guarantee that the player was a male] who had a 'senior' level of 10 [this is a very low level, but at my very low level, I had a huge respect for any player of a higher level than me] who asked me if I was Danish. [The player base is international, and the sample is composed of players from a variety of countries] When I said no, he or she said that he or she would turn the translation mode on. Then, he or she asked me how to use his or her weapon. [I wondered how he or she reached this level without using the weapon and then planned to ask him or her later. Most probably, as I show in the section about initiations, he or she borrowed a character from a friend or a family member to try the game out.] I told him or her how to use the computer mouse and, with my help, he was able to kill a monster (kobold). After that he sat down [I did not realised that, most probably, he or she was preparing to log off. When logging out outside of a rest area (tavern or city), a 20s timer begins. During this time, the avatar sits down as if to rest.]. Then I tried again to find my weapon among the inventory (my collection of rewards or loot from the quests) without any luck. [I lost my weapon previously and I did not know what happened to it. First, I assumed that I lost it probably by dying and resurrecting or 'rezzing' repeatedly. I have been told by one player that it was probably just buried in the default interface of the inventory, since items are not lost on rezzing, losing just integrity. This would justify why, on the list of addon choices, some players include an inventory manager.] Then, something happened [I pressed the 'enter' key, most probably] and my avatar took an aggressive posture (as if I was prepared to attack). The character controlled by the Danish player was sitting down but then disappeared suddenly. Maybe he was scared of my posture [in fact, he or she finally logged out].

While wandering again within the mine, I came across a panther (it was a druid in cat form, as druids are able to shift forms) that asked me: 'help?' I didn't know what he or she wanted. I thought he or she needed help because he or she tried to walk through some wooden stairs. On a second thought, I believed that she or he was

asking if I needed help because I was standing still, trying to figure out something about my backpack (the inventory). So I told him or her no. Then he or she left and I didn't have the chance to tell her or him anything else. Everything happens so fast for me [the fast paced action of *WoW* led to short, fast interactions with players].

Then, I went to complete another quest. I was killing some monsters when some guy [?] came and helped me. I looted the corpse of the monster [by clicking on the corpse and selecting from the window that appeared on the screen the items or rewards I wanted] because I said to myself that 'I am the woman and he should be polite and let me take the loot. And it was me who attacked the monster first after all.' I thanked him although I didn't need help. [Later, a player commented that what I first assumed to be politeness, it was not. The first person to damage a mob tags it. Only they are able to loot it once it is dead (it would be greyed out to the other player). This does not apply to players in a party.] He or she said 'np' [no problem] and left fast [not leaving me the possibility to start a conversation.]

I was killed several times. [Death meant a slowing down ending with a total stop of my character's movements, accompanied by a fading away of my character's body until becoming translucent, followed by a sort of teleportation to the 'nearby' graveyard. In practice, I did not think that the graveyard was so close and the very task of walking back to my corpse was tedious. This was because being dead did not mean that I could pass through mountains or fences.] One time, while I experienced death, I noticed that there was some other female (?) player needing help (more monsters attacked her or him). But I was dead myself and even if I wasn't I couldn't help her because of the reduced health and inability to attack successfully one experiences after resurrection. [When one resurrects by asking the spirit healer at the graveyard to resurrect their character (instead of walking back to their body) then that player/character experiences an even more severe state of their character. This state is called *resurrection sickness* and consists of a severe diminishing of all resources (*stats*) of their character for 10 minutes, but this does not affect players below level 10.]

At the end, the game play became very difficult because I kept resurrecting close to the monsters and because of the reduced health after resurrection. As a result, the nearby monsters killed me repeatedly. [Once at the cemetery, your character's spirit can resurrect in two ways. One of them is by talking to or interacting with an NPC called the *Spirit Healer* (which resurrects the character but one has to pay a bigger price in terms of the wear or degradation of the character's armour or weapons). I used to think this is how I lost my weapon: it degraded until it was nothing left of it and I ended up fighting bare-handed. The other is by walking back to their own corpse and accepting to resurrect. From experience, I know now that it is better to accept resurrection at a safe distance from the monsters that will not spare you just because you are weak after the resurrection.] Then, after a successful resurrection in a *kobold*-free zone and pressed the log-out button I sighted a higher level woman priest [I am not sure if she or he was a NPC], who was approaching me. She or he *buffed* me [cast a type of beneficial spell on me, which increased my abilities for a certain amount of time] but I was already logging out. It was again too late to talk to her (Eufonia, a level 5 female paladin, 21 October, 2008, 17:00-18:00).

4.2 Short history and description of Star Kingdoms (SK)

Star Kingdoms (*SK*) was officially launched by BSG Online Games in August 2000 and it is described by its creators as a free, browser based, online, space themed, massively multiplayer, community based, strategy game (it had a paid version free of advertising at the time of conducting the research). The game requires online connection and can be played via the internet browser, on mobile devices and video game consoles.

The player's goal is 'to build up an army and become the most dominant Kingdom in the Universe' (BSG Online Games, 2010b).

The storyline of *SK* seems pretty simple and expands the official goal of the player to other activities. Players can 'build an army, attack friends, make allies, or even enemies. Because the game is played in a community of other people, anything is possible. Join thousands of other members in a bid for total domination' (BSG Online Games, 2010b). Adding to the storyline,

the game features some elements of role playing on its forums (without being called as such), even though these elements are not included in the official game rules and the game is not recognised as a role-playing game. Thus, *SK* can be played without these role playing elements, but many players chose to role-play on its forums (I prefer the term 'forums' to 'fora' as this is what players call them). By role-playing I understand mainly players who play as themselves but tend to stage dramatical representations of actions or attitudes pro or against actions from the game, such as combative actions or inactions (suicide attacks, targeted attacks, wars or times of peace) or political actions (elections, leadership, covert or overt pacts, betrayals, loyalties and the forming and breaking down of alliances). The term also includes the more traditional sense of role-playing, which refers to players who play the game by assuming the role of their character (the queen or king of a kingdom) to a certain degree and acting it out. Because *Star Kingdoms* is a text-based game, where the visual cues are limited (the players can choose to have a visual logo), the 'acting out' part takes place mainly through written communication on the official forums and chat or, outside the game, on the unofficial forums and via instant messaging software.

BSG Online Games (developer of two other games) boasts that they had 1 billion page views overall on their website since their launch in 1999 and their total player base has 80,000 players, of which 500 players are logged on at any moment (BSG Online Games, 2010b). On 9 February 2010, 17:15, there were 251 players online on *SK*, increasing to 552 (Monday, 26 April 2010). Based on discussions with players, close to its official launch, the game may have had an approximate number of 10.000 players (some indicate even higher figures, but having multiple accounts was a popular practice and these suggestions should be taken with even greater care), declining to around 2.000 in 2006-7 (these figures are only rough estimates and should, in no way, be taken as accurate).

The game has a simple graphical interface with buttons with text, which can be pressed with the computer mouse, and tabs where numbers can be input using the keyboard. By inputting some numbers or using the buttons, the player can acquire revenue, explore land, build troops, spy on enemies, attack other players for land or revenue or go to the forums. *SK* is an 'interactive online world' in the sense that: its world is persistent (it remains after the player logs off), supports simultaneously a considerable number of players and the game action happens in real time (you make one move and you get an instant reaction, although it takes an established amount of time to be able to

make another move).

The community of *Star Kingdoms* players is supported by in-game chat services (of the sector, alliance and universe) and forums: (*i*) official in-game forums (for example, sector forums, alliance forums) and out-of-game forums (a link to these public forums, labelled 'community', is provided) and (*ii*) unofficial forums (of different official or unofficial alliances or groupings). The forums are essentially message boards and have threads of conversations on many topics.

Every player is assigned a kingdom (there are 8 planet types, from which to choose, with their advantages and disadvantages), which is a planet in a sector of 19 other kingdoms in a galaxy of 40 other sectors. Although the *SK* website mentions that the kingdom is a planet in a 10X10 sector map, the map seems to be only conceptual, as no map is available to the players. There are three servers, corresponding to three universes, Terra Nova, Centaurus and Desolation (the last was launched after the present study was completed and makes the game available via *Facebook*).

Every sector usually has a Leader (SL) who usually names the sector, adds a banner (an image that represents the sector), may set up a code of rules for the sector to uphold, helps the sector to thrive by changing the sector state to an appropriate one (the kingdoms are able to perform certain actions better based on the state of the sector, for example 'defence', 'mobilization' or 'growth'), buys enhancements, such as 'nano bots' or 'nanos' and 'solar winds' for the sector (these too may boost the resources of a sector as a whole), and controls the diplomacy of the sector (most of the times the SL chooses the alliance in which the sector should be). There is also a Vice Sector Leader (VSL) who helps the SL.

All the kingdoms in the sector are allies and fight together against other kingdoms or sectors to expand their size. A kingdom is made up of the following components: Money, Power (energy, food), Civilians (Population), Land, War Honor, Military Units, Scientists, and Probes. The official aim appears to be the appearance of the chosen names of players and their kingdoms or that of their sector or alliance on various charts displaying the highest scores for various achievements. One of the most important achievements is their Networth (NW), which is given by a formula which takes into consideration all the above components of a kingdom.

Many of the official rules of *SK* are inscribed in the game design via the game code. Others are seemingly left at the players' choice. The system of

rules of *SK* (including official and player rules) will be described and analysed in more detail in the chapter 'Subversive ritualisation'.

Searching 'Star Kingdoms' via the Google search engine yields 15,900,000 results, 'star kingdoms strategy' – approximately 11,100,000 results and 'star kingdoms guide' – 23,500,000 results, which may support its developer's claims of popularity in the course of the long life span of the game.

The next subsection can be characterised as auto-ethnographic (being reflexive and subjective in nature) and has the double purpose of presenting details about the gameplay in *Star Kingdoms* from the perspective of the researcher-player and the context in which the current interpretive framework was developed.

4.2.1   My playing experience in Star Kingdoms

Since I recruited interviewees via the game, using *SK*'s communication means, I will not reveal my nickname or the sector to which I belonged in *SK* because it may lead to the disclosure of the in-game identity of some of the subjects, who did not want to be identified (not even with their nicknames).

I started to play when a new round started (every round lasts three months, after which the game starts again), creating an account and choosing a name for me as a queen, one for my kingdom and a logo based on aesthetic considerations (I wanted the name to sound 'majestic', but 'girlish' and the logo to be 'cute'). The players are able to upload a picture or logo, which can be anything from animals, to manga or anime characters and cartoons and, in the past, although it was against the rules, pictures of more or less naked women. Some players do not consider this logo an avatar *per se*, but rather a symbol which has the purpose of providing a recognisable visual cue to the name assumed or to an older identity.

The next step was to choose a planet type. I picked 'Forest and Wilderness' due to the fact that this type of planet had a population bonus (so I chose based on functionality). At the beginning, I was assigned, like all players are when they start to play (irrespective of being the beginning or the end of the round), to a 'newbie mode' which lasts 72 hours, see Figure 4.3. In this mode or state, the player can only grow as a kingdom, acquiring land and armies, but it cannot attack or be attacked. Visually, this is marked by the name of your kingdom appearing in blue on the sector list.

I had been allocated randomly to a sector, e.g. see Figure 4.4. My playing sessions would, normally, not last more than 10 minutes. On a typical day,

Figure 4.3: *Star Kingdoms: Newbie Status* — image withheld

I would check the sector news (where one can see if your sector mates need your help) if I have any messages from the Sector Leader (SL) and decide if his or her communications concern my kingdom. [The SL, shown in yellow on the sector list, might announce a war, ask for our (the kingdoms in his or her sector) view on a specific problem, such as whether we have any preference for the state in which the sector should be, that he or she just took over the leadership or he or she is willing to step down as a leader, etc.] In addition I would check if my sector was attacked. If I was, I would get frustrated because it was not customary to strike back. This happened because I have been told by a former *SK* player that 'retals', the term for retaliatory attacks were frowned upon by the community. Other past or current *SK* players did not seem to be against 'retals' and one particular guide (`http://www-und.ida.liu.se/~andli382/skguide/`) refers to a rule against 'retal for retal', but mentions nothing explicitly against 'retal' itself (although it does mention about retaliatory actions being performed by sector or alliance mates). This indicates the fluidity of the player rules in *SK*. If I wanted to attack, I found out from the forums that there are a number of calculators, which are software created by players to make sure that the attack has a better chance of being successful or that the attack is fair in the eyes of the community (which means

that it must not be 'bash', a community rule referring to a kingdom not being allowed to attack kingdoms three times smaller than themselves).

Figure 4.4: *Star Kingdoms: Sector* — image withheld.

Then, I would go and get my daily revenue reward, explore some land, and start building residences (for civilians) and some barracks (for soldiers), train soldiers (taken from among the civilians) or scientists, all these by inserting the desired numbers of soldiers, residences, or barracks in the designated text boxes. At the beginning, I tried to read a guide indicated by a fellow player. There were several guides posted on the web (for example `http://www-und.ida.liu.se/~andli382/skguide/`), written most probably by players, but I preferred to learn by doing. Thus, I adopted a trial and error approach to the game (which is a good approach if one already has an idea about strategy games).

While I was not completely familiar with how this particular game worked, I did have some basic experience with the general aspects of strategy games. As a result, I was not the worst player in my sector. This may even have a funny side, considering that some of the other 'players' might have been just 'farms' or 'multies' (multiple accounts created by a player in order to easily rob them of resources or to spy on other sectors or alliances). From the point of view of conducting the research, my non-aggressive approach, although it

did not help to achieve high scores, was vital in order to stay in the sector long enough to conduct participant observation. Unless one actually knows what she or he is doing and performs well, at first sight, the gameplay may seem arid. However, what I considered to be 'fun' were the various types of forum and chat.

On the different types of forum and chat is where players engaged in debates about politics and humorous exchanges on anything from real-life politics to flirtatious innuendos (most often with a pronounced ironic hint). In fact, the players themselves admit that the forums, which host the community and on which community was performed, were what kept the game up and running. In order not to 'get hit' or be attacked one has to stay 'active' (this has various definitions, ranging from being powerful enough after getting out of the newbie mode to logging on to the game frequently, but these two seem to correlate). The 'inactives' are most often the preferred target.

There is a fine line between being 'inactive' and being a 'suicider' (the latter being usually a player who commits 'suicide' in the game by sending off all their army and leaving their kingdoms undefended) when the player commits 'suicide' by not logging on for a long period of time. These latter players will get attacked to the point that they will not be able to redress the state of the kingdom and abandon the game. The longer one stays away from the game or the in-game forums (spending time on the forums counts as being active since the player would still be logged in), the more likely one is to be attacked since others can see that the kingdom has been inactive for a long period of time.

So, after spending a couple of minutes on building an army, I would go to the in-game forums. I mostly enjoyed reading the forums (I have been more of a 'lurker' since I felt that I was not experienced enough to have an opinion on the best course of action for our sector), but I contributed gladly to one of my favourite pastimes in the game: the '3-word story' mini-game, the goal of which was to collaboratively construct a story by each of the players adding only three words (also described in Ghergu, 2007). The result was a funny, eclectic story (which often had a sexually themed unexpected turn). Through 'games within games', such as this, community was constructed and enacted.

Courtesy of the SL of that time, my kingdoms' name was listed as protected for a period of time, with the promise that the sector would 'retal' in case of me being attacked. For disrespecting rules and upsetting prominent players, sometimes the offending kingdoms would become KT (Kill Target), literally the target of a group of players determined to see the player-kingdom dead in

the game and which had every means to do that. The KT would be attacked repeatedly until its total defeat.

I conclude by pointing out that the purpose of all the above descriptions is to familiarize the reader with the games being studied, before proceeding to explore aspects related to the ritualisation found in these games. Therefore, not all the aspects of the games or gameplay were addressed.

Furthermore, the sections describing the researcher's own experiences should not be taken to represent most players' experiences (although some experiences might indeed be representative for a larger number of players).

Auto-ethnographic in essence, the sometimes introspective fragments of description are included here as a way to foreground the researcher and include her as a subject. This practice is usually employed in the ethnographies of the 'virtual', to support their claims of authenticity, by replacing or serving instead of the depiction of the arrival of the ethnographer to the field of study in traditional ethnography as Mason (2007, 114) also noticed. However, its main purpose here is to add, through reflexivity, another layer to the analysis, that is, the researcher's subjectivity. If denied altogether, then any claims of objectivity for a particular piece of research may be compromised. The current description of the two games is meant to provide enough depth to contextualize the discussions in the following chapters, which will address the mainstream ritualisation in *World of Warcraft* and subversive ritualisation in *Star Kingdoms.*

Chapter 5

Mainstream ritualisation

The previous chapters presented how ritual and ritualisation were defined and used in various fields, ranging from anthropology, history of religions and media studies to interdisciplinary fields such as media anthropology. Moreover, in previous chapters, my definition and use of ritual and ritualisation were presented, emphasising that ritualisation is conceived of not only as a wider social phenomenon and process, but also as a framework. By using ritualisation as a framework, a theoretical, integrative model was constructed and applied on some of the social phenomena existing in and around online games, concentrating on analysing the practices of playing together. This framework of ritualisation preserves many of the traditional understandings of ritual, coming mainly from anthropology, but is also enriched with less conventional accounts of ritual, such as those from media anthropology, sociology and social psychology.

This thesis focuses on emergent ritualised practices, rather than on forced choice or set ritualised practices. Joining guilds may be an example of an engineered ritualisation, although not in all the cases. While most of the ritualised practices encountered in *WoW* might seem spontaneous, in many cases they are not. The ritualisation is engineered when, for instance, joining a guild is mainly a built-in step to progress in the game (although joining guilds may be ritualised when players do this to be or play with friends or family). In many cases, guild membership is required to reach the 'higher end content' (for players and for established guilds) or to learn how to play well quickly via social learning. Even previous experience with other games might prove inefficient with such a vast game as *WoW*. As the architecture of the game (which may be motivated by the marketing strategy) supports certain relationships and discourages others, it also influences ritualisation in ways

that help the development of certain rituals and inhibit others.

However, to understand the engineered rituals, one must first investigate how ritualisation occurs in online games (more or less) naturally. I wanted to know whether rituals originating from players exist in graphical MMORPGs and, most importantly, what role they fulfil if so. While the ritual elements analysed in this work are not entirely independent of the design of the current game or the design of past games, they do possess a larger degree of freedom than the others. As such, they are more difficult for the developers to control. I am not saying that these online games are free from any politics or history, rather, that the rituals and ritualised practices that I came to be interested in have a higher degree of spontaneity than other ritualised practices (such as engineered ritualisation) which I do not investigate here.

Not only are the rituals and ritualised practices that represent the focus of this thesis more spontaneous, but they also come more from the part of the players than from the developers. Of course, the developers actively work on ritualisation (without calling it such), directly or indirectly, by trying to improve the immersion, avatar or interface customisation or community participation. At other times, the developers attempt to benefit from ritualisation, by exploiting its visible signs: players playing with their family or friends, for example when the developers released the *Real ID* scheme or improved the refer-a-friend scheme (where both the initiator and the initiate receive benefits for playing together).

Before anyone can begin working on ritualisation, it is crucial that one first understands the phenomenon thoroughly. An essential first step in forming such an understanding is the existence of an in depth description and analysis of emerging ritualised play. This is why this chapter focuses on describing the ritualised practices emerging more from the players than from the way the game was designed.

There are other practices or aspects of play which may be said to acquire a ritual character, such as some elements of character creation and naming (including attention to their aesthetics or to real life identity). When one cannot choose 'stupid' names because they are 'too unserious', as one female interviewee recounts, not only does this say according to a ritual dimension that the game is serious, but the game becomes serious, at least to a certain degree. The name selection act is ritualised by the very act of not choosing that name. Another example of a ritualised act is the case in which players create and abandon avatars because they cannot connect with them. This

suggests that some people desire and achieve a connection with their avatars. How such a connection takes place is still unanswered by psychology, but may find its answer in ritualisation and its 'model' creation function (Handelman, 1998). In the ritual mode of being, doing equals existing or creating to exist. There is some break-through research which has been conducted by Yee and Bailenson (2007) through the prism of representation theory, which states that individuals self-represent themselves as though through the prism of an external observer. While this explains some phenomena, the external observer paradigm does not explain why, with the same avatar, people can experience different degrees of connection during a gameplay session, as one male interviewee claimed. The representation theory only begins to explain the underlying mechanisms of these phenomena, but it provides an excellent starting point for their study.

Although this type of practice may seem to focus on the individual at first glance, the social aspects are evident in the way players carefully construct an image in view of presenting it to others. It is rare that a player is the sole spectator of such an image (see Ducheneaut et al., 2006), although there are some instances when this happens, especially in the case of gender swapping practices of females (when many 'male' characters are banks; that is, characters kept as a storage place for items in the game). In the light of such considerations, although these aspects of character creation may be considered to be ritualised play, I believe that they might be a special instance of collective ritualisation. Thus, directing my attention and investigating in depth the overtly collective dimension of ritualisation is a necessary first step before even attempting to approach a more covert type. In this contribution I will limit my attention solely to the ritualised practices which have a more direct social focus.

Overall, this study aims to further the current understanding of ritualised practices in online games, which can possibly lead to the development of games more sympathetic toward the emerging ritualised practices and, by this, to better gaming experiences.

My method was ethnographic in approach. For *World of Warcraft*, I conducted 50 semi-structured and structured interviews in formal settings with 21 males and 29 females (49 via email or instant messaging, one face to face) and a couple of other informal interviews (3 males and 1 female, including one couple who were playing together). I also conducted participant observation which resulted in field-notes: first, by playing myself and second, by attending

to two playing sessions of an individual starting the game for the first time who consented to being observed.

I identified two types of ritualised play: mainstream ritualisation and subversive ritualisation.

1. *Mainstream ritualisation* consists of a series of ritualised practices in accordance with the mainstream styles or modes of play. This type of ritualisation includes close circle rituals, which are rituals that place the emphasis on the social, especially on the formation, performance and maintenance of relationships or interactions. Thus, they can also be called relationship rituals and may have two forms that are not necessarily mutually exclusive: a) initiation rituals and b) rituals of playing together. In this context, initiation rituals are closely connected with initiating, performing or consolidating relationships. The same can be said of the playing together rituals. Not only that they say something about the relationships between the players, but they usually are or become a constitutive part of the relationship (the performative dimension of rituals) or contribute to it (the transformative dimension). Even if the relationship does not exist when the initiation begins, the desire to form and maintain a relationship is presumed to exist (on the side of the initiator or initiate). Based on the nature of the relationship, close circle rituals are divided into inner circle rituals (which refer to family and romantic partners), private circle rituals (which are concerned with friends from real life) and extended circle rituals (referring to friends and acquaintances made online). Note that the terms or determinants which were used for these types of ritual do not necessarily characterise the closeness of the relationship as there are people who may feel closer to their friends (from real life or from the game) than to their family or romantic partners.

2. *Subversive ritualisation* is defined by reference to mainstream ritualisation. By constrast to mainstream ritualisation, subversive ritualisation is a type of ritualisation which refers to a series of ritual practices which are not considered to be a part of the mainstream styles or modes of play. Although subversive ritualisation may take many forms, among which one may mention cheating or 'modding' as ritualised play, they are very difficult to approach because of their subversive nature. The only subversive ritual aspect which was mentioned by my interviewees was Underground Alliances (in *Star Kingdoms*). Hence, only one aspect

of subversive ritualisation was investigated and analysed, namely secret, subversive social structures.

This chapter focuses on the overtly collective aspects of mainstream ritualisation in *World of Warcraft*, namely close circle rituals (inner, private and extended circle rituals, which are relationship or interaction rituals) and their two forms: a) initiation rituals and b) playing together rituals. Due to the fact that, in the context of this thesis, the initiation rituals are a subcategory of playing together rituals, they will be treated together. The next chapter will investigate subversive ritualisation from the perspective of secret social associations, as well as its role in online games. The analysis will be based on *Star Kingdoms*, due to the lack of accounts on the presence of secret, subversive social structures in the data on *World of Warcraft*.

Almost all ritualised play as defined here has at its very heart the social in various forms. Thus, a discussion about the importance of various social aspects encountered in *WoW* is welcome.

5.1 The importance of social aspects for starting or continuing to play the game

Before talking about the social aspects of the mainstream ritualisation (i.e., inner circle rituals, private circle rituals or extended circle rituals) or of subversive ritualisation, it is important to briefly relate these rituals to the wider social aspects of the game. Some of the social aspects considered relevant for the game by the players deserve close attention, as they indirectly inscribe the game into a 'more than just a game' meaning which ritualises the game. A way to present these social aspects is by bringing forth the reasons presented by players (their motivations) for starting and continuing to play *World of Warcraft*, which emphasise those social aspects that are considered important by the players.

My sample had a larger cohort of female players than male players, which did not reflect the accepted gender ratio among *WoW* players from previous studies (Yee, 2005d). Because of this, my results will be weighted, in most cases, to the gender ratio proposed by Yee (2005d) (84% males and 16% females). Weighting offers a better perspective of how my sample compares to the data at the level of the general population of *WoW* players (see the chapter

on methods).

Due to various changes in the life of players that may affect the gameplay, it was assumed that people start for one reason and the reasons change over time or other reasons are added. To reflect this assumption, two questions were asked: (*i*) Why did you start to play the game? and (*ii*) Why do you continue to play the game? The first question was present in all the interviews or the interviewee responded to this before the question being asked, but the answer to the second question was drawn, sometimes, from responses to other questions which related to this issue.

Overall, 31 players out of 48 players interviewed reported that the reasons for playing registered changes along the way. These included 9 of 20 males (45%, weighted as 38% of all *WoW* players) and 22 of 28 females (78%, weighted as 12% of all *WoW* players). Hence, more than half of the players that were interviewed mentioned some sort of change in the reasons for playing the game (64% of the interviewees, weighted as 50% of all the *WoW* players). While the reasons did not truly change in essence or for all the interviewees, they did develop to include one aspect or another of the game to a greater degree (either towards a more social side or a more individual-centred one).

It is important to emphasise that half the male players and 76% of the female players interviewed reported social reasons for starting to play the game. 33 players (67%) out of a total of 49 players interviewed mentioned one or more social reasons for starting to play, including 11 males out of 20 (55%) and 22 females out of 29 (76%). These social reasons offered were: wanting to play with family, partner or friends, including playing to save the relationship or on a child's behalf, enjoying the social interactions in the game such as making new friends and playing with them. Other social reasons enumerated were: desire to help people, playing against or with real people (other players are more unpredictable, thus more challenging to play against), seeing friends or family playing and wishing to do the same and taking up playing at other people's suggestion. Weighting to the gender ratio proposed by Yee (2005d) (84% males and 16% females), 58% of the total number of *WoW* players started to play for social reasons, with 46% being males and 12% females (note that my sample size is very small and I assumed that the above gender ratio is valid).

Regarding the reasons to continue playing the game, 65% of the players interviewed said that they continued to play for social reasons, a similar number to those who advanced social reasons for starting to play the game. 32 of

49 players indicated social reasons for continuing to play, comprising 11 of 20 males (55%) and 21 of 29 females (72%). The number of players who offered social reasons for continuing to play is comparable to those who started playing for social reasons. Weighted results suggest that 57% of the total number of *WoW* players continue to play for social reasons, with 46% being males and 11% females.

