

Going home again? Fan nostalgia in anticipation of World of Warcraft Classic

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Abstract

Since its release in 2004, World of Warcraft (WoW) has regularly changed the game and the play experience in significant ways. Recently, Blizzard, the developer of WoW, announced the upcoming game WoW Classic: “an authentic, Blizzard-quality classic experience”. Drawing on interviews with adult WoW fans and gamers, the article examines the game as an ‘affective space’ (Hills, 2002) of fandom that cannot be separated from the fan narratives and experiences it mediates. A key component in this affective space is the notion of fan nostalgia. The nostalgic relationship between a fan and a favourite text is often imbued with an imagined history, conjoining affect and meaning, belief and knowledge, and making nostalgia “both a way of knowing worlds – and a discourse of knowledge” (Radstone, 2010, p. 188). The article traces different and often contradictory modes of fan nostalgia connected to WoW, such as tactile feelings of technostalgia (Bolin, 2015), deeply personal and anchoring types of nostalgia in the form of totemic objects (Proctor, 2017), manifested through fan practices of collecting digital items and souvenirs (Geraghty, 2014), and interwoven with desirable and appropriate self-identity and self-narrative (Williams, 2014). In reading these modes of nostalgia, the article argues that they ultimately function as a sort of ‘homecoming’, as the gamers’ many different experiences of the game and media texts surrounding the game all come together as complex attempts of memory work, creating the possibility of establishing a home within their fandom.

Key words:

Fandom, gaming, World of Warcraft, nostalgia.

Introduction

World of Warcraft (WoW), one of the largest and longest-running western MMORPGs, is part of a genre of online role-playing games that offer a fictional universe where thousands of individuals socialise with other players, playing either with or against each other. Since its release by Blizzard in 2004, it has attracted a massive player base, peaking at around 12 million players in 2010. A game like *WoW* is by no means a stable object, in that it has grown and changed periodically, and every new expansion pack has added new playable content and new parts to the game, effectively expanding the game and the game world itself. This constantly evolving nature of the game is made possible by players paying a monthly subscription fee in addition to buying the game and the expansion packs. Players have created a wide variety of online resources surrounding the game, such as websites, information databases, wikis, blogs, YouTube channels and forums through which they not only detail the game but also discuss the direction of the game and voice their expectations and needs. This collaborative relationship between producers and consumers is an uneasy one, where producers try to balance the ongoing direction of the game against a player base that asserts “the right to participate in the culture, on their own terms, when and where they wish” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 169). This can result in conflicts where the game itself – what it is and what it should be or become – is at stake, which became evident in 2010 with the release of the expansion pack *Cataclysm*. It not only broke the record for the fastest selling PC game of all time – it also did something that no other expansion pack had done before. Unlike previous expansions to *WoW*, which added extra parts and playable content to the already existing game world, *Cataclysm* altered the game and the play experience in fundamental ways by completely reworking and reimagining the entire original game world. Suddenly, players lost a beloved object that they had come to know so well, effectively creating what Rebecca Williams (2016, p. 143) terms a “post-object fandom”, which refers to “fandom of any object which can no longer produce new texts”. In response to this loss, the fan base started to create their own versions of the original text with the proliferation of player-hosted private servers which all emulated the original game in various ways. Now fans had the opportunity to revisit, experience and play an older and almost original version of the game they knew and loved. Consequently, the number of active *WoW* subscriptions decreased while the number of active private server accounts increased to more than 1.3 million (DKPminus, 2016), which is around a quarter of the total number of subscribers announced in *WoW*’s last official public subscriber report (Wowhead, 2015). Blizzard continued to send out cease and desist letters, shutting the private servers down, only to find hundreds of new

ones constantly emerging. The game developer finally caved in to the demands from the fan base and the economic repercussions of the private servers and, in an attempt to regain subscribers and please fans, joined forces with the administrators behind Nostalrius, one of the largest private servers. Building on the fan labour from Nostalrius, Blizzard soon announced an official version of what the many legacy servers offered: “An authentic, Blizzard-quality classic experience” in the upcoming *WoW Classic*.