	Social reasons for continuing to play	Other reasons for continuing to play
Social reasons for starting to play	24 (49.0%)	9 (18.4%)
Other reasons for starting to play	8 (16.3%)	8 (16.3%)

Table 5.1: Reasons for starting and continuing to play *WoW*

Table 5.1 demonstrates that although the overall proportions of players motivated by social reasons remains relatively constant from starting to play to continuing to play, a proportion show a migration. That is, some players started due to other reasons and continued for social reasons and other players started due to social reasons and continued for other reasons. In total, 17 players (35% of the interviewees) experienced a change of motivation either towards the social aspects or other aspects of the gameplay. Although the sample size is small, it can show that the reasons can shift over time within the same population. This change depends, perhaps, on socio-demographical changes or on where the player is situated in relation to the game (for example if the player is new to the game and in the process of developing a style of play). Events that produce change in the life of the players might also be considered. The motivational shift may indicate that experiencing the game has effects on the motivations for playing, transforming them or discovering new, stronger, motivations (whichever corresponds better to the player's circumstances). This may be true especially for people who experience this game (or this type of game) for the first time. As a consequence, they might not know at first what to expect from such a game and project their ideal expectations and playing style into it, soon to discover that what they really enjoy is something totally different. Another explanation may be that the specific social experiences they seek in the game they have chosen might not be possible, are impossible to attain or not as enjoyable as they thought. That being said, one important lesson from these findings is that social aspects are vital either as a motivation factor to start playing a game or as a motivation factor to continue playing

the game, though these two motivations should not be lumped together, as is often the case in the literature.

Another important aspect relevant to ritualisation, which emerges from these findings, is that ritualisation is expected to show change throughout the playing life of an individual. However, ritualisation is expected to remain constant, for the overall player base. As the motivations change, players find pleasure in other types of ritualisation.

The figures presented above should be taken with due consideration because of the small size of the sample and the fact that the sampling method was not random. Since 58% of the total number of *WoW* players start to play for social reasons and 57% players continue to play for social reasons, these findings are consistent with other data from the literature which report that the social motivations and the social aspects of the game are important for the players of MMORPGs. These figures are comparable with the 35% of the players who play *EverQuest* for social reasons reported by Griffiths et al. (2004b). The figures in this thesis are slightly higher due to the way I considered the 'social dimension' to include group play and playing against others (unlike Griffiths et al., 2004b, who included these aspects in the 'game mechanics dimension'). Therefore, these data provide a good indication of the importance of social aspects for *WoW* players and a good quantitative anchor for my data in the existent literature.

5.2   Close circle rituals

Closely connected with these social aspects are the rituals and elements of rituals identified. The social aspects can be seen as both engendering and being engendered by these rituals. Consistent with the 'models' approach to ritual (see Handelman, 1998; Houseman, 2004), rituals (which are a product of society) create social order and, by doing this, they help create and maintain society.

Close circle rituals are defined in this thesis as rituals which focus on the social aspects of gaming, mainly on relationship formation, performance and maintenance. One form of close circle ritual encountered in *WoW* includes the initiation rituals; another one includes rituals of playing together. It is important to remember that the two forms identified are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, initiation rituals may be considered a subset of rituals of playing together. Initiations may start as part of a ritual of playing together or may

evolve into such a ritual. What they have in common is that they posit relationship, if only as an ideal goal of one of the players involved in these rituals. Even if the initiation had a focus on relationship only from one side (either the initiate or the initiator), this is still a ritual which has at its heart the relationship. Therefore, it is important that these forms are considered together.

The type of the relationship may provide a basis for dividing close circle rituals into inner circle rituals (which refer to family and romantic partners), private circle rituals (which are concerned with friends from real life) and extended circle rituals (referring to friends made online). As with the previous classification, the topology is largely theoretical. This happens because players may assign different degrees of closeness to various types of relationship, which do not always reflect what is usually considered to be the norm. Due to close circle rituals containing both initiation and rituals of playing together, the inner, private or extended circle rituals will be considered from both perspectives.

5.2.1   Initiation rituals

The first type of close circle rituals analysed is the initiation rituals. The literature on initiation rituals is extensive (see, for example, Eliade, 1959; van Gennep, 1960; Turner, 1969; La Fontaine, 1986), and there are many types of initiation; some examples include many of the rites de passage which mark the passage between childhood and maturity (puberty rites or coming of age), the rituals of admission into secret societies (fraternities or sororities) and those concerning mystical vocations. Other initiations include being accepted to universities and/or companies as well as graduations. In view with my definition of ritual, however, I am interested in initiations revolving around online games that stand for something else, mainly centred on interaction or relationship (i.e usually not under the direct control of the developers), and are less concerned with instrumentality (i.e. those involved with gaining the official, formal rewards, usually but not always coded within the game).

Before investigating the initiation rituals, some quantitative data are needed in order to gain a sense of how representative my sample is. While the fact that my data compare well with the ones of Yee (2005c) suggests that they may be representative of a large number of MMO players, this does not mean that there was no sampling bias.

According to Yee (2005c), a weighted 62% of *WoW* players are introduced to the game by a romantic partner, friend or family (with 60% of all the males

and 76% of all the females, which weighted means 50% males of all players and 12% females of all the players). My data show a similar trend: weighted percentages of 61% of all *WoW* players being introduced by a partner, family or friend (46% males and 15% females). The corresponding not-weighted number of gamers who were introduced to the game by a partner, friend or family is 77% of the interviewees, with 11 of 20 males (55%) and 27 of 29 females (93%).

Knowing all this information is helpful, of course, but it does not produce a detailed picture of how people are initiated to become *WoW* players. A more nuanced picture of the existing and emerging interactions is needed. Ritualisation offers a suitable framework for analysing this process. Sometimes, the introduction to the game is simple and mechanical, other times this is instrumental in approach, thus barely deserving the name of ritual. But most times it is deeper and meaningful, transcending the trivial (although one has yet to see a trivial social interaction). Although they are not rituals in the religious sense, a certain sacredness and sense of magical dimension were observed, similar to what Goffman (1967) noticed when he defined interaction rituals. Initiation rituals in online games are a form of ritualised play that can be distinguished by more aspects:

1. they are a 'profane' introduction into the game and through them the player becomes a player;

2. although no secret knowledge or acquisition of a secret language *per se* are involved, sometimes the rules of play are so hidden under massive amounts of information and the jargon used in game is so different to everyday language that the players experience these as such;

3. the initiation symbolises and effects a more 'sacred' initiation into the universe of the player-initiator (the initiate is in most cases close or hoping to be close to the initiator), into their interests, pleasures, etc.;

4. ultimately, this incursion of the initiate into the private sphere of the initiator results in a status transformation in both of them, which is socially and relationship oriented at the same time. Through these transformations, the initiate-initiator mark, for the society or for themselves, that they have just started a relationship of a different degree of closeness, re-state that they are closer to each other with yet another bond that they share or enact the closeness through another means.

As previously noted, initiation rituals can be considered a subset of 'playing together' rituals. Why then using the term initiation rituals? What purpose

does it serve? As one can see from other studies focussing on demographic data, such as the Daedalus project (Yee, 2005c), for example, an interest in how people were introduced to the game exists.

Due to the fact that, in many cases these introductions are ritualised, this process cannot be described only as a simple introduction to the game and must be subjected to a more careful analysis in order to understand it in depth. It is important to know if one found the game on the internet or was introduced by a friend, but equally important is what motivated this introduction and what does it mean for the actors involved in this process. One needs to know whether the initiator was a friend, with whom the initiate will play from now on, or they were an acquaintance, and the two will never play together. In the latter case, an initiation ritual might not take place, especially if both the player who introduces the game and the one who is introduced have no intention to play together or use the game as more than a game. If at least one of the actors involved in an introductory process to the game sees it as more than a game, for example as a facilitator or context for a relationship, the game acquires a ritual dimension.

Although I presented the initiation rituals as separated from playing together rituals for analytical reasons, a clear cut division is neither possible nor desirable. The initiation is not a one-off event, rather it is a process that may span the whole playing duration. Another theoretical distinction can be made between initiation rituals which happen at an initial stage (from the period of introduction to the game) and practices that have as objective knowledge transmission. The latter were considered initiation rituals if the emphasis was on relationships or identity rather than on gaining knowledge to advance in the game. Knowledge transmission practices take place throughout the gameplay (some players feel like newbies even after a considerable amount of time spent in the game and many players admit that the learning process never stops in a game such as WoW; this reflects the variety of content and gameplay styles that can be mastered in such games). However, as mentioned previously, this thesis is concerned with spontaneous rituals, that is rituals which are initiated by the players and over which the developers have less control. Although, at first glance, most practices which deal with knowledge transmission might seem spontaneous and originating from players, they are not. In WoW (and other games of this type), the player manual is so concise that it barely helps the players and one has no other solution than to pay for an official player manual (which may prove to be equally unhelpful), to search the forums which are

over-saturated with information or to engage in social learning. In some cases, this social learning may be thought of as having a ritual dimension in that it is repetitive, formalised, has a secret language and involves creating or maintaining relationships, but these practices are largely pragmatic (game-specific pragmatism) in nature and constructed by game design. Thus, they will not make the object of study of this work as it will investigate only initiation rituals from the initial stage and those which transform into playing together rituals. It is true, however, that one cannot separate social learning from playing together rituals, and the above distinction is, again mainly in theory. Nevertheless, even when mentioning these practices of knowledge transmission, the thesis will focus more on their relationship side, not the (existent) cognitive gain.

The initiation ritual in *WoW* follows a certain script (more or less rigid) which involves a variety of steps (but not necessarily all of them). Among these steps, one could mention: the appraisal of the game by the initiator; the initiate tries the game (through a trial pass or trial on the initiator's account), which sometimes progresses to sharing an account and, ultimately, the initiate sets up a full-fledged account.

Initiations and the inner circle

Each of the above mentioned stages will be presented, accompanied by examples drawn from excerpts which focus on initiations and the inner circle (that is, initiations undertaken by family and romantic partners). Note that, to identify the interviews and the interviewees, a coding system was used in the name of the interview. For example, in the code 'int_12_f_33_Bellidonna [2142-2477]', 'int' stands for interview; '12' is an order number; 'f' stands for female ('m' for male); '33' is the age; the name or names, 'Bellidonna', is the name or nickname assigned or chosen by the interviewee and '[2142-2477]' represents the number of the lines of the excerpt in the interview file.

1. The initiator attempts to persuade the initiate by praising the qualities of the game or the initiate sees the initiator playing, which incites the curiosity of the initiate:

    int_15_f_20_Subject15 [3823-3904]
    (9:12:27 PM) Subject15: My dad introduced me to it, he kept urging me to play

> int_45_f_34_Marie G. [4129-4243]
>
> 4.How did you find out about WOW? From where/whom? I was dating a guy that played wow. I saw him playing a lot.

2. The initiate tries the game by using a trial pass or trying on the initiator's account.

   > int_48_f_31_Coralyn [1882-2002]
   >
   > I had certainly heard of WoW long before i started playing, but it wasn't until 2008 that my boyfriend got me to try it.

3. Convinced by the pleasurable experience they had, the initiate continues to play by sharing the account of the initiator. Sometimes the initiate creates their own character, as one can see in the excerpt below, where the interviewee emphasises the fact that her character was made by herself:

   > int_34_f_33_Donna B. [1863-2067]
   >
   > A: My partner has been playing pre bc, so once we started dating I saw him playing and became curious and tried it on his account with a character that I made and end up loving it so I got my own account.

4. The initiate decides to get a full-fledged account:

   > int_01_f_30_Aelvyra [1023-1163]
   >
   > (6:06:51 PM) aelvyra: my boyfriend has been playing for about 3 yrs so i eventually decided to give it a go and very quickly got my own account

Certain rules apply, rules about the times when one should be helped or left on their own, the amount of information offered and how it is offered, the negotiation of the space, time and computers (Carr and Oliver, 2009).

Nevertheless, the most important characteristic of an initiation ritual is that it means something. Most often, the initiation ritual is or transforms into a playing together ritual which places the emphasis on relationship. The initiation ritual may be a playing together ritual from the very beginning, as only the intention to form, perform, cement or transform a relationship between the initiate and initiator, from either sides, is required. The ritual starts as an initiation ritual, as one or more persons want to be initiated or are persuaded to become novices or initiates. Then, it develops into a playing together ritual, with the initiates (now players themselves) maintaining a sustained connection with their initiator through play. The sustained connection marks the

transition to a ritual of playing together which has 'relationship' at its cen-
tre. In these kinds of ritual, the game takes on several other related meanings
(aside from being a game): it symbolises and forges affection and closeness; it
represents a common universe of interests, hobbies or favourite entertainment
(which includes doing things together and providing shared topics of conver-
sation); context for social interactions; domesticity and sense of togetherness;
sacrifice to save one's relationship. The following paragraphs will present these
meanings in more detail and with examples from the interviews.

The game becomes a symbol of affection and closeness, a way to bond
with members of our closest circle. There is no one direction from which the
initiation originates. The initiator might attempt to recruit the initiate or the
initiate might manifest a desire to be included in the game. The person who
wants (or is persuaded) to become a novice shows an interest in the hobbies
or pastimes of another one (romantic partners or family members). Usually,
the initiate decides to try the game and play it as a token of their affection.

> int_09_m_52_David N. [2137-2248]
> 6:17 PM David N.: I found out about WOW from my 13 yr old son he
> plays warcraft 3 all the time and still does. end

> int_09_m_52_David N. [4068-4403]
> me: You said something about your son playing WoW. Do you play
> WoW with your son?
> 6:31 PM David N.: I did for a long time He has gone to other games
> and is more interested in sports at his school and is now interested in
> dating so his game play is very limited mostly on the weekends when
> he visits me His mother and I are divorced End

The game is approached with the desire for a common universe, which
engenders or expresses intimacy and affection. Either the initiate, the ini-
tiator or both would like to share interests, hobbies or a favourite means of
entertainment.

> int_15_f_20_Subject15 [8135-8386]
> (9:29:56 PM) Researcher: Do you play WoW with your dad? Are you
> in the same guild? How about your boyfriend?
> (9:31:09 PM) Subject15: occasionally i play with my dad, he is more of
> a EQ2 player, we are in the same guild. my boyfriend refuses to play

The above excerpt suggests that the initiator or the initiate are not fixed
roles, and the initiates themselves, motivated by the same desire to share

their interests and hobbies with other members of their close circle, would try to persuade them to join the game. Sometimes, the potential initiate would refuse, which might engender tensions.

Nevertheless, the game is more than a symbol. By being context and background for social interactions, the game actually plays an instrumental role in the maintenance of relationships, especially when family members or romantic partners live far apart. The game is not very different in this respect from television. Differences exist in that this context is made, not received, although some television formats or context of television reception might be construed as being more co-created than others. Another major point of distinctness is that the context in this case is play, which is co-created between the initiate and other players. However, not only is this context co-created, it is co-acted, in the sense that the gamers 'do things' together as part of their play. The most prominent distinction from television, though, is that the game provides a sense of co-presence, similar to being present in a physical environment. The game may count towards spending time together (not only in the physical room, but also within the medium that provides entertainment).

> int_26_f_24_Alexis H. [1759-1930]
> I was dating a guy that played almost obsessively with his friends. I made an account so we would have something in common and a good way to bond and spend time together.

> int_26_f_24_Alexis H. [2195-2747]
> Curiousity from watching my boyfriend and my friends play. Ive always been one of the elusive "female video game nerds" - so joining WoW was pretty natural. I got into it really easily and enjoyed the story. After a while, it became an escape from the demands of life and from my degenerating relationship. I moved away from my home town, and used WoW to keep in touch with my friends. The boyfriend that started me on it and I broke up, and I actually got in touch with a friend I went to highschool with, to whom I am currently engaged. (Thanks WoW!)

This common universe extends outside the game, by providing shared topics of conversation and planned events. These forge intimacy at two levels: at a here-and-now level (shared topics of conversation) and at a future level (shared planned events). While the here-and-now level grounds the relationship and gives it consistency and power, the future level hints to continuity. Conversely, not participating in these conversations or not planning future events means not being a part of a common universe and it may dispel or threaten the

intimacy. The shared universe mentioned above creates domesticity; it gives you a sense of togetherness in a familiar setting. Playing happens, in some cases, in a shared physical space. This represents yet another instance of togetherness, affection and intimacy, as the players can talk to each other or express their feelings/pleasure in real life as well, including through gestures of affection such as hugging.

> int_27_f_21_Katie K. [2302-2655]
> Katie K.: My best friend in highschool started playing it when it first came out. He always tried to get me to play but I never did. When the latest expansion pack came out my fiance and his group of friends kept talking about how they were going to get into it and play again - and I honestly just felt a little left out so I thought I'd try it.

> int_27_f_21_Katie K. [13488-13547]
> (talking about celebrating an attack with the fiancé with whom she plays) We hug in game and out of game. We play beside one another.

> int_43_f_37_Avataah [6609-6903]
> 26.Do you meet offline with players from WoW? If yes, what do you talk about?
> Well our whole family unit plays, and sometimes we talk about WoW – like if someone levelled or saw something the others might not know about yet...My husbands friend that introduced us to it we meet with sometimes.

Sometimes, the game is seen as affecting the relationships between uniniti-ated and the players. The game becomes a source of tensions and unbalance. The next example suggests a happy resolution of a tension between a potential initiate and their initiator, together with a realisation that the game was not a threat to the relationship, but a way to perform it:

> int_14_f_20_Lori S. [3298-3446]
> Lori S.: My boyfriend and a lot of our friends played, and I sort of gave him a hard time about it for a while, but he got me into it.

> int_14_f_20_Lori S. [3961-4342]
> Researcher: would it be wrong for me to say that you started to play this game to save your relationship at first? Sent at 4:14 PM on Friday
> Lori S.: I wouldn't say that. There wasn't really anything wrong, he wasn't like spending so much time playing that we didn't interact or anything. He just wanted me to enjoy something that he enjoyed, like share a hobby with me.

Because of existent or potential tensions, the game is ritualised. The initiation may, sometimes, take the form of a healing ritual (as illustrated by the excerpts below), which is a playing together ritual which focuses on relationship. It is performed, at first, almost as a 'sacrifice' (to save the relationship) with the quasi-magical power to alleviate the tension and heal the relationship. As such, the game is not only seen as strengthening relationships, but also as a potential threat to them. The initiation ritual, in this case, performs the functions of a magical healing ritual (restoration ritual), with the initiates believing that their initiation would heal the relationship, restoring order and balance. However, the initiation or playing together ritual is not only restorative, but also transformative (La Fontaine, 1986, 11,16). The initiates do not wish to restore the state of the world as it was, but to effect a transformation on themselves. By undergoing the ritual of initiation, the initiate hopes not only that they will gain invaluable insider knowledge (including the 'secret' language, the highly specialised language used by *WoW* players) which will facilitate connectedness and communication, but also access to an almost hermetic universe where she will become 'visible' again to the loved one.

> int_39_f_28_Subject39 [2490-2712]
> My fiance is practically obsessed with WoW. I was invisible when he was playing it. It almost broke up our relationship and made him cancel it. He eventually cancelled it but only after I became obsessed with it! How rude!

> int_39_f_28_Subject39 [3235-3498]
> I started playing because it occurred to me that it would save our relationship if I took an interest in my partner's interests. We would have something in common, something to talk about rather than me watching him or leaving him at home and going out somewhere.

Eventually the game becomes interesting and fun and players start playing for the game's own merits. Thus, the game either suffers a de-ritualisation, by becoming just a game, or a further ritualisation, by the new player taking part in other rituals: extended circle rituals or avatar rituals.

> int_10_f_28_Radmila M. [4504-4920]
> (4:03:55 PM) Radmila M.: My boyfriend played it and I was pretty familar with it, he was playing it for about a year before i even bought the game. At that time (about a year and a half ago) I was pretty bored with guild wars and wow seemed fun so I picked it up. I still play the

game, so that means year and a half. And yes the reasons had change over the time as my boyfriend stop playing and I am still playing it.end

int_48_f_31_Coralyn [2171-2304]
It was a fun, relatively cheap way to spend time with my bf, and then I got hooked and started enjoying the game for it's own merits.

Sometimes, the initiators express their affection or gratitude, by providing help, information whenever needed (a situation also presented by Carr and Oliver, 2009) or even mediating and facilitating the integration in online groups of the initiate, so that the initiate does not struggle alone with the ordeals of initiation. In certain cases, the initiator even plays for the initiate (mostly in the case of female players) until they learn the basics (a practice referred to as 'backseat driving' by Carr and Oliver, 2009).

int_15_f_20_Subject15 [1962-2201]
(9:04:04 PM) Subject15: Well my dad actually got me into playing WOW and he knew a lot about the game, so he helped me through. He also had nice people to help me out, so it was really enjoyable, little confusing but got the hang of it

int_14_f_20_Lori S. [1234-1766]
Lori S.: For me it wasn't too confusing, because my boyfriend was the one who got me into it, and he was there with me telling me how stuff worked. I did think it was difficult, though. Even the movement, since I wasn't really used to this kind of game, I ran into walls and stuff with my character. And in the first zone (my first character was a gnome rogue, so in Dun Morogh with the trolls), I got to the harder fights and originally would ask my boyfriend to do them for me. I'm better at it now, though. END

The help can also mean speeding up (pre-approving without any other formalities) the acceptance of the initiate or protégée into the guild to which the initiator belongs, a practice that is widespread in most guilds for family members and close friends. As a result, the initiator's network of online friends and connections opens up, ready made, for the initiate to enjoy its benefits.

int_01_f_30_Aelvyra [1328-1455]
(6:08:17 PM) Aelvyra: was kind of confusing at first but i had a live in helping hand who explained anything i didnt understand end

int_01_f_30_Aelvyra [3206-3472]

(6:23:14 PM) Aelvyra: i did read some of the game manual although not much, my boyfriend helped me a bit to start off with and i went into the guild that he was already in and they were very friendly and helpful but i would say that his experience helped me the most end

One important fact is that the percentage of the female players who are introduced to the game by romantic partners is greater than that of male players introduced by partners. In this sample, no males (of 21) and 34% (10 of 29) of the female players interviewed reported being introduced by a romantic partner (boyfriend or girlfriend, fiancé/e or spouse). These data are similar to the findings of Yee (2006a, 2005c), who noted that 1.0% of males and 26.9% of females were introduced to the game by romantic partners.

Another aspect of the inner circle is being introduced to the game by family. By including spouses in the romantic partner category, I excluded them from family. 3 females (of 29) and 1 male (of 21) from my sample were introduced by family members, with a weighted version of 5.6% of all *WoW* players (1.6% females and approximately 4% males). In contrast, Yee (2005c) reported that 12.9% of females and 7.3% of males were introduced by family members. With a weighting applied, this is equivalent to 8% of all *WoW* players (2% females and 6% males). In the case of females, the percentages are markedly similar; the difference seen in males can be ascribed to the small sample size.

Finally, if one considers the inner circle overall, in terms of the players who are introduced by a family member or partner (14 out of 50 interviews; 13 females out of 29 female players and 1 male out of 21 male players, representing 44.8% of the female players interviewed and 4.7% of male players interviewed), there are again more females than males. The weighted percentage is: 7.1% of all players are females introduced by family and partners and 3.9% of all players are males introduced by family and partners. According to these data, 11% of all *WoW* players (the overall weighted score) were introduced by family and partners.

Yee's (2005c) study found similar percentages: a weighted total of 13.4% of all the players were introduced by family and partners. 40% of all females and 8.4% of all males were introduced by romantic partners and family, with weighted scores of 6.4% of all players being females introduced by family and partners and 7% of all players being males introduced by family and partners.

A number of conclusions can be drawn from the above data:

1. almost half the females in *WoW* were introduced by family members and

romantic partners, whereas only a small percentage of the male players were introduced similarly;

2. romantic partners play an important role in the initiation rituals of females, but almost no role in those of males;

3. family plays a role that is almost twice as important for females as for males in their initiation rituals;

4. the initiators in most inner circle rituals are usually the male players. This can be seen as a direct consequence of the fact that online games have considerably more male players than female players. It is important to point out, however, that the start of the ritual action does not necessarily originate from the male players. It might be that the female pre-initiate players are the ones who approach the male players, after seeing them playing, and ask to be initiated. The above statement refers to the fact that the initiation ritual is conducted by a male initiator, irrespective of the person who started the process.

The first and the last aspects may bear a huge significance for ritualisation, as through initiation, the preferred playing styles of male players are passed on to the female players as the norm. For example:

> int_10_f_28_Radmila M. [3023-3382]
> Wow I start playing when TBC (burning crusade) came out, with my boyfriend and some friends, I already had experiance:) in mmos so it was much easier and I did see my boyfriend play so I already [k]new what class I am going to make , what proffesions to take, in one word I knew everything about the game (well the start of the game) when i start playing it.

Of course, this does not mean that the female players do not change this style and form their own style of play as they 'become' players. They often do so, but the initiation ritual in which they take part stigmatises their particular style as not the norm. Sometimes, this stigmatisation is even further increased by female players who adhered to the norm and view other female players, with different playing styles, as not being confident enough to use the normalised playing style (for example, not confident enough to conduct raids). What might seem as an issue of confidence, if one observes through the lens of normative play, may simply be a question of personal choice and individual style. Furthermore, if the initiator is seen as an authority figure (and as far as

the game is concerned they usually are), the preferred style or choice succumbs to the normative style and the play experience may be lessened (e.g., when the server is chosen based on the partner's preference of play).

Initiations and the private circle

The private circle rituals are rituals which involve and gravitate around friends. I did not count here the friends that one made in *World of Warcraft*, although friends that one made in other games and became real life friends were included. Among these rituals I encountered initiation rituals and rituals of playing together, with inherent overlapping between these two types of ritual.

According to Yee (2005c), introduction by friends was the most encountered within each cohort of males and females as follows: 50.8% of the male players and 36.4% of the female players were introduced to the game by friends (which weighted means that 42.6% of all the players were males introduced by friends and 5.8% of all the players were females introduced by friends, with a total of 48.4% of the total number of players being introduced by friends).

My results are similar to those reported by Yee (2005c): 24 players out of 49 were introduced to the game by friends (including co-workers, room-mates and classmates - 3 players). This comprised 10 of 20 males (50%) and 14 of 29 females (48%). Weighted scores thus suggest that 50% of all players were introduced by friends - 42% males and 8% females. The percentage for the female players is slightly higher than seen by Yee (2005c). This may be explained by the fact that interviewees were not forced to choose between categories, such as being introduced by friends or by a romantic partner. Rather, if interviewees mentioned that the introduction was due to both friends playing and a romantic partner, they would be included in both categories.

By comparing these data with the ones referring to the players who were introduced by a family member or partner, three conclusions can be drawn:

1. friends are more important for the initiation of male players to the game than they are for female players;

2. however, friends are the most important factor for the initiation of both female and male players;

3. overall, half of players were introduced by friends and only 11.4% of them were introduced by family and partners, which is also in accordance with the data reported by Yee (2005c).

Given how important friends are for the introduction to the game, special attention must be paid to private circle rituals which refer to initiation.

As in the case of the inner circle rituals, private circle initiation rituals follow a script with different steps. The initiate only has to undergo one of the steps. These steps are similar to the inner circle rituals, but exhibit some specificity as well. Most often, this specificity involves collective aspects in which more than two players are involved. The following steps have been identified: initiator praises the game or actively entices the recruit to play the game; a group decision is made to try a new game or move from another game; the initiates try the game of their own initiative or are persuaded to try it (through a trial pass or trial on the initiator's account); on their account, the initiators show the initiate how to play the game and the initiate decides to get an account.

Here, each step is presented and illustrated with excerpts from the interviews:

1. the appraisal of the game by the initiator, an active pursuit of getting the recruit to play the game:

   > int_06_f_25_Nicole G. [1699-2261]
   > (6:58:43 PM) Nicole G.: My best friend Stephen played for a long time, and had been trying to get me to play. I would watch him, and because he was already at lvl 60 and used multiple addons, his screen was always so confusing to watch,so that detered me because I didn't think I'd ever learn how.

   > int_46_f_22_Navi [1741-1875]
   > My friend had a free 10 day period and he knew that I played [...] and told me to try it, thinking it was funny because I was a girl.

2. a group decision to try a new game or move from another game with a content that was not so fresh:

   > int_04_m_18_Alexander M. [2877-3224]
   > (5:48:52 PM) Researcher: How did you find out about WOW? From whom?
   > (5:50:31 PM) Alexander M.: The online community at Blizzard, since at the time I was playing Warcraft III with a lot of friends. We decided to buy the game together, but we had no real idea what MMORPGs were. As far as we were concerned, it would be another normal multiplayer experience. END

int_11_f_40_Sam M. [4460-4871]

(9:25:50 PM) Sam M.: Well as an avid gamer, I have many friends who share the latest news on games, and so I knew of WoW long before it came out. However, I had a serios issue with paying a monthly fee for a game. So I waited for Guild Wars instead. So I actually came to WoW later than some of my friends. When it came time to look for another MMO, they convinced me to try WoW, and I have not regretted that. END

3. the initiate tries the game of their own initiative or is persuaded to try it (through a trial pass or trial on the initiator's account):

int_08_f_53_Nancy Woolf [1510-1853]

(7:04:50 PM) Nancy Woolf: Ummm.... well, I pretty much loved it from the very beginning, when I just got a 30-min "taste" of it at a friend's house...

int_08_f_53_Nancy Woolf [1941-2280]

(7:06:27 PM) Nancy Woolf: My husband and I were visiting a couple for the weekend...

(7:06:29 PM) Researcher: I mean were you interested in the game before going to your fiend's house

(7:06:48 PM) Researcher: ?

(7:07:04 PM) Nancy Woolf: no... I had never heard of it or even knew this type of game existed.

(7:07:23 PM) Nancy Woolf: I was most impressed by the graphics

int_19_f_27_Stephanie V. [1605-1769]

One of my best friends was an avid player from the start. I was over her home in March of 2006 and she had me try a Mage. I was hooked after the first few levels.

4. the initiator shows (on their account) the initiate how to play the game:

int_41_f_19_Sunnai [2123-2564]

I heard a lot about it from classmates and read about it on the internet, and it got me very interested, so i had this friend that played it, and i asked if she could teach me. I started playing WoW on my own in December 2007. But before that i had a friend

> that played it, and she showed me how to play on her account. I
> think that was around half a year before i started playing on my
> own. And i still play the game on daily basis.

5. and the initiate decides to get an account:

> int_35_f_48_Hypatie [2617-2826]
> I keep track of games, especially RPG games so I knew about it
> from reading articles and seeing ads. I got in late and only because
> a friend and work colleague was playing regularly and made me
> want to play.

Similarly to inner circle rituals, actions and behaviours associated with the private circle are often ritualised due to them being most likely performed not only for an instrumental reason, for example, learning the game in order to play it, but for other reasons as well, most of which involving forming, maintaining or transforming relationships.

Due to this departure from instrumental reasons, it is common that private circle initiation rituals are or become about relationships. Maintaining a sustained connection with the initiator through play is not necessary for the ritual to be about relationship. It suffices that a relationship with the initiate or initiator is sought after at one time or another of the initiation ritual or even before it commences. The initiation ritual may have been from the very beginning about a relationship. In an analogous fashion to inner circle rituals, in private circle rituals, the game is instilled with a series of closely connected meanings: it is both a symbol for affection, care, closeness, familiarity and togetherness, as well as a means to foster these; it is context for social interactions with the private circle as well as counting for time spent together and a way to perform friendship; it symbolises and provides a common universe (of interests, hobbies or favourite entertainment) which engenders traditions that make up the shared and common pasts so vital to group identity. Close attention will be paid to each of these meanings and excerpts will be provided for exemplification purposes.

Although it can still be said that the game becomes a symbol of affection and/or closeness, as in the case of inner circle rituals, what is more important in private circle rituals is the integration function within a group. Besides being a symbol, the game is a way to spend time with friends and bond (more examples can be found in the next paragraph below). Due to this affection and closeness being of a different nature than that involved in inner circle

rituals, a different terminology was employed to refer to the rituals involving friends. In private circle rituals, the emphasis is not on the novices showing an interest in the hobbies or pastimes of their friends (although this is implied), but rather on doing things together. If, in inner circle rituals, other activities that couples or families do may count as doing things together, the situation becomes complicated as far as friends are concerned. In the economy of time of the post-modern individual, relationships with friends become increasingly difficult to maintain. They might be relegated to second or even third place after family and work relationships. To this, spatial considerations are added, individuals starting to grow apart from old friends in the first instance through physical distance (for example, people moving away from the beloved places of childhood and adolescence in search for jobs, students graduating and losing touch with their high-school or college friends, etc.). The novices wish to be initiated as they want to take part in these game activities along with their friends, as through them friendship is performed, re-tied and/or maintained, especially when friends are physically separated by large distances.

> int_26_f_24_Alexis H. [2195-2747]
> (Researcher: Why starting to play the game?) Curiousity from watching
> my boyfriend and my friends play. I've always been one of the elusive
> "female video game nerds" - so joining WoW was pretty natural. I got
> into it really easily and enjoyed the story. After a while, it became an
> escape from the demands of life and from my degenerating relationship.
> I moved away from my home town, and used WoW to keep in touch
> with my friends. The boyfriend that started me on it and I broke up,
> and I actually got in touch with a friend I went to highschool with, to
> whom I am currently engaged. (Thanks WoW!)

> int_35_f_48_Hypatie [3030-3282]
> As noted before, I started playing because a friend of mine was playing
> and I joined her guild. Later she stopped playing but I continued playing
> in various guilds. Now I am in a guild of professionals and I play mostly
> because I enjoy their banter.

> int_41_f_19_Sunnai [2123-2564]
> I heard a lot about it from classmates and read about it on the internet,
> and it got me very interested, so i had this friend that played it, and
> i asked if she could teach me. I started playing WoW on my own in
> December 2007. But before that i had a friend that played it, and she
> showed me how to play on her account. I think that was around half a

year before i started playing on my own. And i still play the game on daily basis.

Group initiations are very common and so are migrations from other games. For these players, part of the fun is being together and learning together with their friends in the game. For most of these players, playing with friends is more important than just playing. Thus, the decision to leave a game and choose another one is a group decision and not a question of individual choice. Not even preferred playing styles, budget or types of game matter when it comes to following their friends. In a way, for these players, the game equals playing with friends.

These migrations and group decisions are an interesting aspect because they ritualise not just one particular game but the whole gaming experience of a particular group of friends. Traditions are constructed based on previous experiences and, based on these traditions, the group of friends define their social identity. These traditions construct common and shared pasts (Katovich and Couch, 1992) which sustain the friendship zone against the zone outside of its borders (for example, friends are those with whom certain games were played, which involved a lot of fun).

> int_04_m_18_Alexander M. [2877-3224]
> (5:48:52 PM) Researcher: How did you find out about WOW? From whom?
> (5:50:31 PM) Alexander M.: The online community at Blizzard, since at the time I was playing Warcraft III with a lot of friends. We decided to buy the game together, but we had no real idea what MMORPGs were. As far as we were concerned, it would be another normal multiplayer experience. END

> int_11_f_40_Sam M. [1395-2046]
> (9:13:03 PM) Sam M.: Sure. So I think the first games I played online were first person shooters, like Duke Nukem, and Shadow Warrior. I also played Diablo, and a bit of Neverwinter Nights. All were with friends of mine, all male at the time. I always preferred the more role-play games, and when they did not, I spent several years not playing online at all, and just playing single-player RPGs on my PC and consoles. My first MMO was Guild Wars, which I played for 3 years straight from time it released. It got to the point that most of my guildmates and friends were finding the game stale, so we moved over to WoW. That was in Novemeber of 2007.

int_38_m_21_Subject38 [267-540]

The first online game I ever played was Halo 2 for the XBOX 360, and that was when I was 16. I kept up my Halo habit until I was 18; I don't play Halo anymore because all my friends and I moved on to World of Warcraft. I suspect we will one day move on to another game.

int_38_m_21_Subject38 [1189-1627]

Oh yes, of course. At first, I played because all my friends did and I wanted to play games with them like we did with Halo 2-3. As things went on, however, I began to simply play whenever I had free time or any time to kill during the day. At one point, I also played as a way to bond with my long distance girlfriend, whom I could only afford to drive to see 3 days out of any given week. Now, though, I again play for time to kill.

In some cases, after the initiator leaves the game, the player accustomed to ritualised play seeks other ritualised play. Further ritualisation may be experienced, as a move away from private circle towards extended circle rituals. These rituals, as we shall see, involve virtual friends or even random people whose company is enjoyed and sought after online:

int_35_f_48_Hypatie [3030-3282]

As noted before, I started playing because a friend of mine was playing and I joined her guild. Later she stopped playing but I continued playing in various guilds. Now I am in a guild of professionals and I play mostly because I enjoy their banter.

Distance but also *physical proximity* in real life makes the future players want to share hobbies with those around them. Of course, proximity is not the only factor at play when starting to play a game, but it does act as a catalyst in certain cases. One wishes to get along with the people from one's vicinity, thus the integration function of the initiation or playing together ritual comes into play again. One may wish to be initiated due to a desire to feel part of a group or to have common grounds with someone physically close, but psychically and socially more distant (sometimes even an in-game authority figure, see the example int_42 below). Thus, the initiation ritual becomes about forging and strengthening relationships. It may even display a transformative function as well, in the context in which players start as room-mates or co-workers and become friends:

int_24_f_25_Heidi [1265-1417]

(11:03:35 AM) Heidi: At the time I lived with two very good friends, and they have always played a lot of adventure games, so they introduced me to it.

int_42_m_21_Lixta [2551-2975]

As for WoW; I started playing nov. 2008, not only 5 months ago. I started playing as I had been away from gaming for about a year and was starting to crave the stimulation my brain gets from competitive gaming at a high level. I was encouraged by a player who I had become friends with when I lived with my girlfriend and her flat mates, he was one of them. A top player on the server, always having the highest tier sets.

int_05_m_38_Oddlyeven [749-923]

My co-workers would talk about playing WoW in the mornings. For about a year, I teased them for playing a video game as adults until they finally talked me into playing.

Helping the novice becomes part of a relationship maintenance ritual and shows affection or care. At the initial stage, the help may come in various forms: from offering information or tips, links to useful websites and add-ons, the initiator playing demonstratively with their own character or the initiate's one through the first levels, guiding the initiate from close, from a distance or in the game until they learn the basics. The familiarity of the private circle is experienced as a 'safe venue' for players who are not comfortable with joining and participating in online groups to ask questions. From this safe zone, the initiates can venture gradually into the online sociality, when they feel prepared, as the game forces players to group in order to get to the 'higher end' content.

int_06_f_25_Nicole G. [1699-2261]

(6:58:43 PM) Nicole G.: My best friend Stephen played for a long time, and had been trying to get me to play. I would watch him, and because he was already at lvl 60 and used multiple addons, his screen was always so confusing to watch, so that detered me because I didn't think I'd ever learn how.
(6:59:32 PM) Nicole G.: Once I started playing though, he helped me out a lot by sitting with me and walking me through the first 10 lvls as a human priest. So I guess for me it was pretty easy because I had assistance.

(6:59:34 PM) Nicole G.: End

> int_46_f_22_Navi [772-1091]
> Initially understanding the game was a bit of a challenge for the initial half hour, but I used to look up guides (and cheats!!) on the internet for games like The Sims or Theme Hospital. With WoW my friend introduced me so I had him to guide me around and show me what to do, but still a lot of it was trial and error.

> int_17_f_26_Stormey [612-901]
> - I started playing because my roommates played and they were integral for me learning the game. I had a safe venue to ask any questions that I had. I was terrified of grouping with anyone else for a long time, but I really had to in order to progress further so eventually I got over it.

Sometimes, the game is offered and received as some sort of *cure*, a cure that induces catharsis (emotional cleansing) and switches off all the undesired feelings and thoughts. However, apart from evasionist characteristics (a reference to the 'narcotic' function of online games), the initiation to the game as a cure stands for friendly concern and care, which are other ritual means to sustain a relationship.

> int_46_f_22_Navi [2311-2596]
> My friend told me to play which is why I first started, I'd gone through a pretty messy break up and I'd watched all of Sex and the City so I needed something else to distract me. The reason for playing has never changed, it has always been a release for me and a way of switching off.

Because extended circle rituals (virtual friends from *WoW*) have little introductory role, they will be covered in the chapter entitled 'Playing together rituals - the close circle'. At times, they have a re-introductory role (directly or indirectly), as players report that, due to friends met online, they resume playing after quitting the game or taking a break. As well, there were players who declared that they started to realise what the game was about only after they talked with some online friends or people they have met online. Nevertheless, this type of introduction is better defined as knowledge transmission rituals, which will not be discussed in this thesis (unless tangentially) since these initiation rituals can be better considered as part of the game's engineered ritualisation. Without the knowledge transmission rituals, learning to play the game would be tedious and arid work.

5.2.2   Playing together rituals - the close circle

Playing together rituals have already been considered when discussing the way initiation rituals transform into playing together rituals centred on relationship or are meant to be rituals of playing together from the very beginning. However, due to their importance, playing together rituals deserve a closer and in depth examination.

According to Yee (2005b), 80% of the MMORPGs players play with someone they know in real life: 25% of MMO players are playing with a romantic partner (Yee, 2006a), 19% of players with a family member (excluding romantic partners) and 70% of respondents with real life friends (note that the percentages do not add up to 100% due to the fact that people who play with their real life friends can play also with their family or partners). Yee (2005b) also reported that playing with people that are known from real life leads to enjoyable experiences for most of these players.

The data suggest that a total of 90.9% (weighted) of *WoW* players have or had family, real life friends or partners in the game. This breaks down as 18 of 20 males (90%) and 28 of 29 females (96%); weighted values are 75% of all the players being males and 15% of all the players being females who had or have friends, family or friends in the game. It is possible that this percentage is slightly higher than than seen by Yee (2005b) because data referring to friends, family and partners that players had in the game have been included, irrespective of whether the players play with them or not or if they are still playing the game. The reason behind this inclusion is that, beside from playing together being loosely defined, doing things together is just one aspect of performing relationships. Other aspects include socialising and expressing emotions, which may be left aside if one only takes into consideration the instances when gamers only play with their closest circle (inner and private circle).

The data presented above suggest that the first two types of close circle rituals, namely inner circle and private circle rituals, have an impact on the vast majority of *WoW* players. Even if members of the same close circle play on different servers or on the same server but at different moments of time or in different groups, most players keep in touch with their close circle. This is reflected by Blizzard's move to launch the *Real ID* scheme, which allows players to keep in touch and communicate across their games. The game, either directly or indirectly, plays a special role in relationship rituals (including ones which extend outside the game). Firstly, there is the game acting directly on

the relationship, for example when playing together (frequently or from time to time) or setting up characters on the servers where the close circle members are and logging in just to talk to or be with each other. Secondly, there is the game acting indirectly on the relationship in the case of players using the game as a prop for performing and sustaining relationships: by talking about the game in real life or via other remote means of communication or by meeting up with players that were known only online.

Some of the quantitative data obtained are presented below to better illustrate why playing together rituals matter:

- 52% of the interviewees (26 interviewees, $N = 50$; where N is the sample size) have or had at some point family members or partners in the game (21 females out of a total of 29 females - 72% of the female players; only 5 males of a total of 21 males - 24% of the male players). This would represent 31.5% of all the players (weighted).

- 73.4% (36 interviewees, $N = 49$) of the interviewees had or played with real life friends, of which 20 females ($N = 29$, 68.9%) and 16 males ($N = 20$, 80%). This would represent 78% of all the players (weighted).

- 77.5% (38 interviewees, $N = 49$) of the interviewees play with or made virtual friends in the game, 22 females ($N = 29$, 75.8%) and 16 males ($N = 20$, 80%). This would represent 79% of all the players (weighted).

- 91.8% (45 interviewees, $N = 49$) of the interviewees had or made friends in the game (virtual or real life friends).

In addition, for some players, playing with someone is one of the motivations to continue playing the game. Thus, this indicates a possible connection between ritualisation (close circle rituals) and the commitment to the game. Some even declared that if it were not for their friends they would not play this game and that they would move wherever their friends move:

- 38% (19 interviewees, $N = 49$) of the interviewees, 9 males ($N = 20$, 45%) and 10 ($N = 29$, 34.4%) females, said that they continue to play, among other things, because of the close circle (family, romantic partners and friends). This would represent 43.3% of all the players (weighted). For almost half of *WoW* players, the game is a venue for doing things together with the close circle.

- 14.2% (7 interviewees, $N = 49$) of the interviewees continue to play due to the game being a fun activity with family or partner, with 1 male ($N = 20$, 5%), 6 females ($N = 29$, 20.6%).

- 20.4% (10 interviewees, $N = 49$) said that they continue to play to keep in touch or play with friends, with 6 males ($N = 20$, 30%) and 4 females ($N = 29$, 13.8%).

- 8.1% (4 interviewees, $N = 49$), with 3 males ($N = 20$, 15%) and 1 female ($N = 29$, 3.4%) of the interviewees continue to play due to the fact that they made friends in the game.

The quantitative data show that the majority of payers do not play alone. The huge popularity of this practice together with the link between playing together and continuing to play the game suggests that *WoW* may exhibit enhanced ritualisation on the relationship dimension.

The following section will present some rituals of playing together and explain their associated meaning and/or functions. Examples from all the perspectives (the inner, private and extensive circles) will be provided as well.

The functions of playing together rituals

Playing together rituals can have many functions. The most salient functions identified are presented here, but I recognise that there may be more functions involved in these rituals. These functions are not at all distinct functions, totally separated from one another. Rather, they form a complex web of interconnected functions, which may address one or more meaning of the rituals at the same time.

In playing together rituals, by sharing hobbies and interests, the game becomes a metaphor for affection and closeness, as in the example below. This represents the affective function of the playing together rituals.

> int_14_f_20_Lori S. [3961-4342]
> Researcher: would it be wrong for me to say that you started to play this game to save your relationship at first?
> Sent at 4:14 PM on Friday
> Lori S.: I wouldn't say that. There wasn't really anything wrong, he wasn't like spending so much time playing that we didn't interact or anything. He just wanted me to enjoy something that he enjoyed, like share a hobby with me. END

More importantly, sharing does not happen only at a mental level, through reaching a common understanding about an issue, or through conversations on a topic which is familiar to all the members interacting in a relationship. The game is a virtual space and a medium which allows for doing things together (sometimes play even occurs in the same room). In most cases, the integration within groups function or the belonging function of playing together rituals comes into play. Many players may play due to wishing to belong to a close group of friends (or even to a more loose network of friends, fellows or acquaintances to which the close friends belong, following the social networks' phenomenon). In addition, many players may want to feel integrated within the group or network, in that they may want be an active and connected part of the group. The most important way to belong and integrate within a group is to take part in all its activities, including play, if the group prefers it as a means to do things together. Not participating in one of the group's most important activities, if that is playing together, might signify a degradation of the relationship with the group which can lead to a gradual exclusion from it. In the playing together rituals of couples or families, a slightly modified version of these functions will be encountered, in that the group is replaced by the couple or family unit, and the emphasis will be on the affective function of playing together to a greater degree. Nevertheless, the affective function is not absent from the group aspects. One common affective aspect of group, family and couple rituals of playing together is 'togetherness' (defined as the need to and the feeling of be/ing together, do/ing things together, strike/ing conversations, spend/ing time together with other people). In the context of the game, doing things together means performing activities such as:

1. doing things together as a couple:

> int_29_f_26_Stella [5605-5741]
> (5:21:31 PM) Stella: Nowdays Its almost the same reasons plus the fact It is something i do with my boyfriend (which I met in game too)

> int_29_f_26_Stella [10084-10660]
> (5:33:47 PM) Stella: I feel good with my guild :) And even better when I get the chance to play with my boyfriend
> (5:34:14 PM) Researcher: you play in the same guild?
> (5:34:20 PM) Researcher: as he does?
> (5:34:24 PM) Stella: yes

(5:34:49 PM) Researcher: would you say that is one of the activities you often do together?

(5:35:31 PM) Stella: Well we don't live in the same town (we are 7 hours away from each other) so yes

(5:35:38 PM) Stella: we play together a lot :) on raids mostly though

(5:35:55 PM) Stella: When we meet we don't play so much :) we have more interesting things to do ;p

int_22_f_30_Subject22 [2945-3293]

(5:15:19 PM) Subject22: I started playing bcause I suffered an injury and had to spend all my time at home, so I was looking for something fun to fill in the time as well as looking for a game my husband and I could play together because he is an avid gamer. I still play because my husband does, its one of the things we like to do together. End

2. playing in general (leveling by doing quests, participating in raids and instances);

int_34_f_33_Donna B. [980-1391]

A: First of all my first original character which I created on my partner's account was a blood elf warlock called Sabitha we however were unable to transfer her so I had to start another warlock from scratch, I leveled her with my partner's undead warlock to hit 70 during Burning Crusade, so I didn't find it all that hard along with a few mods that I have downloaded like quest helper makes life a lot easier.

int_44_m_18_Subject44 [1733-1799]
Why continuing to play and if the reason changed

Well mostly for IRL friends... Not mmuch.. I still play with em =)

3. founding, joining and being in guilds together

int_15_f_20_Subject15 [8135-8386]

(9:29:56 PM) Researcher: Do you play WoW with your dad? Are you in the same guild? How about your boyfriend?

(9:31:09 PM) Subject15: occasionally i play with my dad, he is more of a EQ2 player, we are in the same guild. my boyfriend refuses to play

int_31_f_35_Ládymystical [6247-6353]

(2:38:53 PM) [about joining her guild] Ládymystical: it was my choice in joining & making own guilds with my friends. no need for rewards.

int_28_m_25_Subject28 [4465-5352]

(10:42:10) Subject28 says: Over the years things changed for me. I got a few friends and Co-workers to try WoW out. And now we're all playing together in the same guild I have founded. Most of my guildies are real friends, and some of them I know from a guild-meeting we had 1 year ago. And a few are just some friends we made in-game, we don't know them directly, but we all are calling us with our real names and have a real family-like situation in the guild. [...]
(10:44:17) Subject28 says: My main reasons why I continue playing WoW are my friends. We're doing stuff together like raiding in instances or just helping each other out and so on. Would most of my friends quit with WoW, I would also.

4. and learning together with their family, partner and friends.

int_03_f_24_Hino [2410-2760]

I had some help but not much from my uncle because he wanted to level but I met two online friends at around level 16 and we basically leveled together during the Burning Crusade and we were learning from each other we made our own guild it was really fun specially when youre experiencing things for the first time, the feeling is just different.

int_42_m_21_Lixta [2551-3441]

I did wish to do well at this game though and soon I started understanding things, more of my friends started playing as well and soon, whilst all talking on skype, we learnt together, all combining knowledge. This had now become a social as well as an addictive activity for me.

int_42_m_21_Lixta [5627-6131]

I already had friends in the game however some had only started playing weeks before i did but were always talking about how good the game was. I passed all who were not level 80 at the game already which felt great.

The above examples also demonstrate the supportive function of playing together rituals. Closely connected with the supportive function is the cognitive function of playing together rituals. This is due to the fact that, in many cases, helping each other goes hand in hand with learning together (which includes recommending links to useful add-ons and websites). However, if the cognitive dimension predominates in the sense that one plays together with a friend or partner only to gain advantages in the game, I consider that the ritual dimension is weakened towards a more instrumental dimension of play (with the note that a clear cut division between the two dimensions is difficult). Some players reported finding pleasure in helping out, which leads to the conclusion that there is an aesthetic function involved as well. This aesthetic function is linked to the fact that most of these players indicated social motivations for playing the game. In some cases, the practice of players 'helping each other' in the game may be transmitted to newer generations of players during the playing together ritual (see interview 15 below). Thus, the playing together rituals may have normative functions. The underlying principle working within the ritual might be that if one was helped as a player, the least they could do is to help at their own turn, thus disseminating, perpetuating and normalising this behaviour further.

> int_15_f_20_Subject15
>
> (9:20:48 PM) Subject15: the guild helps me out, it is full of people who have played awhile, websites like www.thottbot.com help me out... someone recommended a quest helper which does wonders on how to complete quests. i guess another hting [thing] that i forgot to mention, new people are always joining the guild and it is really fun to help them out too. i find satisfaction in that too and i think a lot of people like helping out each other

> int_15_f_20_Subject15 [7263-7605]
>
> (9:25:21 PM) Researcher: you said you want to keep up with your friend...to what friend you're referring?
> (9:27:35 PM) Subject15: i met her and him online. we actually all play together, a trio. one lives in canada and one lives in pennsylvania (SP?) and i met them both randomly on the game, introduced them and we all get along very well

> int_40_f_44_CAF [2880-3077]
>
> 6.Why did you first start playing the game? Did the reasons change over time? I just loved being able to have a character you controlled and leveled questing and making friends to help do the same

The supportive functions mentioned above, however, place enormous social burdens on the players with huge costs (in terms of lack of pleasure derived from gameplay). This may happen due to these social burdens limiting heavily the escapist function of the game. However, some players play or continue to play for the escapist function of the game [4 players started for escapist reasons (3 female players and 1 male player) and 6 players (5 female players and 1 male player) continue for escapist reasons]. Hence, some players choose not to engage in these 'helping' practices any more and play for their own fun. This represents another instance of change of ritualisation:

> int_12_f_33_Bellidonna

this player started to play for escapist reasons

> (3:54:17 PM) Bellidonna: I only play on one server, a PVE server. I have the max amount of toons for that server- 10. I haven't played as a different sex yet. I like female toons because I can make them look pretty and sometimes wear pretty armor. My main is a priest. She was holy since I wanted to help people, but I stopped playing to help other people and now play to make myself happy. END

Another one of the functions of playing together rituals closely associated with doing things together and the integration function is the identity creation and performance function. Playing together creates a shared universe constituted from shared and common pasts, presents and futures, which are essential for the construction of the social identity of the group, couple or family unit (Katovich and Couch, 1992). These pasts, presents and futures do that through generating cohesion (unity against a common opponent or obstacle or due to the 'affinity' of actions and thoughts) and belonging. The shared and common pasts, the history, are the premise for present and future interactions and distinguish this group, couple or family from other social units. Shared and common presents are the present, performative aspect of the relationship; that is, how the relationship is enacted in the here-and-now, whereas the shared and common futures are planned and anticipated events, such as instances and raids, which are both ways to enact the relationship in the future and to project the idea of the group's continuity.

Through playing together rituals, the game is another way of spending time together, bonding and staying in touch with family, friends and a romantic partner (especially for those that live far apart). Spending time together is essential for performing and maintaining relationships, and playing together rituals play an important role because they provide opportunities and venues

for this to happen. Since 'offerings' of one's time to others are crucial for performing and maintaining the relationship, playing together rituals facilitate performing and maintaining relationships. Hence, playing together rituals have a relationship maintenance and performance function. The nature of the time spent together is important as well. The fact that the game is the "main 'fun' activity" for the whole family (or for the couple or friends) is not without significance, as it implies the existence of an entertainment function tightly linked with the aesthetic category of 'fun' and the correspondent aesthetic function of playing together rituals. This suggests that for contemporary relationships, among other aspects, 'having fun' is an important component. For many players, the possibility or impossibility of performing playing together rituals is a strong motive to continue, restart or just stop playing. One may argue that playing together rituals are rituals because they happen 'regularly'. However, the fact that these rituals are performed 'regularly' only says something about how binding these rituals are. They could happen less regularly and still be rituals, yet they might not be as strongly binding or as powerful.