The official announcement seems to have polarised the game’s fan base: While many fans are excited to soon be able to play the original game once again – or at least an updated, curated version of the game – a vocal part of the fan community is expressing growing concern about, or even a dismissal of, what the official game will eventually be. The critics argue that the massive expectations surrounding the upcoming classic game are bound to collapse “[b]ecause of nostalgia. The game is OBJECTIVELY better now than it was in vanilla” (Blizzard forums, 2017), and game journalists report on the expectations of *WoW Classic* from the player base as merely “rose-tinted lenses of nostalgia” (Mary-Justice, 2018). Even the production director for *WoW*, J. Allen Brack initially dismissed fans’ request for an official version of the original game with his now infamous answer: “You think you do, but you don’t. You think you want that, but you don’t”. In a later interview with *Forbes*, Brack cemented his earlier comment by stating: “nostalgia is a thing. Rose-colored glasses are a thing. Human brains are not designed to remember pain. And so, you remember the good things. You don’t remember the pain” (Newman, 2018).

This massive critique has exposed a growing *fan-tagonism* (Johnson, 2007) between the fans wanting the original version of the game on the one hand, and both the games’ creators and a large part of the current player base on the other hand. The fandom centred on the original version of the game is being dismissed and treated as nostalgic, a “disease of an afflicted imagination” (Boym, 2001, p. 4). It is regarded as false memories viewed through rose-coloured glasses. The critique rests on an understanding of nostalgia as a longing for an idealised and (re)constructed past where the past it seeks has never existed except as narrative (Stewart, 1993). Working within fan studies, Henry Jenkins (2007) furthers this idea of nostalgia as a deceptive memory, when he argues that “for nostalgia to operate, we must in fact forget aspects of the actual past and substitute a sentimental myth about how things might have been” (p. 157). However, recent research on nostalgia suggests an alternative approach to the phenomenon, arguing for both a critical and a constructive understanding of it. Through the lens of nostalgia, this article will examine what lies at the heart of players’ longing for and wish to return to the original game and the experiences associated with it. Drawing on online interviews with European *WoW* fans and gamers, all of whom have played the original version of *WoW*, The article unpacks the players’ narratives of their gaming experiences and expectations of *WoW Classic* – how they talk about, understand and perform their gaming of *WoW* in relation to what Matt Hills (2002) terms an “affective space” of fandom that cannot be separated from the fan narratives and experiences it mediates. A key component in this affective

space is the notion of fan nostalgia. The nostalgia that emerges from the reacquaintance with a favourite text is also the effect of an imagined history, making nostalgia “a way of knowing worlds – and a discourse of knowledge” (Radstone 2010, p. 188). This discursive relationship between past and present is central to understanding the nostalgia at play here, in that nostalgia functions in different ways for *WoW* gaming fans.

Nostalgia and digital games

The term ‘nostalgia’ derives from the Greek *nostos*, meaning return to home, and *algia*, meaning painful condition, related to prolonged and usually involuntary absences from home (Pickering and Keightley, 2006). During the 1980s and 1990s, scholars considered nostalgia a symptom or disease of modernity (Chase and Shaw, 1989; Lowenthal, 1985), as nostalgia was conceived as the binary opposite of the modernist ideal of progress. Here nostalgia was viewed as a malaise that made passionate consumers collect relics in an attempt to reclaim an idealised past, however, recent research into nostalgia suggests an alternative approach to the phenomenon, arguing for both a critical and a constructive understanding of the concept. Michael Pickering and Emily Keightley (2006, p. 921) oppose the understanding of nostalgia as merely backward-looking, stating that it should “be seen not only as a search for ontological security in the past, but also a means of taking one’s bearings for the road ahead in the uncertainties of the present”. Svetlana Boym (2001) views nostalgia as *a mode of remembering* that allows a person to come to terms with the past in the present. She differentiates between restorative nostalgia, which reconstructs “emblems and rituals of home and homeland in an attempt to conquer and spatialize them”, and a reflective nostalgia, which “cherishes shattered fragments of memory and temporalizes space” (2001, p. 49). This distinction shows that nostalgia can be an active and reflective agent in exerting an influence on both the past and the present.