Other excerpts support the functions mentioned above:

1. spending time together

> int_14_f_20_Lori S. [4455-5054]
>
> Lori S.: I first started playing because D. (my boyfriend) asked me to give it a try, but I found almost right away that I really enjoyed it, even though I wasn't a great player at first. I continue to play of course because I enjoy it, also somewhat to be in line with the expectations of my guild, which is a raiding guild, that I get my character ready for raid content (she just got to level 80), and also because my boyfriend recently transferred schools and lives across the country, it's one of the ways, besides visits and the phone and skype, that we spend time together.

> int_41_f_19_Sunnai [8898-9100]
>
> 21. I play around 5 hours a day approximately, more in weekends. I haven't played a lot lately though, but that's because i've been sick. My boyfriend play[s] as well so we use a lot of time on WoW together.

> int_18_f_18_Megan H. [2245-2329]
>
> I learned everything from my boyfriend. We live together and play in the same room.

2. bonding

int_09_m_52_David N. [4068-4403]

me: You said something about your son playing WoW. Do you play WoW with your son?

6:31 PM David N.: I did for a long time H e has gone to other games and is more interested in sports at his schoool and is now interested in dating so his game play is very limited mostly on the weekends when he visits me His mother and I are divorced End

int_42_m_21_Lixta [2551-3441]

As for WoW; I started playing nov. 2008, not only 5 months ago. I started playing as I had been away from gaming for about a year and was starting to crave the stimulation my brain gets from competitive gaming at a high level.

I was encouraged by a player who I had become friends with when I lived with my girlfriend and her flat mates, he was one of them. A top player on the server, always having the highest tier sets.

When I started to play I found it slightly frustrating, Finding there was so much to learn and understand. The closest I had come to a game liker this was the final fantasy games.

I did wish to do well at this game though and soon I started understanding things, more of my friends started playing as well and soon, whilst all talking on skype, we learnt together, all combining knoweledge. This had now become a social as well as an addictive activity for me.

int_42_m_21_Lixta [5627-6131]

I already had friends in the game however some had only started playing weeks before i did but were always talking about how good the game was. I passed all who were not level 80 at the game already which felt great.

I have also made a few good friends in the game who i talk with in in-game chat all the time and do raids and instances regularly.

If i did not have my real friends playing the game then I would be less likely to be online half as much and therefore they are very important to me.

3. keeping in touch

int_17_f_26_Stormey [2150-2647]

- Mostly, for something to do. I would come home from work tired

and restless and having the ability to sit down and do something other than watch TV was appealing. Plus, I got to spend time with my friends who also played. The reasons are essentially still the same, although I no longer live with my friends who play WoW. However, not living together gives me more reason to play because we don't get to spend the face to face time together like we used to so it's a good way to keep in contact.

int_26_f_24_Alexis H. [3108-3302]

Almost my entire social network of real life friends play on Argent Dawn (RP-PVE server). Ive made SOME virtual friends through WoW, but I dont really know a lot about them other than game wise.

4. main fun activity

int_11_f_40_Sam M. [13300-13601]

(10:14:21 PM) Sam M.: I tend to play most weekdays for 2-3 hours, and probably about 4-8 hours on weekends. I play with my hubby, so for us, its our main fun activty. Regular chores, work obligations, vacations, and similar will reduce these (ie REAL LIFE). So far thats about the only thing that has. END

Playing together rituals are not always possible and this is partly because of the structure of the game. Playing together is only possible if certain conditions are met, for example the level of the character. Lower level characters cannot access the more dangerous areas (they will get killed quickly) where the more advanced players are more likely to progress further and get useful and valuable armour. Other conditions include: the faction that one chooses (one cannot talk in-game with a character of the opposing factions, all communication being reduced to a couple of gestures), the style of play (pvp, pve or rp and a couple of combinations) which corresponds to a server on which the character is based. One can change servers for a fee or when the developers try to balance the populations of the servers and offer free migrations of the characters. Individual preferences, such as being casual or having a different playing times pattern, can also detract from playing with friends. Thus, having offline friends does not necessarily mean powerful online interactions, but they do exist if they are on the same server.

int_14_f_20_Lori S. [6445-7240]

Lori S.: Of course I play with boyfriend. Also, many of my friends were already playing before I started, but most of them are casual players

who will take time off and come back, so for the most part I didn't play with them because their characters are pretty low-level or they're not playing when I am. Also some are on different servers. I have a few real life friends who have started playing after I did and joined my server, and so I'll interact with them in game sometimes. As for friends I've made in the game... there are some people in my guild who have been pretty helpful for me in terms of learning to really play my character in higher-level content, and I enjoy talking to them in guild chat and stuff, but I guess I would consider them more friendly acquaintances.

int_20_m_24_Subject20 [2000-2119]
-some of my co-works play on different servers and my wife plays a little bit, but mostly i play with people i meet

A more instrumental dimension of both initiations and playing together rituals is that both the initiate and the initiator might take advantage of refer-a-friend scheme, which allows players to progress quicker if they play together and get other rewards (such as mounts). According to my definition this would not be ritualised play. It is not clear in the examples below whether the dyad initiator/initiate play together mainly to get the rewards, but at least in the first case, the initiate does not play together with her romantic partner due to the in-game rewards (safe for the affective ones) and hence the play is ritualised.

int_27_f_21_Katie K. [2302-2655]
Katie K.: My best friend in highschool started playing it when it first came out. He always tried to get me to play but I never did. When the latest expansion pack came out my fiance and his group of friends kept talking about how they were going to get into it and play again - and I honestly just felt a little left out so I thought I'd try it.

int_27_f_21_Katie K. [1478-2121]
Katie K.: It was really easy. Mostly because my fiance helped me play. Through the invite a friend system you can level at 3 times the normal speed if you play together. So we did that. ..So until level 60 I sort of just followed him around. Although it was frustrating that it didn't give me time to learn the maps and everything, it was a very good way to learn how to play, how to use the lingo and how to interact with people in the game. Without him I probably would have been way worse off. Now I'm leveling a character on my own, and I find it really easy to do it because I had him to take me through a leveling procedure first end

int_41_f_19_Sunnai [4050-4299]

11. No it went soo slow in the beginning. I didn't know where to go, what zones to quest in. I've been trying some refer-a-friend with you [my?] boyfriend and i got to admit i enjoy you level so fast together, but i like some good oldschool levelling too.

With the continuing, never-ending form of entertainment that *WoW* provides, with endless topics of conversation, the game seems to permeate every day life and relationships. It is not only about doing things together, but also about talking about things done or achieved together. The playing together rituals are accompanied by conversational rituals, which sometimes are part of the playing together rituals. Talking about shared accomplishments or actions from the game is another aspect of togetherness and closeness and emphasises the affective function of the rituals of playing together. These conversations, which usually gravitate towards discussion of the game, for example, its latest expansion packs, its forthcoming events in or out of the game, etc. are ways to build common and shared pasts, presents and futures (for a more detailed discussion about how they create and maintain the social identity of the group, see above). Chatting with friends is often one reason for returning to the game after the player quit.

int_12_f_33_Bellidonna [3683-4284]

(3:31:57 PM) Researcher: Why do you say that WoW isn't just entertaining? Could you explain this?

(3:34:20 PM) Bellidonna: I guess I mean that it is a form of entertainment that is so different from others. I can be entertained by a movie for 2 hours and may want to watch it again, but then I walk away from it. I never really walk away from WoW. Even when we aren't playing, my husband and I talk about it a lot- about what toons we want to play, what we want to do with them.

(3:34:52 PM) Bellidonna: I think that when I started to play WoW, I didn't simply start to play a game, but I made a lifestyle change. END

int_12_f_33_Bellidonna [5216-5619]

(3:40:00 PM) Researcher: Do you usually play together with your husband, as a family activity? Are you in separate guilds?

(3:42:13 PM) Bellidonna: I always play with my husband. We group together every day. We just left a guild, but when we are in one, we are always in the same one. WoW is the family activity we do most. I'll run around some in game if he's not home, but we still group together every day. END

int_05_m_38_Oddlyeven [8059-8215]

(about meeting with WoW players) I occasionally meet offline and we usually talk about life in general, silly things that we've done in game, and up-coming events (both in-game and out)

int_47_m_27_Hristo D. [3016-3120]

I got back because I had friends in game that I know in "real life" as well and I always play something.

But it is not only about playing together, it is also about playing against each other or competing with each other (overtly or not). Ritualised contest or conflict situations make it possible for players to re-assert (normative function) or challenge (contesting function) the established social order, its status-roles and its conventions within their group of friends or within the society at large. Comparing one's gaming performance against the performances of one's friends is an enjoyable activity for more competitive players. It is possible that, for these players, not knowing the people with whom one competes takes away some of the fun. The 'real life' social status of their contestants might be seen as more fulfilling to challenge (or their 'real life' symbolic capital more honourable to preserve or upgrade) through performances in the game. It may also be that random players or virtual friends constitute a social circle perceived as less persistent than the real life equivalent, and players might feel the need that their accomplishments last longer than a random encounter. The contesting function acts in an all-is-possible universe, where social order can be safely re-written (sustained by the escapist function of the game). Thus, the contest may be seen as ritualised in *WoW*, although the game design sustains and regulates most of the contest situations (the answers from int_04 below are illustrative in this respect). For example, valuing more time over mastery fosters not only competition, but also the contesting function. It equalises the players, giving the opportunity to the lesser skilled ones to gain advantages over their friends if they invest more time (and time is a resource more readily available than skill). The interactions between playing with others (forging shared pasts, presents and futures) and playing against others (building common pasts, presents and futures) represent another way of forging community and group identities. Thus the conflicts with others and challenges bonding players against others influence the identity construction function in a direct way.

int_42_m_21_Lixta [5627-6131]

I already had friends in the game however some had only started playing weeks before i did but were always talking about how good the game was. I passed all who were not level 80 at the game already which felt

great.

I have also made a few good friends in the game who i talk with in in-game chat all the time and do raids and instances regularly.

If i did not have my real friends playing the game then I would be less likely to be online half as much and therefore they are very important to me.

int_04_m_18_Alexander M. [used to play on competitive pvp servers]
(6:22:45 PM) Alexander M.: The sense of community has fluctuated but has always been present. In the old days when raids would require 40 people and pvp was limited to a single server population only, for example, specific rivalries or alliances were commonplace. Blizzard gave us the means to interact (through forums, etc.).
(6:23:44 PM) Alexander M.: Now, though, Blizzard have made the game more open to casual players, meaning that one does not feel as big a sense of loyalty to a community anymore, since the challenges which bonded players have essentially been neutralised.

int_04_m_18_Alexander M. [used to play on competitive pvp servers]
(5:50:31 PM) Alexander M.: The online community at Blizzard, since at the time I was playing Warcraft III with a lot of friends. We decided to buy the game together, but we had no real idea what MMORPGs were. As far as we were concerned, it would be another normal multiplayer experience. END
(5:52:26 PM) Researcher: Going back to your previous answer... Did you found out that there wasn't a nornam [normal] experience?[...]
(5:54:19 PM) Alexander M.: Yes, we weren't used to a game that rewarded time invested over skill so ridiculously. Our friendly rivalry that had nurtured our relationships while growing up suddenly turned us into festering creatures determined to stay up late into the night to gain a level over one another.

The rituals of playing together can function as a catalyst for interactions and relationships, such as friendship, fellowship or love. Outside the game, the playing together rituals can act as both conversation starters and ice-breakers for real life relationships. Also, within the game, friendships or romantic relationships may form and develop, mediated by playing together rituals. Either initiated online or offline, these relationships are usually maintained through playing together rituals and may even extend beyond the game.

int_16_m_40_Steve Black [6160-7851]
I have 2 brothers-in-law that play WoW. None of us play on the same

server. I have had several virtual friends in the game from time to time, but they are not important to me and we always seem to lose touch after a while. Here is a fun story for you: My wife and I had attended Blizzcon '07 and purchased several World of Warcraft t-shirts while we were there. A few months later I started a new job. One day during my first week at work I wore one of my WoW t-shirts. I was still "the new guy" at work and not many people were talking to me (I look a little intimidating). One of the employees that worked in a different department than I did noticed the shirt during lunch and struck up a conversation with me. It turned out that he was also a WoW player and was also a member of the Horde like myself. He is originally from Michigan and moved to California after meeting his girlfriend on World of Warcraft. They were both single and in the same guild when they met. They started chatting for a few months and then exchanged pictures and then my coworker came to California to visit. They have been inseparable ever since. (Now back to my story) I became good friends with this coworker and moved my character to his server after my wife had left me. He and his girlfriend were extremely kind to me during the hard times I was having shortly after the separation. I no longer work with my new friend, but we are still close. He and his girlfriend are still WoW players and I see him online all the time now that I'm playing again. He is also an Xbox online user, like myself, so we have still been playing games together even when I wasn't playing WoW for those 6 months.

int_07_f_27_Hanneke [3205-3651]

(11:21:23 AM) Researcher: Did the reasons for playing WoW change over time?

(11:22:54 AM) Hanneke: Yes. At first I just wanted to play a different game, later on I got attached to the people I play with. because I fell in love with a person I played with a lot it got even more complicated. Then i just wanted to be with him so that was the main reason for playing

(11:23:46 AM) Hanneke: Now we live together so it is just enjoying the game again. END

There is a need for human interaction, playing with or against others, chatting, forming and maintaining relationships with people. The interaction function of playing together rituals both serve and express this human need. These people may not necessarily be friends, but rather acquaintances, fellows or even less (in the case of random people with whom or in the presence of

whom one plays). This is, perhaps, the most prominent function of the playing together rituals. Most MMO players perceive games as lonely and boring without the people. Thus, they enjoy the company of guild mates or random players. Some players mention that it is fun to be with the same people for specific activities; possibly it gives the players a sense of familiarity and a rudimentary sense of belonging to and continuity with a group. In some cases, these online friends or random people are not important as the interactions or relationships with them are not persistent in time. However, for some players, the interactions or relationships with fellow players with whom they are not friends are still important since they engender affect, enjoyment, sense of community or familiarity. By facilitating these feelings, the rituals may have a transformative power (in real life) on at least one of the parties involved ('make something in my life feel better'). Due to these feelings, the interaction-centred rituals could be deemed efficacious in the game and may enhance gameplay. Nevertheless, the playing together rituals which focus on the interaction function are less efficacious outside the game. There are, however exceptions, when intimate feelings such as missing some players or having a 'connection' with them are felt, but these feelings do not tend to be very powerful.

> int_16_m_40_Steve Black [6160-7851]
> I have 2 brothers-in-law that play WoW. None of us play on the same server. I have had several virtual friends in the game from time to time, but they are not important to me and we always seem to lose touch after a while.

> int_36_m_19_Boris P. [2169-2356]
> 9) I made some virtual friends there... And i play with my real life friends, of course... I have that virtual friends on facebook now. And we talk in-game and over facebook, msn, etc...

> int_36_m_19_Boris P. [1531-1817]
> 6) I started becouse of my friends, and now I cannot imagine my life without it. It became part of me. It just amazing how good that game is. Sometime I just logged and speak with people for 2-3 hours. U don't need to play it all the time. U can just talk with 15000 at the same time...

> int_21_m_23_Subject21 [11137-11661]
> I had some real friend in the game, but they left because WoW was not really their type of game. Friend, whether "real" or "in-game" are important to me. In the same way that I like playing tennis with the

same group of people every week. I would not necessarily hang out or have a beer with anyone I play tennis with, but it's fun to be with the same people for that kind of activity. I feel the very same thing for WoW. I'm not searching for "real" friends there, but I need to be part of a group of people I know a bit.

int_07_f_27_Hanneke [4010-4589]

(11:26:30 AM) Hanneke: I had 1 friend who was my colleque, in that guild I made a lot of other friends, we went to concerts and parties together, had a bbq together. They are not that important to me, I like them and I like the chats we have but they are not as important as my normal friends although I do miss them when I don't see them for a while

(11:27:19 AM) Hanneke: When you come online and there is no one there you know you feel a bit lonely, sometimes for me that is a reason to go and do something else. END

int_15_f_20_Subject15 [5105-5326]

(9:17:52 PM) Subject15: no i didnt [have friends], but my dad made good friend[s] and when he told them i was going to play, they seemed to already love me.. they are important, they i dont know... make something in my life feel better

As mentioned previously, playing together rituals display relationship creation and maintenance functions. The relationships engendered in online settings are seen by many as not that important; even some players who choose to meet face to face with players from *WoW* experience a different kind of relationship. They deem it as not or not that important, marked by less closeness (10 players say that virtual friends are not or not that important and 17 players deem them important, whereas 5 players have no virtual friends):

int_04_m_18_Alexander M. [6163-6793]

(6:06:05 PM) Alexander M.: When I first started playing I had a lot of real friends playing too. By the time we started raiding in vanilla WoW the list was smaller, but still there. I began to make many virtual friends though, and even spent a weekend up in Scotland meeting some more prominent members of my guild. After staying up til 4 in the morning chatting to people for a year, you feel like you know them anyway

(6:06:53 PM) Alexander M.: So now I have real life friends who I met in the game, although I wouldn't say they were that important. Right now, it is the fact that my sister and her boyfriend play that is most significant. END

int_29_f_26_Stella [6866-7127]

(5:25:31 PM) Stella: I have made some friends throughout the years. Many of them we met in real life and still hang out together. Virtual friends - just guildies I have good chats with and I care about as much as someone can care about his classmates for examples

In many cases, playing together rituals can be considered as efficacious as they can help the formation of online friendships. In many cases, the online friends are considered important for players (if only for the gameplay). With their online friends players do not only play, but also chat on a variety of topics (in and outside the game, through various means of communication, such as face-to-face discussions, instant messaging, social networks, etc.). Again, the continuous engagement with the game is often attributed to the relationships forged or maintained online.

int_25_m_41_Curu [5588-5933]

6 - World of Warcraft I must say here is highly addictive, at first its the very long challenge of leveling to the maximum level, then the challenge of maximising the kit your character has, by this time as I had made many friends, it became more of a religion and a daily part of my life but the social aspect is what keeps it alive for me now.

int_19_f_27_Stephanie V. [14441-14772]

I love the chatting options and the option to voice chat. I play for the relationships I've built- if it wasn't for that option to make friends around the world, I wouldn't have played as long as I have. Another thing that continues to amaze is the amazing graphics. In Northrend alone there are amazing landscapes and skylines.

int_38_m_21_Subject38 [1750-1934]

9) I already had some of my real life friends in the game. I did, however, meet people in WoW that I now can consider very trustworthy and great friends. They are very important to me.

int_47_m_27_Hristo D. [3236-3475]

In the time Ive played Ive come to know many different people and some of them have become my friends. Some Ive not met in person as they live in other countries as for the once that are from my country (Bulgaria) I know them in person.

Sometimes, the efficacy of playing together rituals is limited by personal beliefs. Such a personal belief is that online friendships are 'creepy'.

int_02_m_20_Subject2 [4384-4832]

(9:19:51 AM) Researcher: Did you make/or already had friends in the game? (real friends?/ virtual friends?) Are they important for you?

(9:20:06 AM) Researcher: except the friends that introduced you to the game

(9:20:16 AM) Subject2: Uhh

(9:20:52 AM) Subject2: Its creepy to make friends through WoW so i keep the RL to myself and my RL friends that play with me

(9:21:09 AM) Subject2: So the same ones who introduced me are the ones i play with

Often, the friendships created and maintained through playing together rituals, are solid enough to extended in real life. This is yet another aspect of the rituals' efficacy in engendering a sense of friendship that resembles or is the same as the one formed in real life. At times, real life affinities are discovered or sought in the game (as in the last example):

int_08_f_53_Nancy Woolf [4179-4996]

(7:15:49 PM) Nancy Woolf: The only person I had in the game was the friend who introduced me to WoW but doesn't play often [...]

(7:16:07 PM) Nancy Woolf: I play wow basically for the friendships I've made.. [...]

(7:17:43 PM) Nancy Woolf: I have made very good friends through the game. I've met people in person because of the game...

(7:18:00 PM) Researcher: from the game?

(7:18:22 PM) Nancy Woolf: In fact I just made reservations yesterday to fly to TX to meet my best buddy on the game. She lives there.

(7:18:25 PM) Nancy Woolf: yes [...]

(7:19:10 PM) Nancy Woolf: I will get to meet about 5-6 other ppl in my guild becuase her son started the guild...

(7:19:17 PM) Nancy Woolf: so that should be a lot of fun

int_05_m_38_Oddlyeven [2069-2257]

I had about three real friends in the game. Ive made tons of virtual friends who have grown into real friends. I've met 11 or so people in real life who were previously virtual friends.

int_12_f_33_Bellidonna [4833-5216]

(3:39:47 PM) Bellidonna: I have made some friends in the game but most of them aren't too important in my life. There are only 2 people I met through WoW that I will probably stay in touch with- the guild master of our old guild and her husband. We were in the guild for about

2 months before we realized we lived 5 minutes from each other. The day we realized that we met for lunch. END

Playing together rituals which create virtual friendships are powerful and can engender not just feelings of love or friendship in real life, but also of betrayal, disappointment and being hurt. In some cases, when such a friendship breaks up, a feeling of bitterness remains, which may deter from future playing together rituals with virtual friends. The virtual friendships are in some of these cases the main reason for playing the game. Without them, little reason is left to continue playing the game.

int_16_m_40_Steve Black [8125-8809]

When I first started playing WoW, I purchased the players guide from a local bookstore. What I didn't learn from the book I would ask in general chat and usually get a friendly response in answer. I created a guild early on and a tight group of friends quickly formed. We bounced questions off one another when we needed help. Eventually the guild fell apart and I was left with a bitter taste in my mouth for guilds. After a while I discovered thottbot.com and still use that site to this day for help. I am currently not in a guild and will ask questions in general chat every now and then, but the responses you get not are usually one friendly response to 500 rude remarks.

int_16_m_40_Steve Black [12824-13724]

I have only had one bad experience with a guild. It was the guild that I created when I was new. I called this guild "The Brat Pack". We started out friendly enough, but as time went by I discovered that the other members were starting to resent me because I didn't group up enough. I didn't group up because I was trying to level up so we could get to the end game content. This was back when the level cap was still 60 and the first expansion was just a dream. Guild mates that I considered my friends were using a private chat channel to discuss leaving the guild and starting a new one with a new guild leader. They eventually informed me of their decision and left the guild one by one. Later, after the old guild was disbanded, they sent me an invite to join the new guild, but said that my wife couldn't join. They never gave me a reason for her exile, so I told them to go to hell.

int_21_m_23_Subject21 [9409-10089]

More or less. I personally feel that WoW is not really fun without some friends or a friendly guild. This had me the first time (when I lost all my friends) and another time too. In a game, people are less

understanding to your real world obligations (University for me) and that had me kicked out of a guild once. When the big university rush was done and I could resume playing WoW, I was not so happy to find out that I was kicked from the guild because I was offline for some time. So adding new ways of playing or new things to do is important to keep the people playing, but twice is was actually having lost my friends (for the reasons you know), that had me stop playing

int_21_m_23_Subject21 [5273-6102]
Then I started playing WoW. At first it was a little bit confusing and I felt lonely despite the fact that it was supposedly a MMO. I got the game a later then "everyone" else (about a month or two later) so there was a lot less of people in the beginner zones. Sent at 8:14 PM on Wednesday
Subject21 I eventually found some friends and got invited into a guild with a very friendly guild master. We became good friends (in the game) and I played WoW until we started doing some "high-end" raids. Then we had some arguments and I, at some point, left the guild. Having not much left in the game, I stopped playing. I re-started playing when the expansion came out, but got bored of it rather quickly and quit again. Finally, when the second expansion came out, I reactivated my account and I have been playing since

Sometimes, ritualisation changes. Change may be a move to one or more degrees of closeness up or down relative to the current position on a hypothetical continuum of relationship (with the self at one end and the wider population at the other). It can be towards a more individualist dimension (sometimes with an instrumental feel) or a different kind of ritualisation. Players still play to stay in touch, but a more individual ritual, a ritual of escape and fun starts to take precedence. In some cases, the ritualisation changes its focus from inner circle rituals toward private circle rituals. In other cases, the 'seriousness' of play hints to an increasing de-ritualisation and 'more fun' is equated with both a less instrumental play and a ritual of playing together with friends. Moving together, may also decrease ritualisation in game; perhaps the rituals move outside the game, facilitated by the shared real physical location. This latter case shows how, within the playing together rituals, the game stops being just a game in a more vivid colour.

int_24_f_25_Heidi [1731-1970]
(11:07:04 AM) Heidi: At the beginning it was to play with my friends - the social aspect - but this changed very quickly. Today I play for my

own fun, and the social aspect is not really important! Now it's more a spare time entertainment!

int_19_f_27_Stephanie V. [2240-2474]
Because my friend wanted something we could do together....I still play with her once in awhile but now its more to escape the stresses of real life. I have a very stressful schedule so when I can, I pour my attention into fantasy.

int_41_f_19_Sunnai [2566-3216]
6. I started playing it because people said a lot of good things about it and got me interested. In the beginning i played it with my friend for the fun of it, now it's become alot more "serious" if you can say, with raids and so on. I still love playing but now i feel like i HAVE to because i'm in a small raiding guild. So in the beginning i played because it was fun, now i play because it's a hobby and sort of my 2nd lifestyle. I still play for the fun of it ofc, but as i said it's more a serious game now, in the beginning it was just a game you played whenever you wanted to. Now i have to be online every friday if i sign up for the raiding.

int_07_f_27_Hanneke
(11:21:23 AM) Researcher: Did the reasons for playing WoW change over time?
(11:22:54 AM) Hanneke: Yes. At first I just wanted to play a different game, later on I got attached to the people I play with. because I fell in love with a person I played with a lot it got even more complicated. Then i just wanted to be with him so that was the main reason for playing
(11:23:46 AM) Hanneke: Now we live together so it is just enjoying the game again. END

int_38_m_21_Subject38 [1189-1626]
6) Oh yes, of course. At first, I played because all my friends did and I wanted to play games with them like we did with Halo 2-3. As things went on, however, I began to simply play whenever I had free time or any time to kill during the day. At one point, I also played as a way to bond with my long distance girlfriend, whom I could only afford to drive to see 3 days out of any given week. Now, though, I again play for time to kill.

5.3 Conclusions

This chapter investigated mainstream ritualisation. First, by investigating quantitatively the social aspects considered relevant by the players for starting or continuing to play the game, as they revealed the game in a 'more than just a game' light. This showed that the overall percentage of players reporting social motivations for both starting and continuing to play the game remained at a relatively constant level of more than 50%. These results indicated that ritualisation may occur and may have an important role in starting and continuing to play the game, which was later confirmed by qualitative data on both initiations and playing together rituals. However, a change in the players' motivations occurred, with some players not mentioning social reasons for continuing the game but mentioning them for starting to play the game and other players indicating the reverse. This suggested a change in ritualisation, which was, again, later confirmed by qualitative data.

Second, close circle rituals were investigated, with the two non-mutually exclusive forms: initiation rituals and rituals of playing together. Both types focus on relationship and were divided, theoretically, in inner circle rituals (which refer to family and romantic partners), private circle rituals (which are concerned with friends from real life) and extended circle rituals (referring to friends made online or acquaintances).

Consistent with the given definition of ritual, I was interested in initiations that were less concerned with instrumentality (gaining official, formal rewards) and more with relationships. The initiation rituals, as a form of ritualised play, display the following characteristics:

1. they are 'profane' introductions of the players to the game;

2. massive amounts of information on the rules and strategies of play and the highly specialised language used in game might lead to the initiation being experienced as a ritual where secret knowledge is imparted and assimilated;

3. a more 'sacred' initiation into the universe of the initiator (interests, hobbies, pleasures, etc.) takes place;

4. this 'voyage' of the initiate may result in a status transformation for both the initiator and the initiate, via which the initiate and/or initiator marks the start of a relationship or a relationship of a different order, re-

states the closeness through another bond or enacts the closeness through another means.

The initiations display certain sacred and magical dimensions, similar to what Goffman (1967) noticed when he defined interaction rituals. The initiation ritual in *WoW* follows a (more or less rigid) script with different (non-mandatory) steps: the initiator praises the game and entices the initiate to play, the initiator is seen playing and draws the curiosity of the initiate and/or a group decision to play the game is taken, sometimes migrating from another game (as Williams et al., 2006, found as well); the initiate tries the game (through a trial pass or trial on the initiator's account) or the initiator shows the initiate how the game is played, which sometimes progresses to sharing an account or a full-fledged account.

The initiation ritual often is or becomes a playing together ritual which places the emphasis on relationship. In initiation rituals, the game, aside from being a game, is endowed with various, connected meanings which focus on relationship, such as: the game symbolises and forges affection and closeness (which is often shown by the initiator providing help, but also by the novice wishing to be initiated); it represents a common universe of interests, hobbies or favourite entertainment (including doing things together and providing shared topics of conversation, which form the shared and common pasts, presents and futures); it is context for social interactions; it is a source and a metaphor for domesticity and sense of togetherness and a source or reliever of tensions. Both inner circle and private circle rituals present these meanings, with small exceptions and variations, but they were presented separately for ease of exemplification. They differ in that, for inner circle rituals, the game becomes, at times, a source of tensions, and the initiation becomes a sacrifice to save one's relationship. The initiation transforms into a healing ritual, which is presumed to have a quasi-magical restorative function (the ritual is believed to re-establish order within the relationship). In addition, if, in the case of inner circle rituals, the initiations privilege the affective function, in private circle rituals, the integration function within a group is the one that is favoured.

Thirdly, playing together rituals were investigated. While quantitative data, confirming the data of Yee (2005b, 2006a) that the majority of payers do not play alone, suggested that the close circle rituals (especially inner circle and private circle rituals) may have a high impact on the majority of *WoW* players, the qualitative data confirmed this. Moreover, the discovered

link between playing together and continuing to play the game indicated that *WoW* may exhibit enhanced ritualisation on the relationship dimension, which was confirmed by the qualitative analysis. Following the quantitative analysis, some rituals of playing together were presented, with examples, and their associated meaning and/or functions explained.

From the web of closely connected functions of playing together rituals, the following were identified: relationship and interaction functions (the main roles of these rituals focussed on the creation, performance and maintenance of relationships or interactions), integration and belonging functions, affective function, cognitive and supportive functions, identity creation and maintenance function, aesthetic function and normative or contesting functions.

The game becomes a metaphor for affection and closeness in playing together rituals (affective function), by sharing hobbies and interests. However, the emphasis is on the performative aspect of the relationship function: doing things together, which may mean: doing things together as a couple; playing in general (levelling by doing quests, participating in raids and instances); founding, joining and being in guilds together and learning together with our family, partner and friends. In many cases, the integration and belonging functions of these rituals are very important, in the sense that play occurs as a way to belong to and actively integrate within a group. Although belonging and integration will still be found in inner circle rituals, the emphasis will be on the affective function of these rituals. An affective aspect of both group, family and couple rituals of playing together is 'togetherness' (sometimes understood spatially, as play takes place in the same room or virtual space).

Two functions of playing together rituals are closely connected, namely the supportive function and the cognitive function. In many cases, helping each other means learning together. Where the emphasis is more on learning than on the relationship, the play is less ritualised.

The activities of playing together create a universe made of shared and common pasts, presents and futures which is essential for the construction of the social identity of the group, couple or family (Katovich and Couch, 1992). These events engender community and cohesion through affinity, integration and belonging.

One way to build a shared and common universe is achieved through conflict and contest-like situations. In this context, playing together means also playing against other players. Players find pleasure in competing (entering in direct or indirect competition or formal conflict) with friends and strangers.

This type of play fulfils contesting and normalising functions, as through these rituals, conflict and competition are expressed within the safeness of the game. Equal conditions are created for the in-game and out-of-game 'status' to be challenged or overturned. Since, in *WoW*, the situations focussing on conflict and contests are ritualised by the developers via game design, this chapter will not insist too much on this aspect (but the following chapter will address this in more detail by focussing on the subversive function of playing together).

Another way to build a shared universe is represented by the conversations which grow up around and are generated by the playing together rituals, for example, talking about things players did, do or will do together. They have an affective function, as they engender or symbolise togetherness and closeness. Chatting with friends is often one reason for returning to the game after a player quits.

The game is both a way and an environment for spending time together, bonding and staying in touch with family, friends and a romantic partner (especially with those that live far apart), but also having fun together (the entertainment function, of particular importance for contemporary relationships). These aspects are roles that playing together rituals have in performing and maintaining relationships. Because of the structure of the game (the choice of the faction or server) or individual preferences (having casual game sessions or different playing times), sometimes, playing together rituals may be impossible or less frequent.

The rituals of playing together can function as a catalyst for interactions and relationships outside the game (friendship or love). However, the most popular function of playing together rituals, the interaction function, is less concentrated on forging meaningful relationships and more on casual encounters, interactions and conversations with people (the interaction function). People are the most powerful asset of MMOs, as their players usually perceive games as lonely and boring without the people. Interactions with players may lead to a sense of community (in the largest sense of people who have in common the game), affect (feelings of missing someone or connection), and a rudimentary sense of familiarity, belonging to and continuity with a group. While efficacious for gameplay, in terms of efficacy beyond the game, these rituals tend to be less powerful (with some exceptions), as the interactions they create and the effects they generate are less persistent in time.

Another instance of the relationship creation function and an example of its efficacy is that, for some players, the friendships created and maintained

through playing together rituals may cross over from the game in real life. For other players, this cross-over may never happen, as idiosyncrasies, media stereotyping of online relationships or physical distance will impede it. Many players see the relationships engendered in online settings as not that important or as less close kinds of relationship. Nevertheless, online relationships fulfil some other functions for these players, such as the interaction function.

Playing together rituals may generate online friendships performed through chatting or playing together practices. Due to them being important for a considerable number of the players (or for their gameplay), they have a role in some players continuing to play the game. Additionally, since they are about relationships, playing together rituals may engender negative feelings, which can affect the current or future play and may even be conducive to quitting the game.

A change in ritualisation is not uncommon. The ritualisation may move on a continuum (with the self on one end and the general population on the other, beyond that point receding to a reduced ritualisation). As well, a change in real-life factors can lead to a decrease in ritualisation in game.

Due to many of the functions of the rituals of playing together being connected to creating, performing and maintaining relationships or interactions, they are very important for players beyond the game itself. In this logic, the game stands for relationships and interactions. Perhaps this is mainly why, for many players, engaging in playing together rituals is a strong reason to start, continue or restart playing. Conversely, not engaging in these rituals or experiencing negative feelings about these may lead gamers to stop playing.

To sum up, in this chapter, playing together practices and their functions (as described by the players) were presented and analysed in a novel, integrated way, from the perspective of mainstream ritualisation, as rituals of relationship (and interaction). Quantitative and qualitative data showed that playing together practices fulfil important roles (functions) in the relationships and interactions of the players and their gameplay. Thus, these practices help form, perform and maintain relationships or interactions and lead to players continuing or quitting the game. Moreover, an in-depth analysis of these practices has been achieved by including competition and conflict, along with communicational, affective, cognitive, cooperative and action-oriented aspects, in the practices of playing together.

Chapter 6

Subversive ritualisation

The current chapter examines another facet of ritualisation, namely subversive ritualisation. Subversive ritualisation is defined as a category of ritualisation that is distinct from the mainstream type in that it reflects a way of playing that differs from the mainstream one and even goes against it in some cases. This style of play is ritualised in the sense that it means much more than just play and performs some functions beyond those connected to the game itself. Like other types of ritualisation, the subversive kind endows the game or elements of the game with wider socio-cultural meanings and functions.

As mentioned previously, I am interested in those aspects of ritualisation which address its more collective dimension and disregard, in this thesis, those elements which pertain to the sphere of the individual or have a more local colour. Therefore, where the data indicate that some activities might be performed only by an individual or a particular guild on a particular type of server, these activities were not taken into consideration. An example of such activity in *WoW* is the account of one interviewee who heard a story about the existence of a guild of 'the naked dancing people' on a role-playing server, who were interrupting the events of other role-players. My interviewees who played *WoW* hardly mentioned any aspects of subversive ritualisation. They either never encountered practices which can be included under the umbrella of subversive ritualisation (they were asked if they ever heard of secret societies or secret groups) or presented singular, scattered accounts of this type of ritualisation. Although I acknowledge that the questionnaire was formulated to include only one type of subversive ritualisation (secret social structures), the diversity of the questions, their open-ended nature as well as the informal discussions with players provided sufficient freedom for players to mention other aspects of ritualisation (including subversive ritualisation) that they considered

relevant for the game. However, from my formal and informal discussions with the interviewees, I deduced that the subversive ritualised behaviour in *WoW* is not a common, unified practice, but rather localised and less poignant for the game as a whole. Hence, I focussed my attention on the game-wide aspects of subversive ritualisation that were found abundantly in *Star Kingdoms*, in the form of Underground Alliances. The 'game-wide' label which was applied to these activities does not necessarily refer to the area in which they take place or to the fact that they involved directly the whole population of players, but rather to their impact on the majority of the players and the overall game.

In *Star Kingdoms*, subversive ritualisation is visible especially in the social representations which circulate widely in the game about a number of secret, subversive social structures which have flourished during the game's peak of popularity. Thus, although I did not have direct access to subversive ritualisation in *SK*, I was able to notice its presence and investigate its functions and perceived effects throughout the game via these social representations (for a definition see below).

In general, ritualisation is highly dependent on its socio-cultural milieu. For example, ritual change (an aspect of ritualisation) happens usually in times of profound changes in the socio-cultural context in which the ritual is performed (Hobsbawm, 1983, 1-14). Thus, a discussion about subversive ritualisation in *Star Kingdoms* needs to pay a close attention first to one of the key factors in shaping this context for a game, the rules of the game (touched upon in the section which provides a general description of *Star Kingdoms*, but discussed in more detail in the current chapter). Before presenting the specific rules of *Star Kingdoms*, I will define the term 'game rules', drawing from the most relevant definitions, and provide an overview of various studies focussing on the normative dimension of online games. Another issue which needs to be considered is that subversive ritualisation (at least in accordance with the fact that, currently, I am mainly interested in the ritualisation which emerges from the players) has strong interactions not only with the rules of the game (mainly with the ones comprised in the code of the game), but also with the rules developed and enforced by the players themselves. This warrants closer inspection of the issue of player rules (in computer games, in general, and in *Star Kingdoms*, in particular) before subversive ritualisation begins to be analysed.

In particular, in this chapter, I investigate subversive ritualisation and its functions. First, I approach subversive ritualisation as one of the game-wide

modifications or creative actions originating from the players (which include player created rules as well). Although reductionist, this type of view has the advantage that it places subversive ritualisation within a wider context and allows a better observation of the interactions and dependencies between subversive ritualisation and the rules of the game (either created by developers or players). Then, I describe and analyse the subversive ritualisation identified in *SK* as revealed by the functions of the secret social structures named Underground Alliances.

In *Star Kingdoms*, I observed two closely connected types of game modification undertaken by online game players (which are less approached by scholars of online games), namely (*i*) creating and imposing player rules across the entire game and (*ii*) building alternative, subversive, social structures in and around the game called *Underground Alliances*. This latter form of modification bears strong characteristics of ritualised play and belongs to what I called subversive ritualisation. I proceeded to identify the factors leading to the creation, dissemination and maintenance of both the player rules and secret social structures. My results indicate that the establishment of player rules was probably encouraged and supported by the official rules and structures. I showcase as well how unofficial game rules from *SK* would become official in another game and, possibly, return to the original game as official.

Furthermore, I describe the subversive ritualisation in *Star Kingdoms* by presenting the social representations of the players regarding the unofficial, secret, social structures (closely associated with cheating) called Underground Alliances (UAs). In the first instance, I look at the factors which may have helped UAs' creation followed by the factors contributing to their widespread presence in the social representations of the players. Essentially, these are factors which potentially led to subversive ritualisation in the game. It appears that UAs were created because the game design (and the game rules) could not cater for the existing and emerging relationships of the players and emerging patterns of play (a form of 'elite' play). UAs prospered because of the vast number of players, which helped them remain clandestine, and their blurry relationship with the official rules (UAs were not considered cheating by the developers). Next, I identify a perceived dysfunctional side of the Underground Alliances, which points rather to a more instrumental dimension of the game, than to a ritualised one. In addition to being considered a dysfunction by the players, I suggest that UAs performed key functions in the game, both for their members and the general player population, which indicates that, due to these

functions moving beyond instrumental reasons, UAs are a form of ritualised play. In *SK*, subversive ritualisation can be approached by analysing UAs' most important functions in the game (and the wider meanings they confer to the game), such as the subversive function, the relationship and interaction creation, performance and maintenance function, the community construction function (where the social identity (re)production, cohesion and narratives have key roles), the immersion function, the identity construction function (including UAs' role as resource for social and cultural gaming capital).

As a method for conducting the study, I selected virtual ethnography, following the tradition set by other ethnographic studies (for example Hine, 2000; Taylor, 2006b; Pearce, 2006; Consalvo, 2007). Because of the controversies surrounding UAs, my research settled, with two exceptions, with reports about these secret structures which fall in the category of social representations. By social representations (term first coined by Moscovici, 1961) I understand a collectively elaborated system of values, ideas, opinions and beliefs, which enable individuals to orientate and communicate in the social and material world by providing them various shared codes.

I became familiar with *Star Kingdoms* when the game still enjoyed some popularity, during a period of research for a master's degree (October 2004 - August 2005 and 1st January 2007 - 29 January 2007), when I investigated elements belonging to the ritual dimension of *SK* (Ghergu, 2007). However, the current chapter is based mainly on research conducted during 30 October 2008 - 1 January 2009 and 2nd January - 2 March 2009, a period characterised by a low number of players and decreased activity on the *SK* forums. The research consisted of observation and participant observation within the game and on the in-game forums and conducting 7 in-depth semi-structured and structured interviews with players from *SK* (1 by e-mail and 6 by instant messaging software, lasting between 1 hour and 30 mins and 3 hours and 15 min). The analysis of the interviews was qualitative content analysis. I also drew on the ethnography of communication (Bauman and Sherzer, 1974; Gumpertz and Hymes, 1972). I used a self-selected sampling approach, in which the majority of the interviewees were recruited by sending in-game messages to which several players responded. This was used in conjunction with a snow balling technique. Most of the interviewees were knowledgeable, prominent players (and one ex-player), with multiple connections or friends and holding important political functions in the game.

Star Kingdoms was chosen due to its fair amount of popularity (for a

reasonable amount of time), long-lasting existence, sense of community and wealth of traditions. My previous research on the ritual dimension of *Star Kingdoms* made the game amenable to the study of subversive ritualisation (as part of the history of the creative actions of *SK* players) which is more difficult to observe on a short time schedule.

In addition, I would like to mention that I attempted to contact BSG Online Games, the developer of *Star Kingdoms*, twice by email, but no reply from their part was received.

6.1 Rules of the game and player modifications of games

As mentioned previously, one step in approaching subversive ritualisation is to consider it (along with the player created rules) one of the modifications or creative actions that players undertake when playing the game. Another step is to focus on its ritual dimension and investigate the functions of subversive ritualisation. Returning to the first step, one may argue that, through modifications or creative actions, players act directly on the game rules, changing them to suit their needs and motivations. Of course, considering subversive ritualisation as one of these player modifications is an over-simplification, but allows for subversive ritualisation to be linked logically to the inherent tensions between the game rules established by game developers, player created and imposed rules and existing and emerging patterns of play. Also, it emphasises emergence, one of the characteristics of the kind of ritualisation that I was interested in investigating for this thesis.

The issue of players' creative agency has been investigated by a growing corpus of academic studies which argues that this has yet to be settled in online games (Taylor 2006a; Taylor 2006b, 115; Consalvo 2007). However, it is usually believed, within the game industry and among players, that online games and their rules are created mainly by game developers.

The current dominant discourse portrays MMOG players as follows: 'players as consumers, (potential) disruptors, unskilled/unknowledgeable users, and rational/selfish actors' (Taylor, 2006a). Thus, creative agency seems reserved for game developers, as players are deemed to be unwilling, unworthy or incapable of dealing with it.

The exceptions to this discourse mainly refer to games which are closer to the end of the continuum where less goal oriented virtual worlds, such as *Second*

Life, reside. The developers of this type of game recognise the players as co-creators of their world, although sometimes they face challenges of integrating the emerging patterns of play into their design (Malaby, 2006; Tschang and Comas, 2010). This type of integration may be difficult because of the tensions between the design of the game, which responds to a marketing strategy and pays particular attention to the profitability of the game, and the aim or aims of the community of players (Tschang and Comas, 2010). At the other end of this continuum there are the more goal oriented games, for example most MMORPGs.

The degree to which gamers assume a creative approach to play varies widely (based on the genre of the game, the type of game rules, needs of the players and actions and the attitude of the publisher and/or the developer towards such creativity manifested in their governance policy). In some cases, the players may contribute to the game which they are playing significantly. Some players may even modify an online game to such an extent that it becomes a game which is considerably different than the original one (for example in the case of the player rules or player created structures from *Star Kingdoms*). Good examples of such modifications are 'mods', innovations brought by players to existent games by accessing the game code (Postigo, 2010; Scacchi, 2010). Players' modifications of games are considered important due to providing new modes or contexts of play and content, but are also viewed as atypical and not truly representative for all the players (Poremba, 2003). This is also thought to be the case of transgressive play (Aarseth, 2007), that is play that purposefully disregards the intended way of playing (concept closely related to subversive ritualisation in the sense that the latter is a particular instance of transgressive play which imbues the game with other, wider, meanings). At the moment, the issue of players' creative agency, as is illustrated in the literature on computer games, provides a useful but far from complete picture. More studies are needed to explore the types of players' creative actions and their functions and attempt to establish whether they are practices that are rare, representative or with major effects for the general player population of a game. However, while this chapter may help to broaden the current representations of players' creative actions (in academic or industry related settings), its main goal is to describe one particular type of such actions, namely subversive ritualisation.

Before giving an overview of some of the player's creative actions in *Star Kingdoms* and investigating whether they have a connection with the game rules, a basic understanding of what 'rules of the game' mean and how they

are framed in the field of game studies is needed.

6.1.1   Game rules

The term 'game rules' can reunite a host of normative aspects which regulate the game and game-related world, including code, social norms, guidelines of gameplay and the prescribed way to establish or join social groups or communities within the game. However, in order to understand that different layers are at stake when it comes to regulating online multiplayer games, a framework is needed. One useful way of thinking about game rules is the framework of Salen and Zimmerman (2004, 139, 149), which distinguishes between: (*i*) constitutive rules, the abstract, mathematical rules of a game, unusually embedded in the code; (*ii*) operational rules, which are usually found in the instruction manuals and are based on the constitutive rules, followed by players when playing a game and (*iii*) implicit rules, which are the rules of etiquette and behaviour that are generally unwritten and go without saying while playing. Salen and Zimmerman (2004, 139) acknowledged that, sometimes, the boundary between operational and implicit rules is not well defined (implicit rules can become explicit by being included by developers in the printed rules of a game) and that 'the formal meaning of a game emerges through a process that bridges all the three levels of rules in the game'. However, Salen and Zimmerman (2004, 139) seem to reserve to constitutive and operational rules the main role of defining the specificity of a game (because of their unambiguous nature), that is what makes a game formally different from other games. This contrasts with other opinions, including mine, which argue that there is a socio-cultural side of the game rules which is of utmost importance for experiencing the game (Jakobsson, 2007).

This happens because of the manner in which Salen and Zimmerman (2004) defined the implicit rules as potentially similar for many different games and therefore lacking the power to individualise a game. However, my previous observations on the rules of *Star Kingdoms* (BSG Online Games, 2010a) (of which only some were mentioned briefly and tangentially in Ghergu, 2007) suggested there might be considerable differences between the implicit rules of text-based games and what one might find in more graphical games. Thus, a minor (but important) rethinking of the framework is needed. To adapt the framework of Salen and Zimmerman (2004) to multiplayer games (where the social aspects play an even bigger role in gameplay), I propose to substitute 'implicit rules' for two other terms: (*i*) 'social rules' with social sanctions [positive or negative,

including ejection] by either designers or players and (*ii*) 'cultural rules', which refer to the culture at large and have the potential to modify all the other sets of rules. Depending on the game, I feel that that all these sets of rules can be either implicit, explicit or a mixture of both, although the social and cultural rules seem to be implicit more often than not. Salen and Zimmerman (2004, 488) have already made a step towards recognising the existence of emergent 'social rules' when they discuss their schema (perspective) of 'games as emergent social systems in which simple play behaviour and social interaction can result in incredibly complicated experiences of play'. A logical consequence of this schema is that these emergent social systems also have emergent social rules, which have an impact on both the social relationships developed in and around the game and the gameplay itself with its rules. As well, Salen and Zimmerman (2004, 538) made another step towards recognising the existence of 'cultural rules' for games when they discuss their schema of 'games as open culture', which refers to games that grant players explicit creative agency (such as *The Sims*). These games generate emergent, open-ended play or cultural content and are also capable of exchanging meaning with their wider cultural contexts. Whether specific games are explicitly designed to be modified by their players or not, the larger cultural trend of 'open culture' (related to free software and open source philosophies) still exists and may influence even games with more rigid designs.

From a formal point of view, game rules distinguish one game from another (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004; Consalvo, 2007), as well as from other parts of life, and they are, as Consalvo (2007, 7) calls them, 'the most important boundary marker for games'. Apart from the role of setting boundaries – however fuzzy and porous these may be, for example see Pearce (2006) – game rules are also seen as the essential core of games where, according to Consalvo (2007, 7), the fun of games lies and therefore their appeal for players. From an oversimplified perspective (although, admittedly, there is more to gameplay than this), one can say that, due to players liking particular sets of rules and disliking others, they prefer certain games and not others. Since game rules are such an important part of games, then, perhaps, it is not surprising that game rules, whether constitutive, operational or socio-cultural, have been subjected to (playful) modifications. As a study of the creative actions of players in FPS (First Person Shooter) online video games points out, "play is not just 'playing the game', but 'playing with the rules of the game' " (Wright et al., 2002). According to this study, not only that modifying the game or toying with its

rules would engender similar aesthetic experiences as playing a game, but it is also a part of the game.

In practice, games are prone to change under the influences of the social milieu in which they are played. Some of the most established games suffer transformations and modifications of their rules over time due to players or other types of pressures. By this, games are no different from other human cultural forms characterised by fixity and formality, such as rituals or traditions, which can be transformed or invented (Bell 1992, 123; Hobsbawm 1983, 1-14). In his definition of play, Huizinga (1949, 13,28) refers to rules as 'fixed' and 'freely accepted but absolutely binding' and to play as proceeding in an 'orderly manner'. Even though rules may appear as 'fixed' and 'binding', they do so only due to the socialisation of the player within that set of rules or context of play. Nevertheless, this context along with the game rules is continuously negotiated between players (and sometimes even occasional bystanders). The rules are actualised and tuned to the 'here' and 'now' of the play situation on an on-going basis. Consider, for instance, a card game where a player is allowed an advantage (thus modifying the game rules) due to their privileged situation (for example, they are new to the game). As soon as the said player starts to 'get along' with the game and wins, the context of play changes and they could lose the advantage in future rounds.

To resume the argument, while, as in the case of more traditional games, it is hard to speak of 'fixed rules', most multiplayer online games do have a specific order, not in as much as a linear development of a story or a progression towards an end is concerned, but as a structured mesh of rules and/or events. However, although every game has its rules (more or less specific or restrictive and in accordance with the genre of the game), conceiving them as fixed, freely accepted or absolutely binding is less and less the case, especially for multiplayer games. In academic contexts, the rules of MMOGs are increasingly seen as co-constructed and negotiated (Taylor, 2006a,b; Consalvo, 2007), and this derives (in great part) from the multiplayer dimension of games. Seeing rules in online games as co-constructed adds a social dimension to what Smith (2001) and Juul (2002) called emergence (defined as simple pre-existent rules combining and generating desirable or undesirable variation). The co-constructed rules are emergent in the sense that they are not fixed, they evolve throughout the game and even beyond, and may include 'emergence' (novel interactions with or new usage for existent game elements), but here the emphasis is on 'social emergence', that is novel social interactions and patterns of

behaviour. In this context, Pearce's (2006) study shows how emergent patterns of behaviour from one game (*Uru*) can migrate and be accommodated by the design of another one (*There*) following the closing of the original game.

No matter how ideal this picture of games as bounded (in time and space) and with clearly delimited rules might be, many game developers and players seem to be convinced of its validity. What is ironic though is that there is no clear place where these rules can be found. The constantly shrinking game manuals, which provide only basic guidelines and are often not read by players (Consalvo, 2007, 84-85), are a good example of the elusiveness of the 'fixed rules'. A place, perhaps less noticeable, where these rules are to be found is the game code. Inspired by the idea of Lessing (1999) that code (understood as both software and hardware) regulates the cyberspace, Taylor (2006a) and Consalvo (2007, 85) rightly think that game designers inscribe values, uses and identities in their games via code. Thus, video games are regulated first and foremost by game code. Another place where game rules can be found is the Terms of Service (ToS) and End User License Agreements (EULA) of the games, in most of which the player is construed as a consumer with limited or non-existent creative agency and the game as a finished product, that ironically has to be taken 'as is'.

Other developers (especially developers of popular MMORPGs) believe that the rules can be modified to accommodate the needs and desires of players and have the resources to effect these changes, but do think that modifying the game is the prerogative of developers. For example, over time, the developers of *World of Warcraft* responded to the casual players by altering the content and rules of the game to make the game more accessible to this type of player. This move left some 'hardcore' gamers dissatisfied (because they felt that the game was not a challenge any more) and with no real means to intervene. These developers have a user-centric approach to game design which focuses on formally involving the players in the design process (see Taylor, 2006a).

The creative actions of the players take the form of either formal or informal involvement of the players with respect to the game.

6.1.2 Formal and informal creative actions of players

In the literature, Taylor (2006a) identified several methods of formal implication of players in the design process of games: (*i*) the message boards via which players leave feedback; (*ii*) alpha and beta testing by players before the official launch; (*iii*) using the player community as a resource from which developers

select new members of the design team or other game-related teams and (*iv*) staging events which bring the player closer to the 'core' of game design (on the path towards participatory design), such as the *EverQuest* guild summit held by Sony Online Entertainment (developers and service providers of the game *EverQuest*) and the *Fan Faires*.