Although recent academic work provides some direction, there is no single theory or comprehensive approach to inform the analysis or the discussions of nostalgia. The current article begins with an understanding that nostalgia is a cultural construct and therefore reflective of its social, cultural and historical contexts. Susannah Radstone has argued for such a nuanced approach to nostalgia, one which embraces the paradoxical nature of the phenomenon: “Perhaps, instead of hunting down nostalgia in its many guises and domains – instead of treating nostalgia as [an ...] object of denigration, we might use this perception to identify some paths of departure that radiate from nostalgia” (2010, p. 88). This stance echoes Keightley and Pickering’s (2006, p. 937) idea that the many manifestations of nostalgia accommodate both progressive and regressive positions and attitudes, as nostalgia “can only be properly conceptualized as a contradictory phenomenon [...] it is not a singular or fixed condition”. In the same vein, I opt for a more nuanced approach to nostalgia that considers both the contexts of nostalgia and the voices involved in expressing the nostalgic sentiments, while being open to multiple and alternative under-

standings of the concept. Here nostalgia is seen as part of the *WoW* fandom and a way of interacting with and understanding how the gamers as fans interact with the game and its many elements – some of which are deeply ingrained in the fans' sense of identity, as we will explore in detail later in the article. Gary Cross (2015, p. 10) frames this deeply personal dimension of nostalgia tied up in our consumption of media/pop cultural products through the idea of "consumed nostalgia", which expresses "a longing for the goods of the past that came from a *personal* experience of *growing up* in the stressful world of *fast capitalism*". At the same time as being a part of fans' self-narrative, consumed nostalgia also points to the ephemeral nature, as these objects as consumer objects become nostalgic much faster due to the "narrow duration of the media moment" (p. 34). Viewing *WoW* through the lens of consumed nostalgia can serve as a reminder for us that even though it is a digital, ever-changing object we consume, it can still carry significant implications for the players' personal experiences of the sense of self.

Under the guise of consumed nostalgia, popular media and digital games in particular function as arenas for nostalgia to thrive, and for mobilising different understandings of nostalgia. The nostalgic value of digital game hardware has stimulated the retention and collection of older technologies such as NES and the emergence of strong feelings of consumer nostalgia for digital games (Sloan, 2015), where marketing companies and retailers have sought to latch on to gaming nostalgia by designing and selling retro-gaming products that rekindle memories from late adolescence (Loveridge, 2018). Natasha Whiteman (2008) is concerned with nostalgia for digital games from the surrounding fan communities that develop affiliations with classic games, and how this, in turn, frames the interpretation of and approaches to contemporary games. Jakob Hörtnagl (2016) explores the retro-gaming community of *Everquest* as a means of preserving the social architecture in an authentic gaming experience, pointing to the game community as a key component. In a similar vein, David Heineman (2014) explores retro-gaming through the lens of a rhetorical theory of nostalgia, as a way of analysing how gamers construct their identity both with and against the context facilitated by the gaming industry. Digital games, it would seem, are particularly well-suited as "objects of nostalgia", in that they are active and participatory media that both strengthen our memories of past media and facilitate a powerful satisfaction of nostalgic desires, as games are interactive media that "can offer players the possibility of not only *being* there but of *doing* things there" (Fenty, 2008, p. 27). We now turn to how gaming fans articulate, understand and evaluate their understandings of nostalgia with regard to *WoW*.

Digital games and the technostalgia feeling of Blizzlike

The nostalgia that is experienced and constructed in *WoW* is reflected through the interviews in widely different ways. The three young men, Steffen, Tue and Morten, played the original game when it first came out in 2004 and later sought out the same feeling

by playing on a number of different private servers which all claimed to offer “a *Blizzlike* experience”. *Blizzlike* (Blizzard-like) is a category of private server running a version of the game that is as close to the original version as possible, with nearly identical game geographies, content release timelines and game code and scripting. Key here is that the coding of the many elements within the game (especially creatures and monsters, described as “mobs”) is as similar to the original version as possible. *Blizzlike* servers are then a marker of authenticity, one which is never fully visible but can be *felt* and evaluated through gameplay. This, often tacit, feeling of authenticity plays a key role in understanding how some of the nostalgia found in the interviews is framed and talked about.

Trevor Pinch and David Reinecke (2009) offered the term *technostalgia*, referring to some musicians’ preference for old, often analogue sound technologies. Later, Göran Bolin (2015) extended the term to refer to any feelings of nostalgia not related to media content but to the medium itself – the material context of our engagement with the medium: the bitter-sweet feelings that are evoked when engaging with material media that have formed an important part of one’s media socialisation but are increasingly deemed obsolete today or have been replaced by other, often digital, alternatives. We may extend the idea of *technostalgia* to also include older versions of software code in a particular digital game. In discussing their experience playing on a private server emulating the original game, Morten explains: “It was the first private server that offered what I was looking for: *Blizzlike*. No extra XP, no quality-of-life improvements. That was what lured me in”. Morten furthermore states that “when we go back, it’s always to *Vanilla*”, on which Tue elaborates: “Yes, *Vanilla* is where the memories are. [Back then the game] wasn’t always super balanced, but you could do some crazy and fun stuff in-game”. This version of the game was the original, seminal game experience for all three gamers, an experience closely connected to a *technostalgia* of a particular version of the game code. Regarding their first experience of playing on a private server, Morten states: “It was like coming back. Like being there again”, to which Tue adds: “Well not quite, almost, but not quite. [...]. It was surprisingly close to the experience but you could *feel* the difference in how stuff was scripted, how mobs acted in-game and such”. Of the three interviewees, Tue is the only one not planning to play the *WoW Classic* when it comes out. It can, as he phrases it, “never be the same as it was back then when we were playing with the old guild”. In adopting this stance towards the *Classic* game, Tue points to the possible problems of retro-gaming with regard to MMORPGs: While the technical and code features of the game may be recreated, the social space of the initial game may not. Tue’s experience of nostalgia is associated not only with in-game places but also the social context of the game and the people he initially experienced it with. While the virtual space in which players interact with the game characters and the game world can be reconstructed, the situation of reception is ultimately lost in time, and with it the social experiences often interconnected with nostalgic longing. What we are faced with here is an expression of nostalgia, separated from homesickness as spatiality, and no longer pointing to an exterior object (the home or homeland), but instead under-

stood in terms of temporality. Furthering our reading of technostalgia through Boym's framework, it is interesting that Morten's experience of playing on a private server is a kind of restorative nostalgia, one which succeeds in the attempt to recreate what has been lost or to return to a former situation (Bartholeyns, 2014). In opposition to this, Tue's "almost, but not quite" comment displays a nostalgic sentiment, which in turn is reflective, in that it calls into doubt traditions relating to the individual or collective feeling of a bygone age that may now only be enjoyed by remembering it.

Gaming nostalgia through collections and souvenirs

There is an intimate connection between nostalgia, memory and identity, in that the objects which fans collect and reclaim from their past are bound up with the creation of a contemporary fan identity. According to Boym, "[n]ostalgia is about the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations, between personal and collective memory" (2001, p. xvi). Elizabeth Wilson (2014, p. 42) has argued that memories are essential to the production of subjectivity, and therefore the memories embedded in collecting and engaging with objects of one's fandom are emblems of the self, markers of identity, in which "nostalgia has become memory". As these memories accumulate over time, they become a narrative of the self, a process in which fan memory is not so much about loss of the past but instead a strategy for dealing with the present (Geraghty, 2018).

Collectibles and souvenirs can be seen as mementos of a special moment. The process of becoming "a collector, or at least see oneself in the image of the collector, is to engage profoundly with the past and the energies of nostalgia" (Banish, 2013, p. 63). Collecting digital items in *WoW* is a practice that was mentioned several times throughout the interviews. The current game offers the ability to change a character's appearance through *transmogrification*, so that you can mix and match appearances from different items and item sets in-game. One of my interviewees, Shelly, is determined to collect all appearances on one of her characters in order to have the most complete collection available. Another interviewee, Morten, is also a collector, but in a different way. He has collected old *tier sets* – old armour sets that he acquired from participating in challenging in-game activities such as raiding in the original *WoW*. Morten explains how he

still [has] my original full tier 1 and tier 2 sets from the raiding we did back then. I will never get rid of those, even though they take up a lot of bag space. They are complete with the original enchants on them and everything, from when I earned them back then.