The players, however, do not settle with these few select avenues of tinkering with the game they are playing and they develop their own. Among some of the informal (emergent) player actions (the actions of developers towards them have been included as well), Taylor (2006a) enumerates:

- 'eBaying' or selling virtual characters, items or in-game money for real world currency via online stores and the subsequent ban issued by Sony;

- writing fan fiction on external websites and the in-game termination of the account of a player who engaged in such practices because the developers did not want his depiction of a virtual rape to be associated with the game;

- using third party mods (modified versions of the game or programs which modify certain features of the game) for certain actions and Sony monitoring the game interface and not allowing these behaviours, which suggests that such practices were attempted;

- organising protests (a campaign for private accomodation in the game *WorldsAway*, 1996; an organised run of naked avatars at the in-game castle of Richard Garriott, designer of the game *Ultima Online*, 1997, or a warrior protest taking place in *World of Warcraft* in January 2005) deemed, in most instances, as disruptions of gameplay which were punishable by closing the accounts of players

- and players sharing their accounts to help their (in-game and out-of-game) friends and guildmates to progress (Jakobsson and Taylor, 2003; Taylor, 2006b), breaking the provisions of the End User License Agreement of *EQ*.

    The majority of these actions are banned by the developers, who usually take serious measures against the players undertaking them, including terminating their accounts.

Even in games which seem, at first glance, fairly strict with regards to their rules, the community of players transform them in imaginative ways. For

example, Jakobsson (2007) investigated two different contexts of play (dividing players into smashers and anti-smashers), with different rules, emerging around the console game *Super Smash Bros. Melee.* These rules established by the players are what I termed the social and cultural rules of a game, to distinguish them, in theory, from the rules created by game developers. The importance of the social and cultural rules (most often, but not always, created and imposed by the players) for games is evident in their role in collaborative play (Chen, 2009) or in conflict and/or mediation of conflict (Pargman and Erissson, 2005). For instance, Chen (2009) describes that, based on his experiences with games, some of the choices made by players were rather connected to the social norms regulating that particular situation (and the social objectives co-constructed by players) and not so much to the game rules (and game objectives). According to Pargman and Erissson (2005), in *Everquest*, the limited number of rules and norms established by the players themselves are the ones which lead more often to conflicts (disputes and quarrels) among players. In their analysis of one of the learning practices in *World of Warcraft*, that is learning in conversation, Nardi et al. (2007) refer to some of these social and cultural rules under the name of 'game ethos' or the 'moral order' of the game. These particular sub-set of social and cultural rules deal with ethical guidelines and principles, in other words, what is fair and unfair in the game, and they are not reducible to accumulating information and facts. Nardi et al. (2007) argue that the 'moral order' of a game is emergent in conversations, contextual and ever-shifting, which is true in most of the cases. Whether temporary or not, these rules have a direct impact on the game, due to the fact that they regulate the game first and foremost. Before any official reaction (on the part of developers to various emerging practices of the players) even begins to take form, these emerging rules are the first which take the pulse of the opinions and attitudes of the players and negotiate them. In some instances, however, the social and cultural rules move away from a temporary character towards a more stable role while maintaining a relative emergence, as has happened in *Star Kingdoms*.

Another set of informal creative actions of players can fit under the umbrella of cheating. These actions are, in most cases, disallowed by game developers because they create unfair advantages for some players and spoil the fun for most players by engendering imbalance within the game

Cheating as creative actions of players

In many offline (but also online) videogames, the effect which some players have on a game may be more readily visible in the form of cheating codes (hacks or cheats) which they either produce or, more frequently, just download and employ to alter a game and gain certain advantages within the game, such as unlimited resources, more lives, an unusual accuracy when aiming etc. Consalvo (2007) calls this form of cheating 'gaming the system', which stands in contrast to 'gaming the player', which is a form of social cheating which entails taking advantage of the players through socio-psychological means.

By altering the game code or taking advantage of other players, the players who cheat do not only modify their gaming experience by circumventing the game rules, but having done so they play a slightly modified or altogether different game, with different rules. Thus, cheating may be thought of as yet another instance of informal creative actions of the players. Consalvo (2007, 95) pointed out that cheating is not only about subverting the game, but also about enhancing it, but the degree to which the game in question is experienced as merely enhanced or changed totally is a question which only individual players can answer. Players may resort to cheating as a way to re-enter a game because: they may be bored, the game is too difficult or does not match their skill level and, as a result, they are stuck or the game has limited scenarios or is badly designed (Consalvo, 2007, 95-98). Also, some players cheat because they may want to prolong the game without having to start every time, to feel the pleasure of playing god (with unlimited powers in game), to find out the next move, reach the end, complete the story faster or have some sort of closure with the game, to acquire status, prestige, wealth or power and sometimes, especially in multiplayer games, to upset other players and cause turmoil in the game (Consalvo, 2007, 95-105,122). What all these reasons for cheating have in common is the desire to transform the game which is played, to modify its rules and accommodate them to the needs or desires of the player.

One could believe that only a small percentage of the players exercise an authorial agency over the game (those who actually write and distribute cheating codes and re-create the game in a way). An important observation is that not every player has the technical skills required to write cheating codes and be able to modify the game in a direct manner and this means there are technical limitations to this type of creative action in place. However, writing code or 'social cheating' are not the only ways for players to exercise their creative

agency with respect to games.

The dynamic nature of games in general (perhaps less evident but existent nonetheless) and the multiplayer component of online games leads, among other factors, to players having more than a voice in some cases. This is what happened in *Star Kingdoms* (*SK*), with their player rules and player created social structures. However, before discussing these, I will describe and analyse aspects related to the official rules in *Star Kingdoms*.

6.2 Official and player rules in Star Kingdoms

6.2.1 The official rules of Star Kingdoms

Star Kingdoms has two types of rules: the official rules, invented and enforced by the developers and/or their delegates (who might be players or employees), and rules created and imposed by the players. To understand why the rules imposed by the players were created it is important to offer an overview of the official rules. In *Star Kingdoms*, the official rules are vaguely expressed in the succinct game manual (BSG Online Games, 2010a), posted on the official website, and are mainly concerned with acquiring the necessary gaming competencies (understanding how *Star Kingdoms* functions in order to play the game). The rules governing the socio-political aspects of the game are only roughly sketched when discussing the game mechanics. For example, the game manual refers to the in-game social hierarchies, which are engendered by game design. In connection to these hierarchies, the game manual explains the processes of electing the Sector Leader (SL) and Alliance Leader (AL) and their attributions and bonuses (but also mentions the existence of the Vice Sector Leader, VSL, and Vice Alliance Leader, VAL), of establishing alliances and the type of relationships between alliances. The official rules allude to the fact that communication is essential for gameplay, mention the sector, alliance and public forums, explaining who has access to them, what is an unacceptable message and what are the proper ways to communicate and report an offensive message. The majority of the official rules, both the ones referring to how the game works and the ones focussing on the social aspects, are embedded in the 'moves' or actions permitted or not by the game. For instance, you cannot attack someone that is in the Newbie Mode (a status held by every player at the beginning) or in Vacation Mode (a status in which the players enter when they want not to access the game for a couple of days). Also, the players (kingdoms) are assigned by default to a sector consisting of another 19 kingdoms

and they are 'forced' by game design (to a certain degree) to collaborate with their sector mates for the benefit or detriment of the entire sector by this being reflected on the growth or power of their kingdoms as well. They can always choose not to get involved in the politics of the sector (not electing anyone as Sector Leader), but this can prove to be detrimental to their Sector and, thus, to their kingdom. Hence, many official rules do not have a written form, but are implied in the way the game was designed.

The designers of the game took the interesting decision of embedding some of the official rules in the code of the game, while leaving others seemingly subject to the 'free will' of the players. Even though they are sketched by design (i.e., the name of the groupings, alliances, suggests that it is not fair play to attack players from your alliance), some rules are not embedded in the code of the game (there is no action or restriction of action from the part of game developers or from the game, via code, if players do attack alliance mates). If one takes into consideration the war-like theme of the game, with all the real life connotations associated with it (chaos, brutality, aggressiveness, mistrust and betrayals), then the choice of the developers could be an attempt to emulate (admittedly, to a small degree) real life war situations to facilitate make-believe. In a less graphical world, such as *SK*, this feeling must be constructed from other than sensory data, and what better way to do this than by the very structure of the game, its code. As well, the game would become rapidly static if the developers enforced some of these rules, such as the rule of 'not attacking alliance mates', and this would lessen the game considerably. This is one of the great tensions in a group game, when the alliances will break down.

At first glance, from the point of view of the official rules, the game seems to be loosely regulated. However, the rules here seem to be: "Let's not have rules or, at least, not explicit rules and see what the community decides to do about it". An additional explanation (which also builds on the conventional war imagery gravitating around the idea of chaos) could be that the developers tried to cater for 'subversive' players as well (from the very beginning or along the way), as their numbers contributed to the overall number of players and their play potentially added another layer to the game. Thus, the game rules in *SK* may be coded in the game not only by actions in the way described by Lessing (1999), Taylor (2006a) and Consalvo (2007, 85), but also by intended inactions. A paradox arises here: if the 'subversive' players were taken into consideration by the design decisions, this means that they would no longer be subversive

and their style of play, although not mainstream, would be consistent with the official rules and thereby official. This may pose particular importance for the central theme of this thesis (ritualisation) because the paradox might be taken to mean that there is no subversive ritualisation and there is only mainstream ritualisation in the guise of the subversive alternative. However, as far as the *SK* players were concerned, the secret structures had nothing to do with the developers (apart from the developers not taking any measure against these structures) and subverted the rules of the game (mainly the player rules, but also the perceived official rules).

6.2.2 Rules created and imposed by players in Star Kingdoms

To analyse subversive ritualisation, one needs to take into consideration the larger picture of player modifications of the game. Establishing and maintaining secret social structures in Star Kingdom can be thought of, in reductionist terms, as being one of the informal modifications that players brought to the game. Of course, ritualisation is more than a simple modification of the rules of the game, as it has functions that are not only instrumental as far as the game is concerned, and the benefits of such a perspective were already mentioned. Another type of modification effected by players on a game is establishing, disseminating and imposing player rules at a game-wide level. Next, I will present the player rules from SK and analyse them in relation with the official rules of this game.

The first impression of *Star Kingdoms* (*SK*) is of a loosely regulated game (with only a few of the game rules embedded in the code of the game and others only sketched in the very short manual). In accordance with this impression (and, perhaps, contrary to the expectations of developers), some players believed that order was needed and, by order, they meant explicit restrictive rules. Creating social structures, but having few explicit rules, did not lead to order automatically. Rather, this was a process which occurred over time. Discussions with some players and ex-players revealed that, at the beginning, the game was perceived as chaotic and characterised by anarchy.

> Trigger Happy: When *SK* started there were many more players which led to a lot more of a chaotic game play. I recall sectors banding together (without an official alliance, or even sectoral alliances outside of 'alliances' who tried to 'take over' weaker sectors. The grouped sectors

would basically tell a sector, <You will use your military towards our causes, or we will take you out.> If a sector decided not to play ball, sector shotguns occur[r]ed until one side won, or the victim sector gave in.

The official rules, as they were, did not cater for all the aspects of the game or for the whole player base. Some players felt that their gameplay was hindered by the official rules which were too lax and favoured the experienced players and power gamers (these players spend more time playing online than the casual players and have an approach to playing that is more akin to work than to play). The official rules were perceived by many players (albeit not all) as being too permissive regarding the attacks which players were allowed to make on each other. These players said that new players felt they were not protected from the merciless strategies of the experienced ones.

Moreover, as in the case of many online games where the community plays an important part, new interactions evolved between players (some of them desirable, but others not), taking the form of playing styles and friendships or affinities. To re-establish a balance between experienced and casual players as well as to preserve and facilitate what was viewed by players as desirable interactions, additional rules covering these issues have been demanded from the game developers with little success (i.e., certain ethics about attacking in the game). In this case, I am referring, mainly, to the most vocal players, who had authority in the game. Feeling that they knew how the game should be regulated, they took it upon themselves to bring change in the game (first by demanding the changes from the game developers). Since their requirements were not met, some players decided to establish their own rules.

Some of the rules created and imposed by players are presented in the following excerpt:

> (5:16:45 PM) Researcher: What about the game rules? Were they created by the game developers or by the players? Did they change over time? What caused the change?
> (5:16:58 PM) Merlin: well
> (5:17:06 PM) Merlin: some were created by BCart [*SK* developer]
> (5:17:13 PM) Merlin: like no cheating, etc.
> (5:17:38 PM) Merlin: but some, like the bash rules, and gangbang (3-4 attacks on the same kd [kingdom]) were made by players
> (5:18:00 PM) Merlin: bash = hitting a kd [kingdom] that is less than one third your size [the size of your kingdom]
> (5:18:03 PM) Merlin: end

Other unofficial rules, developed presumably by players, are the 'missile rule' (not to fire missiles outside war) and 'retal rule' (not to perform retaliatory attacks). From discussions with players I was able to identify and contact the founder of one of these rules (the bash rule) and one of the players who actively contributed to enforcing them, Cornelia Yoder. She is also the developer of Galaxies Ablaze, an online game in which, according to her words, she 'followed the *SK* model, but wrote good clean code using a well-protected database', making 'sure that every bug and exploit was plugged immediately'.

> (3:02:16 PM) LoX: Eventually, I found my way to a game called Galaxies Ablaze, run by a girl who used to be quite well known in *Star Kingdoms*, who went by the handle : "Chick." She also was the one behind the bash rule in *SK*. I found my way to *SK* in about '99 or so, for the betas, but I didn't quite understand its appeal until much much later. [END]

Cornelia Yoder, PhD, recounts how, initially, the help of the developer or owner was sought, demanding the implementation of official rules and other controls which would have limited both the perceived cheating and the domination of established players over less experienced ones. After pleading for official rules from the *SK* developer/s and not receiving them, Cornelia Yoder decided to establish new rules and then managed to enforce them (at least in part) by persuading first her own alliance to follow them:

> "Certain things I did impose on my own alliances in *SK*, such as no bashing, no multi accounts, and the like. Other things, such as making many accounts to get into systems with friends or babysitting friends' accounts, I'm afraid I was guilty of. I did not have any access to actual controls in the game, only to persuasion tactics with my own group or alliance" (Cornelia Yoder, 16 February 2010).

In this particular case, Yoder was a player, but not just any player. She was an Alliance Leader and, due to this, her voice was not just the voice of a common player. She was a leader, even though (or, better said, especially) one elected by players. She had authority and symbolic capital [see Bourdieu (1986) and Consalvo (2007, 3-5) for a discussion of gaming capital, a reworking of Bourdieu's 'cultural capital' (a form of 'symbolic capital')]. Thus, the wide adoption of these rules was situated at the midpoint between the bottom up (from players to developers) and top down (from developers to players) approaches on imposing game rules. In addition, it was customary for every

alliance leader to have their own code of conduct. Therefore, an alliance having its own set of rules did not contradict the 'official rules' overtly. Perhaps, what ended up as unwritten rules were first written in the codes of conduct of the many different alliances run by the same alliance leaders across rounds, as was the case with the rules created by Yoder:

> 'I have been unable to find a copy of my Alliance Rules, which I wrote and used in each alliance that I ran, and widely adopted in the whole game, but [t]hey were intended to help ensure fair play, as best I could' (Cornelia Yoder, 16 February 2010).

Her words also indicate that the rules were not instantly accepted and the process extended over multiple rounds (every round lasted 3 months, after which the game would start anew). In Yoder's opinion (as well as in that of other players), this type of game survives only with the flux of new players, which makes the game interesting and worthwhile playing for the more experienced players. She also felt that without firm rules in place, the game was not actually a game and that cheating and exploiting the bugs of the game could drive away both new and old players. Thus, without new players, who would keep the game or the forums active and interesting, and with the old ones leaving dissatisfied, the game will start dying.

> Cornelia Yoder: "I left *SK* for the reasons I gave in answer 1 – it became nothing but pathological cheating. It wasn't even a true game by then, it was just a contest of who could cheat the best."

Some players are very fond of the player imposed rules, and insist on following the rules even when applying punishments.

> (9:30:24 AM) Researcher: How do you feel about bash/ missile outside the war? Would you do it? Would you punish someone that does it? How?
> (9:30:43 AM) Thunder: i never did it
> (9:30:50 AM) Thunder: maybe rarely in war
> (9:31:07 AM) Thunder: bbut i would punish someone who does it
> (9:31:16 AM) Thunder: grab him arson him [these are two types of legitimate attacks]
> (9:31:22 AM) Thunder: but not by a bash

Not all the players agree with the rules imposed by players. This suggests that these rules are not always observed and that rules, especially the

player imposed ones, are live systems, which pay attention to the context of play. However, even if they are not observed or agreed with, most players still recognise them as rules and know about them, and the larger community will still punish players who disobey them. The fact that the player imposed rules are present in the collective memory of the players, regardless of their allegiance to them, indicates that they have yet another role in the game, moving from instrumentality to the realm of symbolic. The player imposed rules acquired the status of symbolic capital, reuniting both cultural (game knowledge) and social capital (connections with players, via which this particularly obscure game knowledge was transmitted). In addition, discussing them or disagreeing about them provides valid topics of conversation and, at the same time, validates the inclusion of a player within the *SK* community.

> (20:06:40) Researcher says: As far as you know, bash in *SK* is imposed by the developers or players just obey it as an unwritten rules [sic]. How do you feel about this rule? [...]
>
> (20:08:30) Anatem says: There are a number of unwritten rules...the bash rule being one of them and they are player imposed....The bash rule as it stands now I do not agree with...no do I agree with the missle [missile attack] rule either...[...]
>
> (20:09:59) Researcher says: missle rule = not to missle [attack by missile] outside the war? [...]
>
> (20:11:36) Anatem says: [...] yes that missle [missile] rule....not to missle [attack by missile] outside of war...Missles [Missiles] should be allowed for retals [retaliation attacks] and the like...I mean if you are small and get hit...what is your regress...plead for help...END
>
> Researcher: 10.How do you feel about bash or about missiling outside the war? Would you do it? Would you punish someone that does it? How?
>
> Trigger Happy: Missiles are a great way to fight.

Sometimes, the player imposed rules from one game become another game's official rules. For example, some of the unofficial rules from *SK* became the official rules of Galaxies Ablaze (GA), inscribed in GA's code (the programming code of the game). Even more interesting, according to Cornelia Yoder, some of the rules requested (but denied) from the *SK* developer found their way back to *SK*, after they were implemented and their efficiency tested first in GA.

"At the time I left *SK*, there were no official bash rules [this situation was still present at the time of my study], and that was one of the really nasty things about *SK*. I put anti-bash controls in GA, limited certain kinds of actions to wartime only, added a "recovery" period for someone who was attacked, added Shields against more kinds of attacks, changed missiles to different kinds of effects that weren't so crushing, added a control on obscene and hateridden messages, and added serious cheating controls. I also added many completely new features (...). All of this was new to GA, and was later added into *SK* as the admin [game administrator] became aware of how it was drawing people away from his game" (Cornelia Yoder, 16 February 2010).

It is not uncommon or unknown that game designers learn from each other's successes and misfortunes, finding inspiration in the designs of other games (see, for more details, Hagen, 2009). Less known is how complex this process is and what role the rules created and imposed by players can have. Not modifying the game rules to fulfil the needs of the players can drive, in extreme cases, some players to leave and design their own modified games, as in the case of the *SK* player Cornelia Yoder (which, according to an interviewee, was not a singular case). This could lead to players leaving dissatisfied and recruiting their (in-game) network of players or friends to the new games, with possibly devastating consequences for the original game. Finally, these new games may serve as testing labs for new rules for the original game. It is difficult to modify a game dramatically once is up and running (Dibbell, 1998), especially when they are composed of live communities. The community might react strongly and not as expected to the changes. However, if another game, similar enough, would undertake this task, it would be a fantastic opportunity for the original game to have its new rules pre-tested and approved by a representative sample of players. I do not intend to say that this was done deliberately in the case of *SK* and Galaxies Ablaze; rather, it is possible that a considerable number of players migrating between the two games demanded the implementation of the new rules seen in the new games (in the form of new features) from the administrators of the original game.

A different type of player imposed rules, one with a less unitary (at least at first glance) influence over the entire *SK* community, is represented by sectoral or alliance codes of conduct (the role of which is similar to a code of inclusion; for a definition see below). In *SK*, there is a strong connection between the rules imposed by the players game-wide and these codes of conducts. Probably, it was mainly via these codes that the player rules, which would become

popular across the entire game, began to circulate and came to be known in *SK*. The various sectoral and alliance codes were rarely written from scratch; they drew on each other and sometimes they even went to the extreme and copied one another. Thus, rules from one code may have been enclosed in another, potentially helping to disseminate them. The following discussion with an alliance leader is illustrative:

> (4:11:09 PM) Researcher: I've seen a code of conduct on the AL [alliance] forum. It is [Is it] written by you?
> (4:12:25 PM) LoX: Yes. Most ALs [alliance leaders] do. Some of mine, I've taken from the old [Fenris] book of political guidelines, but primarily, it's my view on an effective way of discouraging outsiders from messing with my family of sectors.
> (4:21:57 PM) LoX: Fenris is an EXTREMELY old alliance. The one that was attempted last round was a joke. Fenris/Fenrir were one of the biggest powerhouses in *SK* many many rounds ago. Some people felt that they were a joke, but mostly because they hated the rules and order that they imposed upon the universe...and the fact that they had the firepower to back it up. Fenris lost whatever they had gained when they failed to back the Universe in its war on UAs back in Round 12. Many players turned their backs on them after that. [End]

The part of this excerpt where the player talks about the rules and the order imposed by Fenris (an important *SK* alliance) upon the universe may explain as well how player rules came to be enforced within the whole game. It is possible that the prestige and power of renowned alliances played an important role in this process. In other words, not only that the official structures did not resist new rules, but they might have actually contributed to advance their reach, especially through the most powerful ones. The wide span of alliances (they consisted of many sectors with plenty of players) as well as the fact that the game is round-based (which means that at least every three months alliances broke up and formed anew, most often with different sectors made up of different players) led, possibly, to the game-wide dissemination of the player rules.

In a game where game rules are made obvious mainly by the official social structures they engender (such as sectors and alliances), another way of playing with the game rules is by playfully undermining these official structures and building new ones, such as the underground alliances.

6.3 Subversive ritualisation in Star Kingdoms: the Underground Alliances

Underground alliances (UAs) are a type of player modification which belongs to the subversive ritualisation dimension of the game. Before proceeding to describe the UAs and discussing them as ritualised play, it is important to bring in some context about how the game is played. The strategy part of *Star Kingdoms* is two-folded: building a strong kingdom and creating your army and/or getting involved in the politics of the game. While many players enjoy occupying the first positions on the game scores by building strong kingdoms and conquering land, the political aspect of the game plays an important part for other players. The political aspect can mean:

- participating in elections;

- being elected as leader (Sector Leader or Alliance Leader);

- as a leader, liaising with other Sector Leaders or Alliance Leaders, initiating NAPs (non-aggression pacts),

- forging alliances (you don't have to be a leader to found an alliance but only the sector leaders can cause a sector to join an alliance);

- getting involved in the debates about choosing the sector state (growth, mobilization, offensive, defensive) or the alliance's external or internal affairs, etc.

Players involved in the politics of *SK* mobilise to various degrees a series of resources and skills, including communication and networking ones. As part of these resources, players make use of any official structure present in the game, but sometimes (similarly to real life politics) they would go further to achieve their objectives, including but not limited to the use of means of communication external to the game's website, out of game websites, real life or in-game friends or connections (from previous rounds or other games) and unofficial social structures.

Discussions with various players (many of whom were prominent leaders in the game) revealed that while, for most players, politics took place essentially in the open arenas (and were limited to the official structures available in the game), for some, the political aspects included disruptive, covert activities and unofficial secret structures. The official social structures are the sector

(in which the player is automatically located) and the alliance (which are groups of sectors with a similar line of policy or common interests to which sector leaders choose to adhere). Between alliances, there is a reduced range of official relations, including neutrality agreements (such as NAPs) and wars.

Among *SK* players, it is generally believed that such activities included some players creating secret, collaborative, social structures (Underground Alliances or UAs) outside or, better said, inside the overt, legitimate structures (sectors and alliances). Underground Alliances is a general name for a range of social groupings which are not supported internally by game mechanics. Essentially, UAs consisted of players sharing similar interests and playing together as a group, different than and, most often, against the available official groups in the game. Other informal structures, but perhaps with a lesser emphasis on formalism than UAs, were ad-hoc groups of players which formed when an official alliance was torn apart, when a group of players recognized themselves as elites or simply were groups of online friends who had helped each other play in the past or just shared similar strategies. Often, when an official alliance broke off, some players continued to help each other in waging wars against other players. From the point of view of the players, however, there is still no difference between these groups and UAs. Both UAs and ad-hoc groups were groupings of players, often elitist, and had their own secret agenda, in opposition to the overt one (established by official and player rules).

> Researcher: 10.Did you ever find out about a secret society within the game? Details..
>
> Trigger Happy: Yes, many people group together. And just like any culture, the elites recognize themselves and direct alliance play. This has been going on for a while. I've never cared enough about the game to become elite to join them.

Although I have no first hand evidence that these alliances ever existed (apart from various websites requiring sign-in, which appear to have been dedicated to UAs), data from both research periods showed the undoubtedly strong presence of the social representations of UAs in the collective memory of the players. Unfortunately, because of their existence shrouded in secrecy, UAs did not end up on the research agenda until the last period of study, when players remembered them more as belonging to the past than to the present of *SK*.

Since they did not break any rules, these alliances were probably not considered forms of cheating by game developer/s. However, opinion about UAs

is divided and the various debates about them which sparked within the *SK* community made them a controversial issue. The grey area in which UAs are placed in the public opinion of *SK* players becomes blurrier if one takes into account the important role that player rules have in *Star Kingdoms*. This means that, regardless of the developer's position, the opinions of the players weigh considerably and complicate the matter of UAs even more. The following player was asked if he had ever heard about secret societies in the game. You will notice his concern to dissipate any associations between him and UAs:

> (19:40:38) Anatem says: It all depends on the round but I try to stick close to my sectormates and help them out when asked and then the alliance if I consider them worthy of my support. I have never been part of an underground alliance, and never grouped with any people. every[deleted 'one'] round I signup and land where I land. Like I said before, I am playing for fun and [I am] not to[o] worried about being dominate[d], though no one likes to lose. Losing is no fun at all. END
>
> (19:41:53) Researcher says: But you have heard about an underground alliance?
>
> (19:42:59) Anatem says: I have heard of UAs...and seen a lot of them come and go through out the years. END

To further the analysis, I asked the following interconnected questions from the data obtained:

1. Why were UAs formed and what are the factors which contributed to their emergence, existence and demise?

2. Do UAs serve some functions in the game or are they just a dysfunction?

In Cornelia Yoder's opinion, the creation of UAs is closely connected to the design of *Star Kingdoms*:

> "In my games, I deliberately implemented a group signup system, which eliminated any need for alliances being underground and also the reasons for much of the cheating that went on in *SK*."

More precisely, the emergence of UAs may be linked to the way the game design worked to accommodate the existing or evolving relationships of players. The player was allocated to a sector by the system automatically (this was done to balance the population of sectors). As Yoder states, only later, did the developer of *SK* add the 'group sign up' feature, which allowed up

to three players to sign up together for a place in a sector. This feature was intended, probably, to preserve existing or emerging relationships and nurture the formation of new friendships or relationships as it allowed automatic sign up as well. Although this was a step forward in recognising that players developed or had friendships and relationships with other (current and soon to be) players, which they wished to preserve and/or maintain, it may be that this feature failed to accomplish what it wanted.

Most likely, even after this feature was added, players felt uneasy that, in the opinion of the developer of SK, playing with friends meant sometimes playing 'against friends'. After all, in *SK*, friendships tied easily and it was not uncommon for players to have even around 150 *SK* players on their list of friends on popular messaging systems. To further complicate things, sometimes their real life friends or co-workers would hear about the game they played and wanted to join in. So, choosing three friends or players from their lists and ignoring the rest seemed like a difficult decision for *SK* players. Hence, it is likely that UAs were born out of player's associations. However, from this seemingly natural origin to their acquired 'fame', there are a few steps missing.

Players linked the existence of these structures to the former large player base of the game, due to which they could remain secret, with their members camouflaged among the players affiliated to the multitude of existing official alliances. The current numbers of players make UAs' existence hard to conceal and they are said to be unimportant to the political life in the game or have ceased to exist at the moment of this research.

> (3:13:47 PM) LoX: UAs are Underground Alliances. Not official by any means, but they came about as a result of like minded people attempting to control multiple alliances from the inside. There used to be several of them, xLTx, TAG, TRW, TF, xnoobx/LFC, xFCx, The SC and a few others that've waxed and waned over the years. None of them are a power in *SK* politics now, however, as the universe is just too small for them to hide in anymore.
> (3:13:53 PM) LoX: [end]

Since these alliances were, presumably, not considered cheating by game developer/s, no official measures were taken against them. This is another factor which may have led to these associations flourishing. The functions that these structures had or have in the game were challenging to identify: firstly, because these structures were secret and, secondly, because the opinions which players held or hold about them differed not only within the player population,

but also across time. On the one hand, there are the past opinions of the players when UAs enjoyed a powerful presence in the game, on the other, their opinions at the moment of the study, when UAs are seen, sometimes, through the biased lenses of nostalgia for a game which is not what it used to be.

Describing and analysing the most prominent functions of UAs provide support for why UAs have been considered to be a type of subversive ritualisation. The functions of UAs may be conceived as being the functions of subversive ritualisation overall, but, should any generalization be applied to other games where subversive ritualisation is encountered, care must be taken to consider the specific traits of the subversive ritualisation from the game being studied.

In the 'golden days' of *Star Kingdoms*, when the game was popular, but also at the moment when this research was conducted, the opinion that UAs were a dysfunction for the game was widespread. This opinion comes from a mainstream view on the game which favours certain styles of play which have an influence on other players that is limited by player and official rules. UAs were associated with other styles of play that were less subjected to limitation by the rules of the game (imposed by developers or players), with possible disastrous consequences for many players (from an instrumental point of view). Hence, it seems natural for such structures to be dubbed (bad) dysfunctional for the game. However, while the structures engaged in such practices are subversive (being different from or going against the mainstream or official way of playing a game), they only seem entirely dysfunctional. The subversive structures might have a dysfunctional side, but this does not preclude a functional one. In other words, 'subversive' does not mean 'dysfunctional' by necessity (or overall), as the subversive structures do perform important functions in the game. This can be observed, in offline settings, in other events and structures which may be considered subversive, for example carnivals or some secret societies, which serve important functions in society (see Turner 1969, for carnivals, and La Fontaine 1986, for secret societies). Returning to the game, when these functions speak of a (less instrumental) dimension of the game where the game is seen not only in terms of fulfilling objectives and getting rewards in the game in the form of points, tokens (army, land, equipment) or official authority (leadership), but also in terms of relationships, they refer to a ritual dimension of the game. Shortly, I will discuss the perceived dysfunctional side of UAs; then, I will proceed to describe and analyse their functions, and through them, subversive ritualisation.

The Underground Alliances were usually perceived to be malevolent and engaged in a gameplay that was particularly aggressive, involving group attacks on certain players. As a result, the opinions of the players were generally unfavourable towards UAs. Overall, it is believed that the UA members derived their enjoyment from their concerted attacks on players who were singled out.

The reason for which UAs were conceived by their opponents as being harmful for the game in general was that they posed a serious threat to anyone who resisted them and did not wish to obey or associate with them. Players accused UAs of being manipulative and tearing down alliances at their mercy, hence their playing style was considered to promote anarchy and disobedience to the player-imposed rules and perceived official rules. The opponents of UAs considered them to be responsible for harassing new players, who, as a result, left the game without returning.

> (3:26:37 PM) LoX: Not strictly speaking, as at the time, I fully believe that UAs were the cause behind *SK*'s constantly dwindling player base. But even only two years ago, when this occur[r]ed, we still had 7 galaxies of 40 sectors apiece. That's lot of players and a lot of player loss. The UAs used alliances like tools, then threw them away if they didn't conform or they couldn't hide behind them anymore. Now, I don't fully believe that anymore, but back then I was fervent about that and passionate about the destruction of them in game. I was a little naive and bought into the hardliners who DID believe it and in some cases, still do. I was an xAntiUAx UA member, to be quite honest, but it was still a UA, technically. [end]

> Cornelia Yoder: "Underground alliances in *SK* were a disaster, and really helped destroy the game."

This aggressive type of playing style of UAs seems to be similar to what is usually termed 'griefing' in other online gaming communities (the players engaging in these practices are called 'griefers'). Griefers act in a way which causes nuisance to other players for their own pleasure. In some cases, not only that these practices are not prohibited by the game rules, but are often supported by them (see, for example, Salazar, 2008). In *SK*, no game rules appeared to prohibit these associations or style of play. Thus, one could assume the developers' tacit approval or unwillingness to deal with such issues. Griefing was not mentioned in the interviews I had, but some players did connect UAs machinations to cheating. However, from an official point of view,

as UAs did not trespass any official rules, no cheating was involved. This suggests that clear delimitations are not always possible and the applied labels are consistent with one particular perspective, be it the one of the developers, the players (and here the views are divided) or the one of the researcher. In theory, Consalvo (2007, 104) distinguishes between grief play and cheating, pointing out that cheating goes beyond just the ludic dimension of grief play and incorporates instrumentality. In her view, gaining advantage is crucial for the cheater, whereas the griefer enjoys upsetting other players for its own sake. In practice, from the perspective of some players, gaining an unfair advantage and having fun while gaining that advantage might be considered neither cheating nor griefing, but pure play.

Since their aggressiveness was not constrained by the official rules of the game (which were rather permissive in this respect), it is possible that the members of UAs thought to have operated in the game legitimately. Moreover, it seems reasonable to expect that the members of UAs had a favourable opinion about UAs and even believed that they were essential for the game and for their experiences in the game.

In addition, not all the Underground Alliances thought of themselves as having destructive ends. One type of such a UA was an AntiUAs alliance, essentially an underground alliance itself. One of the interviewees claimed he founded this AntiUA with the purpose of destroying the UAs, which were seen by many players to be detrimental to gameplay.

> (5:07:41 PM) Merlin: another kd [kingdom = player] and i tried to start one up, but it never really took off [...]
> (5:10:24 PM) Researcher: Why did you tried to start up one if you didn't think it was good for the game? And why do you think they did not work? [...]
> (5:12:11 PM) Researcher: not they, I mean your UA
> (5:12:36 PM) Merlin: umm. well our UA was intended to be more to teach newcomers the game if i remember correctly
> (5:12:56 PM) Merlin: we might have even allowed hit on eachother [sic], i cannot recall
> (5:13:07 PM) Merlin: but that was earlier on
> (5:13:53 PM) Merlin: i think it was after that that i decided UA's were bad for the game
> (5:13:55 PM) Merlin: end

6.3.1 The functions of the Underground Alliances

Although, in general, UAs were perceived as having negative influence on the gameplay, the issue is much more complex than it may seem at first sight. Among the aspects which complicate the issue I have already approached the anti-UAs that were essentially still UAs and the role of UAs for their members as far as the gameplay was concerned. Other aspects concern the ritual dimension of the game. As mentioned earlier, there is a ritual dimension of the game, which stands in contrast with (but does not ever separate entirely from) the instrumental one. Whereas the instrumental dimension of a game has more visibility, leading to players perceiving factors which affect this dimension easily, the ritual dimension is more difficult to observe. Thus, those effects of UAs upon the aspects of gameplay focussing on instrumentality (achieving official power, money, land, armies or reaching a high position on the official score tables) often gain more visibility. Alternatively, those effects of UAs concerning the ritual dimension, focussing on relationship and identity, become less evident for the players. Hence, perceiving UAs as a dysfunction in the game had more prevalence than noticing their functions.

Nevertheless, the ritual dimension of subversive structures may not be totally hidden to some players, but requires some distance, away from instrumental aspects that tend to conceal other meanings with their immediacy. The fact that I conducted the research in a period when UAs were less and less encountered and did not represent a force and a menace any more may have allowed for such a distance to be taken. In addition, the research settings themselves (especially the e-mail interviews), which are predisposed to reflexivity and self-observation, may have occasioned the interviewees' attempt to identify whether UAs had functions in the game as well.

Following observations and discussion with players, I identified the following functions of UAs: *the subversive function*, *the relationship and interaction creation, performance and maintenance function*, *the community construction function* (in relation to which three connected aspects have been distinguished to play a key role, that is *the social identity (re)production*, *cohesion* and *narratives*), *the immersion function*, *the role as resource for (social and cultural) gaming capital*. I acknowledge that this may not be an exhaustive list of all the functions, but rather an enumeration of the most prominent ones.

One of the functions of UAs is the *subversive function*. UAs were seen by many players as an 'universal' evil and a spring of 'constant upheaval'. However, it is important to mention that their members derived their pleasure

from participating in their covert concerted actions. In part, this happened due to some of the *SK* players having a subversive style of play. Perhaps slightly more noticeable aspects of this style of play include some players having fun by exploiting the existent bugs to gain an unfair advantage. The fact that the last item on Cornelia Yoder's (16 February 2010) 'to do' list for her game was 'a few built in bugs to make *SK* players feel at home' is illustrative.

When referring to the subversive function, 'subversive' is not meant here as a negative feature of UAs' play, rather it is seen as both different from 'mainstream' (play) and opposing a static game. The subversiveness of the style of play favoured by the members of UAs seems to be built on its resistance against the mainstream type of play, which envisages the game as immobile, with immutable rules, even though no such rules were imposed by the developers. Nevertheless, the subversiveness may be seen as acquiring a double political role. On the one hand, in the wider politics of online games and the creative agency of the players, UAs may be conceived of as liberating the creative player with respect to game rules. UAs can be seen as reactionary to a state of affairs, where even though players have the freedom to play a game with less restrictive rules, they choose not to do so. From this point of view, UAs symbolise the overthrowing of the dominant discourses (of the players or the wider culture), endorsed by players who held the official or semi-official, informal authority, which allowed them to decide what the official rules were and were not. On the other hand, in the in-game politics, UAs are alternative social structures created to respond to different needs than the official structures. Regarding the needs that the official structures fail to answer, there are needs which are external to the game to some degree, such as the need to play with, not against one's friends (refused by the automatic allocation of players in the official social structures), and needs internal to the game, such as the desire to have a 'fun' approach to play, including playing with the rules of the game and playfully tampering with the official structures. Thus, the subversiveness is not only about 'breaking down' official social structures or official rules, but is also about re-creating social structures in the game (and re-creating the game according to different rules), following closely in the steps of the existing or forming social relations. The subversiveness may be also about re-instating carefree playfulness in the game, bringing back to the game what Caillois (1958, 12-13) called 'paidia'. Caillois (1958) distinguished between two conflicting dispositions in games (with the latter tending to subdue the former): paidia, a state of play characterised by spontaneity, exuberance and

freedom, but also by anarchy and turbulence, and ludus, which is centred on discipline through rules and formality. What is interesting is that the player rules have acquired an almost official status (by payers re-appropriating the official rules and re-defining them in terms that suited their needs) and that UAs do not direct their subversiveness primarily against the explicit official rules, but against the implicit official rules or their 're-definition' by the dominant players ('dominant' translate into 'influential' not into 'powerful in terms of in-game scores', although these may be correlated often-times).

In many ways, the social representations of UAs portrays them as reminiscent of secret societies due to their secret activities and (presumably) secret knowledge, hierarchical structures, rituals (among which secret initiations), restrictive nature (elitist, in most cases) and their subversive and in-game 'political' functions (for a typology and functions of secret societies, see Mackenzie, 1967). However, since I did not have direct access to UAs' proceedings and initiations, I will not insist on this facet of them.

The analysis of the social representations of the players about UAs indicates that they have a *relationship and interaction maintenance and performance function*. As well, I identified another function of UAs, closely connected with the relationship function, which is the *community construction function* (in which *the social identity (re)production processes*, *cohesion* and *narratives* play key roles).

The relationship and interaction creation, performance and maintenance function of UAs refers to the fact that these secret social groups are a way of forming, performing and maintaining relationships and interactions between players. On the one side, there are the relationships and interactions between the members of UAs and, on the other side, there are the ones facilitated or engendered by the UAs among the rest of the *SK* players (discussed below, in the analysis of the community construction function). According to players (but also sustained by the facts below), the particular organisation of the game and the fact that the game design does not favour maintaining the same social groups across rounds (or across other boundaries, such as offline or online or other games or this game) are believed to have led to the creation of UAs. Thus, UAs may be seen as a performance of relationship and interaction rituals begun online or offline (even in their subversive form). *SK* is a round based game and each round lasts 3 months, after which the game starts anew. In addition, at the time of the research the game had an automatic allocation of players to sectors, with the exception of the group sign-up that allowed up to three

friends to be assigned to the same sector. Moreover, the subversive form of the relationship rituals seems to be a way for their free manifestation even when the official channels appear to be closed and the game design appears to disapprove of them. The designers may have observed or known the 'like-seeks-alike' tendency of experienced players (reported by interviewees) and tried to counter it because it would have made the game unfair for the general population of *SK* players. However, forcing players to play against their friends may have been an equally hard decision to take, since these relationships are important for a game (see the previous chapter). It is possible that the designers had or reached this understanding because it appears that nothing or little has been done to dismantle the UAs. One could assume that the designers tried to moderate their official decisions by adopting a 'laissez-faire' attitude towards the UAs or they simply valued more the presence of the UAs' members in the game as experienced, committed players, rather than their absence.

UAs have a *community construction function* in *SK*, meaning that UAs led or lead to the establishment and maintenance of communities (term defined and discussed in more detail in the literature review), which are defined as associations of peoples with shared aims, interests and practices (including learning and styles of play) forming within and/or in connection with a game. A closely related meaning of 'community' refers to the feelings of camaraderie and fellowship which these communities foster, named 'sense of community' henceforth. The community construction function of UAs contributes to the ritual dimension of *SK*, by emphasising that the game takes on other meanings and functions, such as becoming both a source and resource for communities and producing a sense of community.

The dynamic process of *(re)producing social identity* is essential for the community construction function of UAs. Therefore, to analyse this function, first I make use of the model of Salazar (2008) of social identity (defined briefly as the characteristics which differentiate one group from another) which has symbolic codes as a basic structural unit (a frame for meaning making and structuring the social reality): spatial and narrative codes and codes of inclusion or exclusion. The inclusion or exclusion codes tend to operate at higher level, acting directly on and sometimes manipulating the spatial-temporal and narrative codes to achieve their 'purposes': building the identity 'boundaries'. Furthermore, the inclusion and exclusion codes work, most of the times, together, since, in many cases, as soon as 'us' is constructed, the 'other' begins to take shape and vice versa. It is very difficult to distinguish between inclusion

and exclusion codes, as even though their actions might seem opposite, their effects appear to converge. They have a double role of segregation and construction of a social identity. The attempt to found a generic AntiUAs can be seen as an example of how inclusion or exclusion codes attempt to manipulate temporal and narrative codes (without success, in this case). Although the victims of the UAs incurred attacks at different moments in time, from the part of various UAs (with different objectives and differing from each other), the inclusion or exclusion codes aimed to homogenise all these players and narratively build an 'us' against a malefic common 'other', the UAs. This construction of 'Us' pitted against 'Other' may also be supposed from the part of the UAs themselves, which were careful to create for themselves an image of being elitist, unified (in respect of the aims of the same organisation), powerful, merciless and highly competitive (selecting only a few players for membership, who were a name in the game and did not approve of being dominated). Thus, it can be thought that UAs attempted to differentiate themselves from the mass of players and players associations and establish group personas, in the sense of a distinctive (positive or negative) image of a group and group's actions presented to the society, in this case, the society of *SK* players (for more details about group persona, see Edwards 1982, 32; Gray 1996, 226). The same may be said about official player associations, which were quick to dissociate themselves from UAs and their goals.

Another aspect vital for the community construction function is *cohesion* (defined as the property of a social group to act as a whole), as through cohesion (among other aspects), community (be it real or virtual) is created and maintained. In producing cohesion, both among their members and the rest of *SK* players (including among the members of AntiUAs), UAs may have had an important role. Analysing how UAs engender cohesion will provide a glimpse into the way they are involved in the process of constructing community. 'Cohesion' can be envisaged as part of the inclusion or exclusion codes involved in the process of re-producing social identity. Although, in the case of cohesion, the emphasis seems to be on the 'inclusion' aspect of the dyad, 'exclusion' cannot be ignored altogether. In the following case, in addition to UAs being a cause and manifestation of cohesion within their own ranks, they are seen to generate cohesion in the outside groups, which in turn unify to repel the very cause of their cohesion. Thinking retrospectively, the founder of the above mentioned AntiUAs acknowledges now that UAs may have been a source of cohesion for like-minded players against a common evil, UAs. As

in other instances in history, 'othering' a challenging group (in this case, the UAs) has been a powerful technique to achieve cohesion.

UAs may have provided a cadre for their members or other *SK* players to construct shared and common pasts, presents and futures in a bid to build community. Katovich and Couch (1992) used the concept of 'shared pasts' to denote joint acts or social occasions in the past which the interactors constructed together, while the term 'common pasts' is employed for the past acts and occasions constructed with others. The concepts of shared and common presents and futures are similar in approach to the shared and common pasts, with the only difference being their particular temporal aspect.

Other ways of building and performing 'community' are the *narratives* about UAs, i.e., stories and myths (in this case, by myth, I understand a story about facts from the group's life and history, not necessarily false, which explains these facts and/or fashions them as exemplary, in a negative or positive light). Long after their disbandment, stories about UAs and their destructive power circulate within the folklore of the game, gaining an almost mythical status in the sense that it sets an example, albeit most of the times regarded as negative. The stories about UAs have found their way into the social representations of *SK* players and become a resource of community by providing a reference to both a shared and common past in the sense of Katovich and Couch (1992). The shared pasts consist of shared experiences that the members of a certain group (UA, official group or the entire community of *SK* players) construct as a past. In the case of UAs, a more obvious shared past would be the past experienced and constructed by the members of UAs, i.e., shared plans of action against the official alliances and their execution as is now remembered. The common pasts make reference to situations co-constructed by members of some of the above-mentioned groups, for example the wars between UAs and the official social structures (including the way they were experienced by both the members of UAs and of official structures together with actions and counter-actions).

> (4:14:50 PM) LoX: Politically, *SK* is run by cut throat officers [officer = a political position more or less official in *SK*] who WILL stab you in the back if it'll gain them some aspect of purchase towards prolonging their own games. So, it's hard to promote trust with players these days, however, it's easier to do so with players you've fought with and for and bled with and had Kingdoms killed with. This is originally how most UAs get started. Like minded players watching each others' backs, but at this point, it might be a little late. [End]

The *narratives* can be integrated in the framework of Salazar (2008) for analysing the construction of the social identity by considering that the shared and common pasts which these stories evoke are part of the inclusion or exclusion codes, which govern and manipulate the spatial-temporal and narrative codes. The attempt to found an AntiUA emphasises how some players tried to construct, through narratives, another type of shared past, shared by all the people who were attacked and harmed in the game by UAs (although not simultaneously). In this type of shared past, the events shared a similarity of action, but, often, did not share the same time frame, nor the same aggressor-actor. It is noteworthy, that, according to the founder of the AntiUA, this alliance never took off. It is unclear to what degree the lack of a shared time frame and aggressor-actor or other factors, such as the charisma of the founders, the pre-existence of other AntiUAs or, simply, the decline of UAs, lead to the premature 'death' of this alliance. When I state that UAs became a resource of community, I take into account both the general community of *Star Kingdoms* players and the more restrictive and smaller community of UA members.

Furthermore, it is possible that the UAs added to the storytelling and role-playing experience of the game. This view was supported by the player's assertion, presented below, that UAs made the game more fun for the general player base. The game had limited graphics and the *SK* lacked the intricacies of the more graphical online games (where the details of their virtual worlds or characters may capture the attention of the players on their own). Thus, what *SK* lacked in graphics, it had to make up for in the imagination of the players, which most often translated in elaborate stories (invented or true) about the social web of relationships which underpinned their numeric adventures. In a way, *SK* is closer to the earlier MUDs, where imagination and role-playing constituted the very fabric of the game, than to graphical games. To start a war, one only had to insert some numbers in a tab and then wait a certain amount of time (called tick) until the result was presented in a textual form, claiming the victory or the defeat of the player. However, for many players, such textual representations of war, victory or defeat were hardly satisfying and they proceeded to wave stories about the rising and fall of their armies or about their enemies. Overall, the stories play an important role in the ritualisation of the game. For instance, the war and communication on the *SK* forums are ritualised through stories similar to those about UAs, as it was shown in previous work (Ghergu, 2007).

(9:23:28 AM) Researcher: have you ever heard about a secret society?
What is your opinion about this issue?
(9:23:48 AM) Thunder: yes i heard [...]
(9:24:02 AM) Thunder: they make the game more fun
(9:24:11 AM) Thunder: end

This suggests that UAs have an *immersion function* as well. Unlike a graphical game where graphical elements and audio effects augment the immersion, *Star Kingdoms* relies heavily on the players' ability to forge their own stories as they progress through the game. Sometimes the stories are not re-told but are internalised as a personal experience. Other times, not only are they told and re-told on forums or between friends or members of the same alliance or sector, but they are role-played (the narrators place themselves into the 'shoes' of an eye-witness-participant in the story), contributing to even greater degree to the perception of a shared experience and co-presence. Therefore, it may be argued that elements which enhance the ability of a story to fascinate the players are an asset for the game and gameplay. Perhaps UAs brought into the game the flavour of secrecy and conspiracy, which are believed to be present in real-life military conflicts.

The stories about the UAs work or worked at an individual level as well, being involved in the process of building identities. These stories used to be recounted to the new players by older players in a bid to: (*i*) gain social and cultural capital for the latter by making a reference to a legendary past to which the narrator had access or in which was actively involved; (*ii*) gain allies in a personal war against UAs by 'othering' them; (*iii*) enhance the gameplay by performing and re-performing these stories. Through these stories the game is further ritualised, but more on an individual dimension (although the ritualisation remains in the subversive sphere). Since the declared scope of the thesis encompasses mainly the more collective dimension of ritualisation, a similar line was followed for subversive ritualisation focussing on its collective dimension. However, the role of UAs as *resource for (social and cultural) gaming capital* in *SK* is another noteworthy function of UAs. Although the individual dimension is prominent, one cannot help but observe that acquiring cultural and social capital (as with any form of capital) makes sense especially in relation to others and, thus, suggesting a collective dimension as well. These secret subversive structures meant prestige and power for some players (even for those who disagreed with their methods). Knowing about UAs or their members was and still is part of the gaming capital in *SK*. At the same time,

they were a source of cultural and social capital for their members (and those who could claim to know them), as they tended to aggregate elites.

> (3:08:02 PM) LoX: Those are what we refer to as "The Golden Years." Obviously, it was a lot easier to make friends in a universe of that size. But then again, if you weren't a UA member, you still weren't considered someone of worth until you made a name for yourself. So I did, simply by running probe farm Kingdoms [kingdoms created for the sole purpose of being used for war resources] every round so I could help out with war.

> (5:07:58 PM) Merlin: I probably had the contacts to get into LT/MG
> (5:08:11 PM) Merlin: but I didn't really feel that UA's were good for the game
> (5:08:21 PM) Researcher: LT/MG?
> (5:08:30 PM) Researcher: what is that?
> (5:08:58 PM) Researcher: the name of the UAs? (...)
> (5:11:08 PM) Merlin: lt was probably the best known UA

Although UAs may have had many functions in the game, there are players or ex-players who still view them as a *dysfunction*. If one considers the game across its lifespan, after the popularity of the game passed, the number of players stagnated and then continued to decrease over time. Prominent current and past players of *SK* mentioned many factors leading to the diminishing of the player base, with UAs being just one among those factors. These factors included: UAs, the 'rampant cheating', various bugs exploited by players to gain advantage in the game over other players together with the perceived lack of interest from the part of the game developer/s (manifested in their sensed reluctance to address these problems and lack of or improper advertising from a certain moment on).

It is important to note that both the player modifications and these subversive social structures stirred mixed opinions, with some players considering them 'good' and others 'bad' for the game. They differed, nonetheless, in the fact that, while player modifications were generally believed to have had 'benign' motivations (to help the game), UAs were closely associated with cheating (by some players) and 'malign' motivations. Thus, UAs elicited a strong emotional response against them from the majority of players. In addition, this response may have been intensified to a great degree by some players' perceived feeling of disinterest and abandonment from the part of the game

developer/s. While it would have been a real challenge to integrate the unofficial social structures within the official ones (since part of their fun was given by them being clandestine), the UAs' issue appears to be just one among other factors indicating a rift in the dialogue between players and developers. The results resist a simplistic representation of aspects of subversive ritualisation (or of the player modifications in a game) as a dysfunction for the game and invite for further research into other aspects of the relationship between players and developers. For example, the issue of UAs (and their debatable association with cheating) brings forth questions about the role of the reputation of the game developer/s (constructed from their interactions and communication with players) in relation to their struggle to integrate emerging social and cultural rules into their design. Further research could attempt to find answers to these questions.

6.4   Conclusions

Game researchers studying MMORPGs noticed that the boundaries between player and co-developer or employee (but also citizen) become increasingly effaced (Taylor, 2006b, 160), perhaps even more so in some virtual worlds (such as *Second Life* or *Habbo*) compared to others. The fact that the player bases of various online games are mobile and often overlap is particularly helpful for the natural dissemination of these trends. In addition, even migrations of established communities (with their specific rules and practices) are frequent when one world closes, for example the migration of parts of the Uru community in *There.com* and *Second Life* (Pearce, 2006). It seems reasonable to assume that players acquiring a greater freedom in some games, virtual worlds or other online spaces might wish to preserve that sense of freedom and re-create it in other games by modifying their rules. However, these practices of blurring distinctions between creators and players are based on a rich tradition of players conceiving game rules as fecund playgrounds.

In the current chapter, I discussed subversive ritualisation in *Star Kingdoms* as a type of player modification of the game and analysed its functions. In this context, I presented several studies concerned with the creative agency of the players and the closely connected issue of player rules.

Some of these studies described and analysed formal modifications undertaken by the online games players (Taylor, 2006a; Malaby, 2006; Tschang and Comas, 2010). In addition, theoretical and empirical studies concerned with

informal player modifications (Taylor, 2006a; Jakobsson and Taylor, 2003; Consalvo, 2007; Wright et al., 2002; Aarseth, 2007; Postigo, 2010; Scacchi, 2010) were presented. Overall, the studies on informal player modifications, tend to look at a more local level in the sense that the modifications do not appear to have a game-wide reach. As a result, the importance of player modifications may be conceived as being reduced, since these practices are not shown as being representative or important for the majority of players. In *Star Kingdoms*, however, the modifications generated by players had a large coverage and/or impact in the game, even in the case of elitist social structures. As a token of this game-wide, important role, the social representations of these structures are still present in the collective memory of the players.