Morten even uses these armour sets as his characters' appearance in-game, mixed with odd pieces "that fit" the outfit as a form of digital cosplay. Nicolle Lamerichs (2011) views cosplay as a metaphor for the relationship between a fan's individual identity and their identity subsumed within a larger community. Cornel Sandvoss (2005, p. 48) argues that conceptualising fans this way as performers

rather than recipients of mediated texts, thus offers an alternative explanation of the intense pleasures and rewards of fandom [...]. In this sense fandom is not an articulation of inner needs and drives, but is itself constitutive of the self.

Drawing on Dyer's notion of the pastiche, Booth (2015, p. 167) argues that "digital cosplay connects us through nostalgia to a past, it also connects us to another present. So too does pastiche connect us to a historical affect, a feeling from the past, that can situate and move us affectively in the present".

The difference between Shelly's and Morten's collections is in their relation to time and the past. Susan Stewart's (1993) distinction between the collection and the souvenir can help us here, in that "[t]he collection does not displace attention to the past; rather the past is at the service of the collection, for whereas the souvenir lends authenticity to the past, the past lends authenticity to the collection" (p. 15). Whereas Shelly's collection is that of a systematic collector, one which "follows a rationale for collecting – perhaps to complete a set which demonstrates 'understanding achieved'" (Geraghty, 2014, p. 129), Morten's sets are souvenirs from a specific time in his gaming history when he acquired them, "earned them" as he phrases it. These sets are also the armour appearance he most often chooses for his character in-game. Even though Morten could quite easily go back in previous raids and acquire the armour sets today, the moment of acquisition is clearly important to him, and which the original enchants on them can attest. Here Morten is demonstrating a subcultural taste which Mark Jancovich terms "cult distinction" (2002, p. 306). This distinction is rooted in the personal value he as a fan attaches to central – and original – digital objects in-game, objects which are mementos and "authentic markers" of "insider status" (Hills, 2010, p. 99). In his extensive work on fan collectors, Lincoln Geraghty (2018, p. 229) highlights how the act of collecting fan objects is in many ways "a biography of the self [...], it is not about mourning the past but about creating a reflexive and tangible identity in the present". If we adopt this line of thinking, nostalgia becomes a productive and affirmative force, a "meaning-making resource" and a "resource for the self" (Vess et al., 2012, p. 281), one which "carries a predominantly positive affective signature" (p. 274). Key here is that this nostalgia is not only bound up with the fan object itself, but is intimately connected to earlier memories in which the fan object is enmeshed. In the following section, we explore the affective dimensions of nostalgia in further detail, as we turn to how specific media products such as *WoW* can function as a key component in fans' self-narrative and memory work.

Totemic nostalgia, self-narrative and memory

In his study on fans, Lawrence Grossberg (1992) characterises fandom as an affective endeavour, and understands affect as closely related to fan identity: We can map out the intensities through which we make sense of the world and in which we ground ourselves at different points. Grossberg calls such a trajectory of intensities a *maturing map*, and

these intensities are bound up with and provoked by media texts. Talking about her expectations for the much-awaited *WoW Classic*, Shelly explains how she fears that the game will end up being a disappointing experience for her: “I really hope they don’t mess this up, I really do. They already ruined it with *Cataclysm* but this is much more important. I will be absolutely gutted if they do... They better get this one right”. The original game clearly has a special significance for Shelly, as her explanation of how she was introduced to the game is closely interwoven with other personal experiences at the time:

My son had only just bought this game and he introduced me to it and... And then it got to the point where I just didn’t want to be off, cause my character was growing and it was great, I was talking to people and there were people I didn’t know, didn’t know me, couldn’t judge me and... ‘cause I was having so many problems at home with my husband... the longer I could be away from him, the better. [...]. And I really believe that it was because I started playing the game, started talking to other people and realizing how much was lacking... I should be talking to my husband and I wasn’t. [...]. [I]t really brought everything to head, and I thank god that my son bought this game [...]. And since then it’s been my account and my game and I’ve loved it. And I hear people moaning on about it and everything but I still love it... I love it as much now as I did back then.