The importance of the player rules or the social and cultural rules of a game (which are distinct, in theory, from the rules created and imposed by the developers) was noticed, among others, by Jakobsson (2007), studying their effects for a console game, Chen (2009), observing their role in collaborative play and Pargman and Erissson (2005) noticing their influence on conflict and/or mediation of conflict. As well, Nardi et al. (2007) analysed a sub-set of the social and cultural rules which deal with ethical aspects under the name of 'game ethos' or 'moral order' of the game. While these studies emphasise the importance of the social and cultural rules, most of them accentuate the temporary and shifting character of player rules. In addition, the studies on the players' creative agency and player rules tend to see the rules of the players and those of the developers as two totally separate domains, which I suggest may not always be the case.

By contrast, the player rules from *Star Kingdoms* had a more unified and permanent mark on the game. Some were adopted by the majority of players, while others, although disputed, were known to them. The mere reference to them qualified the speaker as a knowledgeable *SK* player. In *SK*, which is seen as less strictly regulated from an official point of view, the rules created and imposed by players and official rules generate a complicated mesh. In this mesh, the rules of the players may spring from official rules or lack of thereof (a design intended to leave to players the freedom to create their own rules) and are supported by them (the players rules are disseminated through the official structures created and endorsed by the official rules). Sometimes, the mesh extends forward, to other games, and the analysis presents a case of how game rules crossed the threshold from unofficial, in one game, to official, in another and, possibly, back to the original game as official.

As a special type of player modifications, a focal point of the current analysis was the investigation of what I called subversive ritualisation in *Star Kingdoms*. I studied subversive ritualisation by directing the analytical lens to certain unofficial, secret, social structures named Underground Alliances, at odds with both the player rules and the perceived official rules (even though they did not contradict the actual official rules). These structures may have formed due to emerging patterns of play and interactions between players (of which I mention the 'elite' style of play). Other potential factors for the formation of UAs are players' existing relationships and the challenges faced by developer or developers to integrate the online and offline relationships of the players into the game design and, at the same time, to balance the game evenly (in terms of number of players per sectors). The long term existence of UAs may have been ensured by two other factors: *SK*'s initial, relatively big number of players and UAs' blurry relationship with the official rules (most probably, UAs were not considered forms of cheating by the developers) meant that UAs could remain clandestine and grow their numbers unhindered.

In accordance with my definition of ritualisation, subversive ritualisation has been defined as a genre of ritualisation, in continuous tension with (but not so foreign from) mainstream ritualisation, through which the game takes on new meanings, beyond the game itself, with an emphasis on relationships and social identities of the players' groups. Although performing more or less the same functions as mainstream ritualisation, the subversive ritualisation is distinct from the former by the fact that most often comes from a style of play that constructs itself as different from or going against the mainstream one. In *SK*, the ritual dimension of the game with regard to UAs can be better observed in the functions that UAs perform in the game. To this end, the functions and dysfunctions of UAs have been identified and analysed.

Overall, UAs were perceived mostly as a *dysfunction* for the game, promoting an aggressive style of play (resembling griefing). Their aggressiveness, but also their manipulations and secret, concerted actions were particularly upsetting for players who tried to advance in the game by observing the official and player rules. Moreover, UAs were thought to promote chaos and the transgression of the player (and perceived official) rules and, because of this, they have been associated with cheating. When viewed as a dysfunction, UAs are linked to the more instrumental dimension of the game, where the game seems to take the form of means towards an end to a greater degree, i.e., players aim to obtain a bigger score and have their name on different ranking

charts (even though there is a bigger end of having fun, which is more difficult to describe as instrumental).

However, the players painted a more nuanced picture, which allowed us to reveal some of the functions UAs may have served or serve within the game. The functions of UAs reveal the ritual dimension of the game, as through them the game is infused with wider socio-cultural meanings and functions (centred on relationships and identity), and might explain the apparent lack of official measures against them. Among such functions, I identified and analysed *the subversive function*, *the relationship and interaction creation, performance and maintenance function*, *the community construction function* (with aspects such as *the social identity (re)production*, *cohesion* and *narratives* playing important roles), *the immersion function*, and *the identity construction function* where UAs play a role as *resource for (social and cultural) gaming capital*.

The subversive function of UAs, refers to a type of play which differs from 'mainstream' (play) and opposes a static game. While UAs may be conceived as freeing the players' creativity with respect to game rules and opposing the dominant discourse on this topic within the wider culture, from another point of view, UAs may be seen as alternative social structures catering for different needs than the official ones. On the one hand, there is the need to play with, not against one's friends (a need which is not met by the automatic allocation of players in the official social structures) and, on the other hand, the desire or need to 'have fun' while playing. In this latter situation, the subversive function of UAs may signify that 'paidia', a type of play characterised by gaiety, exuberance and anarchy identified by Caillois (1958, 12-13), is brought back to the game (even for the non-members). Most importantly, the subversive function is not only about 'breaking down' the implicit game rules and official structures engendered by them, but also about establishing new social structures and new rules in the game. These new rules or structures serve the existing or forming social relationships or interactions better than the existing social structures and rules.

Although noting that UAs resemble secret societies (due to their secret activities and knowledge, hierarchical structures, rituals, including secret initiations, restrictive nature, mostly elitist, and their subversive and in-game 'political' functions), current data do not allow a more in-depth analysis of UAs from this perspective.

Next, *the relationship and interaction creation, performance and maintenance function* of UAs were investigated when discussing the subversive func-

tions of UAs. The function points to the role of these secret social groups in forming, performing and maintaining relationships and interactions between the members of UAs and also among the rest of the *SK* players. Since the official structures and implicit rules (or their version appropriated by players as official rules) did not support the existing or emerging relationships and interactions of players (in spite of players' needs for making them more persistent), UAs took upon themselves to resolve the issue. By being social groups whose members permeated the official structures but still kept close contact with each other, UAs managed to circumvent the official rules (of random allocation of players in sectors or limited group sign-up). Thus, as relationships are created and maintained through UAs (and this is valid for both UAs' members and the players who opposed them), UAs stand for relationships and interactions (and by doing this UAs become a form of ritualised play).

Another closely connected function of UAs is *the community construction function* (which adds to the ritual dimension of the game), which means that they engender communities and a sense of community. I used the model of Salazar (2008) for social identity, based on spatial, narrative and inclusion or exclusion codes (to which I added temporal codes), to analyse this function. An example of how UAs help to construct communities by artificially building a generic 'us' against a malefic common 'other' – the UAs, through inclusion or exclusion codes, is the description of an attempt to found a generic AntiUA. Various other *SK* groups worked to create an 'Us' / 'Others' dichotomy by presenting a specific image for their group (i.e., in the case of UAs, of being elitist, unified, powerful, merciless and competitive and, in the case of other *SK* players or official social structures, of having different goals and a fairer style of play than UAs).

Among the resources for building and performing 'community' (i.e., the general community of *SK* players and the community of UAs members) I identified the *narratives* about UAs (stories and myths), which operate by being a reference to both a shared and common past in the sense of Katovich and Couch (1992). While the shared past refers to the past shared experiences constructed by the members of a certain UA, a specific official group or the whole community of *SK* players, the common pasts refers to instances constructed jointly by some of the different groups mentioned above. The social identity framework of Salazar (2008) could easily integrate the narratives about UAs by assuming that inclusion or exclusion codes may include the shared and common pasts from these stories. In the establishment of an AntiUA one can

observe the inclusion or exclusion codes' manipulation of the temporal codes (based more on the similarity of actions, and not the same time frame or actor) by creating a type of shared past which would connect all the 'victims' of UAs. In addition, the narratives about UAs circulated within the *SK* folklore for a long time after their dissolution, and acquired an almost mythical character by describing exemplary acts and figures (although, most often, regarded as negative).

Moreover, UAs may have an *immersion function* as well. UAs added a storytelling and role-playing layer to the game, making the game more fun for all the players (perhaps by infusing it with secrecy and conspiracy, considered to be characteristic of real-life armed conflicts). *Star Kingdoms* overcame being a game which lacked graphical and audio effects (which may increase the immersion of other games) through the ability of the players to invent and play in their own stories as they made arid numerical moves (defined as wars, attacks, probes, etc.). Whether the stories are re-told and/or role-played on the forums or in personal communications or internalised as individual experience, they help create co-presence and the perception of a shared experience.

Finally, I suggest that subversive ritualisation (but also the player rules) became a *resource of (social and cultural) gaming capital* of particular importance for the identity of *SK* players (at a social and individual level). This further ritualises the game due to both the rules and the structures created by the players surpassing, in a way, their ludic and instrumental values by becoming such a resource. Owing to UAs being a symbol of prestige and power, UAs-related knowledge (including UAs narratives or knowing their members) was and still is an important part of the gaming capital in *SK*. Additionally, UAs generated cultural capital for their members (and other *SK* players) by creating an elitist image for themselves.

Although subversive ritualisation may have had many functions in the game, there are players or ex-players who consider them a *dysfunction* for the game (which is a reference to a more instrumental and less ritualised dimension of the game). However, UAs are not the only factor believed, by current and past players of *SK*, to have led to the gradual decrease of the player base. There are a number of other factors identified by the players, such as the widespread cheating, various exploitable bugs and the game developer's perceived lack of interest for the game. Moreover, these subversive social structures were not the only aspects of the game which stirred mixed opinions. Nevertheless, while the modifications undertaken by players in the game were

generally believed to have had 'good' motivations (to help the game), UAs were linked to cheating and 'harmful' motivations. Hence, the subversive ritualisation (manifested through UAs) attracted upon itself a strong affective reaction from the majority of players which was further intensified by some players' perceived feeling of disinterest and abandonment from the part of the game developer/s.

Chapter 7

Conclusions and discussion

The need to play together, which was observed in online games (among other games), seems to have been acknowledged by the community, and increasingly, by the field of game studies, as a very important feature for why gamers play games. This is supported by the fact that this playing together paradigm seems to be imported into all sorts of games (including into first person shooters) and, consequently, all games seem to converge towards an online component. For example, when *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* was launched, in November 2011, the developers chose to coordinate this with the launch of another product, a multiplayer online service, called *Call of Duty: Elite*, which allows integration of online and offline friends. In particular, the players can see whether their friends from *Facebook* are playing the game, when they are playing and where exactly they are positioned in the game. In a way, this is similar to the guilds system in *World of Warcraft*, but is centered on bringing the social contacts from various settings (offline, *Facebook*) into the game. Interestingly, the motto of this product is 'Play Together Better', which underlines again, the fact that the developers become aware of the importance that playing together has on games. This legitimates even more the current research as timely and promises that research on playing together practices will continue to be a hot topic in the near future.

This thesis focused on playing together practices which emerge more from player initiatives than from the way the game was designed. As seen in the literature review, current research in the field lacks an integrative, systematic approach to investigate, describe and analyse practices of playing together in online games. Here, I addressed this problem by using a comprehensive approach to study practices of playing together identified in two online games. This approach consisted of constructing and applying a ritualisation frame-

work, which is a theoretical model that operationalises ritualisation in online games and is used to analyse the practices of playing together.

My framework assumes that *ritualisation* is a process of establishing, performing, maintaining, transforming and extinguishing rituals or ritualised play in online games. Here, rituals are seen as *secular rituals* and defined as activities or performances which generate far greater ends than the means which come into play. In this context, ritual or ritualised play refer to instances when, through rituals or elements of rituals existent in and around online games, these games become 'more than just games' and gather a cohort of new meanings which transcend the game's instrumentality. For example, the games come to symbolise relationships and identity and, through these rituals performed within and around online games, relationships and identity are produced and transformed.

This ritualisation framework has the advantage of drawing on a multidisciplinary perspective, hence being highly adept at explaining a wide range of social phenomena. My concept of ritual is based mainly on the anthropological account of ritual of Zeitlyn (1994, 69). In addition, this conceptualisation of ritualisation as a process is similar to Bell's (1992) conceptualisation of ritualisation for modern or post-modern societies and is influenced by the concept of *secular ritual* from various disciplines. The current framework was based on a widespread revisiting of the concept of ritual (predominantly in its secular form, which does not exclude a certain sacredness), coming from: history of religions, with the concept of *degenerated rituals* of Eliade (1959); anthropology, which describes *secular ritual* as detached from magical-religious settings (analysed extensively in Moore and Myerhoff, 1977) and from sociology, with *the interaction rituals* of Goffman (1967). Other notable influences are from: media studies, the concept of *media events* of Dayan and Katz (1992); communication studies, the ritual mode of communication of Carey (1989) and social psychology, with *family rituals* (Baxter and Braithwaite, 2006), *couple rituals* (Campbell, 2003) and *friendship rituals* (Bruess and Pearson, 2002). Additionally, conceptualising ritual in online games found its inspiration in various studies in which more traditional (Turner, 1969) and newer perspectives (Goffman, 1967) on ritual were applied to online settings (including online games). Thus, these online settings were seen as rituals (Tomas, 1992; Hammer, 2005; Walton, 2005), they were considered to display ritualised play or a predisposition to ritual (Danet, 2005) or some of the practices engendered by them were treated as rituals (Copier, 2005; Ghergu, 2007) or elements of rituals (Ghergu,

2007). Nevertheless, the ritual sphere investigated by most of these studies concentrated on formalised performances and was either enlarged too much to include the whole community of players/users or restricted to the individual, ignoring the relatively new paradigm of relationship rituals (less centred on ritual form and more on the relationships maintained through rituals).

Since game studies describe online games as 'more than just games' (as seen in the literature review on studies on virtual communities, social context of play, sociability online and player motivations), ritualisation, which shares a similar view on games, was a good candidate to analyse the practices of playing together revolving around online games. Another advantage of the current framework of ritualisation is that it uses concepts from communication studies and social psychology, such as *couple rituals* and *family rituals* (in this thesis, called *inner circle rituals*) or *friendship rituals* (called private circle rituals and *extended circle rituals*), reunited as *relationship rituals*. These concepts and some of their functions were found to be particularly suitable to explain the roles of playing together practices in in-game or out-of-game relationships and gameplay.

One of the main contributions of this thesis is that it addresses not only why but also how online games and offline settings work together in forming, performing and maintaining all kinds of relationships. Although some of practices or their roles were mentioned and described by various studies (as seen in the literature review), they do not explore them systematically, in depth and do not offer an integrative framework for analysing all these practices as this thesis does. For example, there are studies which focus only on one aspect of playing together and ignore others (Ducheneaut et al., 2006; Williams et al., 2006; Brown and Bell, 2006; Carr and Oliver, 2009; Ogletree and Drake, 2007) and others which describe and analyse the practices of playing together without much detail (Williams et al., 2006; Cole and Griffiths, 2007). Even when these studies present cases in which offline relationships are performed and maintained through online in-game interactions as common for online games (Yee, 2001, 2006a; Williams et al., 2006; Cole and Griffiths, 2007), their perspective is limited by not having an integrative framework, such as ritualisation, to explain how this is achieved and where the described practices fit among other playing together practices.

Furthermore, the ritualisation framework describes and explains in a unitary fashion practices usually dealt with by games studies separately, such as playing with others as opposed to playing with significant others and cooper-

ative play as opposed to competition or conflict. Playing together practices are not conceived of to include competition or conflict (which are generally not described in depth or ignored by the literature). The ritualisation framework, with the *inner, private and extended circle rituals* sub-components of its mainstream dimension and its subversive dimension, does not exclude any of the above aspects. Thus, significant others, close ones, cooperation, conflict and competitions are all aspects of the social dimension which are approached through the same framework.

In addition, ritualisation also explains in a unitary way action-based, communicative, emotional, cognitive and performative aspects from the online games studied. This is a big departure from many studies in the literature, which focus on only the *sociability* aspect of playing together in online games, understood solely as the need to make friends and socialise. Even those works which presented more aspects did not do so in an integrative way, as they were not using one framework to account for playing together practices. This is exactly what my approach does.

Drawing on an ethnographic tradition, this thesis has an exploratory, qualitative approach to playing together practices. The qualitative approach is visible in the focus on the context and depth, the open-ended nature of the questions and their variety (which provided plenty of opportunities for players to describe their practices in their own words), in the participant observation method and the auto-ethnographic fragments. Additionally, the thesis benefits from a quantitative approach (only for *WoW*), which was meant to support the qualitative data with numbers and see whether my sample is representative (by comparing my quantitative results with those of other studies).

Above I presented the general contributions of the thesis, mainly referring to the originality of studying playing together practices in online games through the lenses of this ritualisation framework. In addition, more specific findings have been obtained and are presented below.

The ritualisation framework was applied first to playing together practices in *WoW*, but before doing this, to contextualise the qualitative data from *WoW*, I presented some quantitative data. Some of these data were concerned with the social reasons why the players start and continue to play the game, others were focused on who introduced players to the game and, finally, some concentrated on people with whom the gamers play.

First, I showed that almost half the players start and continue due to social motivations. Unlike in other studies, playing against other people was included

in these social motivations, together with taking up playing at the suggestion of close or distant others. Although the overall percentage of the players who reported social motivations remains constant for both starting and continuing to play the game, migrations have been observed from social to other types of motivations and vice versa.

In particular, I found the following results for *WoW* players. First, I confirmed previous results of Yee (2005c), that more than half the players were introduced to the game by a romantic partner, friend/s or family, while the percentage of players introduced by friends was around 50%. In addition, similar to Yee (2005b), I found that almost 90% of the players have or had family, real life friends or partners in the game, while 78% of the players have real life friends in the game or play with their real life friends.

Overall, the current data support the results of Yee's (2006a) study and Cole and Griffiths' (2007) study showing that a high percentage of gamers play together with people who are close to them emotionally. I conclude, together with these authors, that MMORPGs can be very social places.

Next, the ritualisation framework was used to explore and present an account of the playing together practices in *WoW*. In particular, I analysed two types of relationship rituals included in mainstream aspect of ritualisation and their roles, namely: initiation rituals and rituals of playing together. These are essentially rituals performed with fellow players, friends, family and romantic partners generically called *close circle rituals*. These close circle rituals perform various functions for relationships or interactions with repercussions on the gameplay as well, such as the *relationship and interaction creation, performance and maintenance functions*; *integration and belonging functions, affective, cognitive and supportive functions*; *identity creation and maintenance function*; *normative and contesting functions* and *aesthetic function*; *transformative and restorative functions*.

Through relationship rituals, the game acquires new meanings, centred on relationships and interactions. Not only that these relationships and interactions are expressed, but they are formed, performed and maintained via the rituals formed around the game.

Among the meanings which the game takes on through these rituals (which also describe their functions), one can mention that playing the game symbolises, produces and expresses affection and closeness. In addition, the game becomes a shared universe of interests and hobbies and a way to spend time, do things together, provide topics of conversations and shared and common

pasts, presents and futures (based on the concept of 'shared and common pasts' proposed by Katovich and Couch, 1992). These shared temporal occasions are important sources of community and cohesion (through affinity, integration or separation and belonging) for the social identity of the group, couple or family, by offering grounding (the past dimension), performance (the present dimension) and continuity (the future dimension). In addition, through these rituals, the game becomes context for social interactions and a supply of domesticity and togetherness. The 'sharing' (game-related knowledge, language, experiences and friendships) and 'togetherness' aspects (extending beyond gameplay) of playing together practices were also observed, for couples, by Carr and Oliver (2009). Moreover, the game is described as both source (similarly to Yee, 2001; Ogletree and Drake, 2007) and management of tensions (see also Yee, 2001).

To sum up, the results from both quantitative and qualitative data in the chapter on mainstream ritualisation (and, overall, the results in this thesis) indicate that playing together practices (in particular, and social aspects of online games, in general), which convey meanings centred on relationship and identity to an online game are very important for most players for two reasons. First, they are important for forming, performing, transforming and maintaining the relationships or social interactions of the players. Second, they are reasons to (re)start, continue and cease to play an online game. Similarly, Yee (2001) described relationships as affecting positively or negatively the gameplay. Most importantly, the findings present, in detail, why and how the practices of playing together seen as relationship rituals perform such important roles in relationships or interactions and in the experiences of playing. Moreover, the qualitative findings of this thesis suggests that couple time (statement which can be extended to other types of time such as family time) is not necessarily in an irreconcilable opposition to gaming time as suggested by Ogletree and Drake's (2007) study. On the contrary, gaming time may enhance couple time (and relationships in general) in many cases, which supports the conclusions of Yee (2001) that games can strengthen or damage relationships.

The ritualisation framework was applied as well to examine and describe the subversive practices of playing together in a chapter on subversive ritualisation. In particular, the emerging, subversive player associations called Underground Alliances (UAs) and their functions were also investigated and analysed in *SK*. These player associations are a part of the subversive dimension of the ritualisation and they were considered one of the modifications made by the

players in *SK* (the other one being the player created and imposed rules). Moreover, UAs have an intimate and intricate relation with both the player created and official rules.

Subversive ritualisation does not achieve different functions compared with mainstream ritualisation. Similarly to the role of 'rituals of rebellion', as analysed by Gluckman (1954, 3), or the functions of carnival, in Turner's (1983, 103–124) view, UAs have functions which appear to maintain order within the social environment of the game. All these events may be conceived of as a move from structured society to a kind of 'chaotic' (to almost subversive), egalitarian[4] type of society called 'antistructure', in Turner's terms, and back to structured society, governed by order. Paradoxically, these events serve to maintain the social order although they are seemingly subversive in form.

The emergence and enforcement of player-created rules and informal, subversive associations (UAs) appear to have been engendered by the way the game was designed, through the support of official rules and associations or lack thereof. Prior to UAs and during their existence, the game could not cater for the existing and emerging relationships of the players or their playing styles. In addition, the large number of players from the past and their fuzzy relationship with the official position and rules of the game (including the player ones) led to the growing number of UAs members.

The functions of subversive ritualisation were analysed through the point of view of the functions of UAs. From an instrumental view on the game, UAs were only a dysfunction as their members had a style of play characterised as aggressive which hurt the newcomers the most and, thus, the game in general. However, from a ritual view on the game, the following functions of UAs were identified: *the subversive function, the relationship and interaction creation, performance and maintenance function, the community construction function* (with three important aspects, *the social identity (re)production, cohesion* and *narratives*), *the immersion function*, the role as *resource for (social and cultural) gaming capital*.

Describing these functions in action, one can say that UAs (which functioned in a similar way to secret societies) were a creative reaction against a static game and an attempt to transform its rules. Most importantly, UAs' role was to adapt the game to the existing or emerging relationships/social interactions of some players better. The game, as it was, did not allow more enduring social structures to be created or maintained and the existing or developing relationships/interactions of the players were not supported.

Moreover, UAs and the narratives about them had important roles in the creation, transmission and maintenance of the identity of their members and other players, who defined themselves in relation to UAs. To analyse this function, the concept of 'shared and common pasts' of Katovich and Couch (1992) (to which *shared presents and futures* were added) was included in the inclusion or exclusion codes presented in the model of social identity (re)production of Salazar (2008). Based on this model it was shown how UAs construct community through these codes.

Furthermore, UAs are seen as source of both social and cultural gaming capital. In online games, belonging to a group which is considered to have an elite style of play (even though or especially when that group has a bad reputation) is essential for gamers who wish to establish themselves as knowledgeable players. Knowing stories about UAs shows that a player has important connections in the game (social capital) and the game knowledge which makes them a competent player (cultural capital).

Overall, the thesis shows that ritualisation is not only encountered in non-graphical worlds such as *SK*, but also *in* and *around* graphical environments such as *WoW*. This dismisses the idea that ritualisation would be engendered by the specific features of a certain medium and supports the statement of Bell (1992) that ritualisation is a creative, fecund, fundamental phenomenon, encountered across human history.

7.1 Limitations and future work

There are a few limitations of this work, which could be addressed in future research. First, this thesis describes ritualised practices of playing together (and their important role in gameplay) in an almost self contained manner, but, often, the mechanical and instrumental (in a ludic fashion) aspects of the game are mixed with these social aspects in a complicated mesh and, consequently, are difficult to separate. One should not deduce that there are no players who enjoy the game only for mechanical and instrumental reasons. Future work may explore how mechanical, instrumental and social intermingle in the experiences of the players.

Second, while I attempted to present as many of the rituals of playing together, I presented only some of them, focussing on ritualised collective play which emerged more from the players and less from way the game was designed. I did so because my definition of ritual and ritualise play did not

accommodate more instrumental activities specific to games (e.g. belonging to guilds). Hence, I did not investigate playing together practices concerning guilds systematically. This was due to the fact that, although there are players who joined guilds from other than instrumental reasons, there is still strong evidence from the literature suggesting that the way in which the online games of MMORPG type are designed influences the affiliation of most players to guilds.

Furthermore, it would have been wise to join a guild in order to get a closer look at formal group play. However, despite attempts to form a guild and even signing a charter of a new guild that never took off, it proved impossible for me to join a guild at that stage. This happened because of the fact that my character had a low level and because of my poor gaming skills at *WoW*. Since I did not concentrate on rituals engendered more by the features of the game (than from players) and explored the issue in-depth through interviews, I feel that joining guilds was not crucial for research at the current phase. Future work, could attempt to broaden the definition of ritual to include those activities which, although generated by the way the game is designed, acquired other meanings which transcend the purely instrumental ones, which I call 'engineered' ritualisation. Following this altering of the theoretical model, the ritualisation framework could be applied to playing together practices in a similar way as in this thesis. Hence, it will be interesting to explore this ritualisation, which emerges more from the way the game was designed than from the players, through the prism of guilds and see whether there are fundamental differences between the emerging ritualisation (studied in this thesis) and the 'engineered' one.

Another limitation of the current work is the fact that the sample was not constructed to be representative (which does not imply that it is not), but rather was a non-probability sample (a combination of purposive and snowballing sampling). Since this study was meant to be mainly qualitative (while quantitative data aimed, primarily, to support the qualitative data), this should not pose too many problems. Nevertheless, I obtained quantitative data which were similar to those of other studies on bigger samples (although still non-probability sampling). Thus, it maybe that the current sample is representative, but extra care should be taken when generalising from the data in this thesis. As future work, a more quantitative approach, with bigger and better samples, could increase the representativeness of the results of the present study.

Moreover, the thesis concentrated more on collective rituals and ignored private rituals, such as avatar rituals (e.g. naming, character creation and development or gender swapping practices), as they were considered a special case of the collective ones. I wanted to understand the collective rituals better before proceeding further with analysing private rituals. Further studies might attempt to integrate these private rituals into the ritualisation framework and, even, into the playing together rituals as an indirect component.

Another limitation of this thesis is that the subversive ritualisation dimension was explored only through the perspective of underground alliances and solely for *Star Kingdoms*. This was mainly the result of the clandestineness of this dimension which makes difficult its exploration. Although, in *WoW*, there is a small probability of subversive player associations developing game-wide due to its design, other subversive ritualised practices may exist. Moreover, competition and conflict, which were only touched upon briefly in WoW, should be explored in more detail in a future study of engineered ritualisation. Future studies may attempt to see whether activities such as 'modding' or cheating can be analysed through the lenses of ritualisation. The current thesis was only interested in exploring subversive ritualised activities with a game-wide influence, which seem unlikely to be characteristics of cheating. Nevertheless, more localised and idiosyncratic activities may also play an important role not only in the experiences of the players who undertake them, but also on those of the general community of players and may be worth considering in the future.

Finally, playing together practices are not just a snapshot in time, but rather they change and transform with it. My current work offers only a glimpse into ritual change and future work is needed to explore the time evolution of playing together practices further.

Notes

[1]An example of a different strategy is the one of the *Second Life*'s developers, which allows the use of in-game materials only with the consent of the people involved in the material.

[2]At the moment of writing this thesis, *Google* is a company which provides a popular search engine.

[3]J. R. R. Tolkien is the author of the novel entitled *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-55), the popularity of which marked the revival of the taste for fantasy adventures in popular culture and which has dominated public perception of the fantasy genre ever since.

[4]Although UAs are elitist, they can be seen as promoting equality among their members and among the people affected by their playing style.

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