Fans identify with objects of fandom which possess traits considered important, and by being a fan of such objects, fans identify themselves with those traits. Furthering this idea, Williams (2014) argues that we might consider such “fan object interactions as ‘pure fan relationships’”, which in turn can reward the fan with “(1) the reflection of a desirable and appropriate selfidentity and selfnarrative; (2) a sense of ontological security or ‘trust’” (p. 20). In a similar study, Hills explains how a specific media product can function as a transitional object that through play “enters a cultural repertoire which ‘holds’ the interest of the fan and constitutes the subject’s symbolic project of self” (2002, p. 109). The disappearance or altering of a beloved fan object can lead to potential threats to a fan’s self-identity and their sense of ontological security. Drawing on sociologist Anthony Giddens’ work, Hills (2012, p. 113) describes ontological security as “the physical attainment of basic trust in self-continuity and environmental continuity”.

Shelly’s introduction to *WoW* is enmeshed with her coming to terms with her marriage problems at the time, and her self-narrative of becoming a fan of *WoW* is intimately tied to taking control of her life again. Both serve as important cognitive landmarks in her self-narrative. Even though the game has changed significantly over the years, Shelly still enjoys playing it regularly, and this constant rhythmic engagement with the game, the routine of logging in every day and playing it, resonates with Giddens’ argument that the “routinization of day-to-day life ... is the single most important source of ontological security” (quoted in Williams, 2016, p. 144).

Having experienced *WoW* being reworked and changed once before, Shelly now fears that it may happen again – this time not as an alteration of the original game but the rebuilding of it, with all the pitfalls and threats of “getting it wrong” that it entails.

Through her year-long engagement with *WoW*, the game has come to embody a *totemic nostalgia*: “a type of fan protectionism [...] centred on an affective relationship with a fan-object [...]. As a result, a totemic text becomes profoundly enmeshed as a resource of meaning-making, of self-identity, self-narrative and self-continuity” (Proctor, 2017, p. 1122). The fear that an essential reboot of the original game involves the risk of Blizzard “getting it wrong” suggests that there is much more at stake here than just the release of a game. The original game has become such an important cultural text for her that the release of the upcoming *WoW Classic* can in fact be considered a threat to her self-narrative, as it could possibly threaten the sanctity of the totemic object and thereby the memories associated with it.

To Boym (2001, p. xv), nostalgia’s complexity as regards both spatial and temporal dimensions is at the very core of nostalgic desire: “to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time”. Thus, the spatio-temporal aspect of nostalgia converges with *WoW* nostalgia as both a time that has passed and a home that has been lost: a world that players knew so intimately from having lived in it for several years, which is now lost in time, having been reworked and changed in its current iteration. *WoW* functions as what Mizuko Ito (1999) calls a “network locality”, a sense of place archived over the network, imbued with a sense of “placeness”. Tuan (1997) describes “space” as more abstract than “place”: “What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value” (p. 4), as a specific location imbued with cultural meaning or *cultural memory*. Working with cultural memory and fan reconstructions, Abigail De Kosnik (2016, p. 4) argues that “many digital works begin as acts of memory, with a user remembering a loved [...] mass culture text and isolating, then manipulating, revising and reworking, specific elements of that text”. De Kosnik refers to such fan-created reconstructions based on memory as *rogue archives* – a term aptly appropriate for describing the many different media texts connected to *WoW*. Rather than simply reconstructing an absent text loyally, the *WoW* private servers to a large extent transformatively *rework* a lost text – the original, full complexity of retail vanilla *WoW* – on the basis of officially archived and fan-generated textual traces (Booth, 2017, p. 38-9). Such reconstructions are approximations of the original text, built out of reference sources as well as fan texts “at every step throughout the process” (De Kosnik, 2018, p. 4), resulting in a mix of both. As a place imbued with cultural memory, *WoW* has become a palimpsest cult text in which players engage with both the current version of the game and the original, remembered version of it, a double layer which “attempts momentarily to replace the nondescript and actual, the banal and everyday ‘nowhere’ (*outpos*) with the preferred symbolic and fictional, the ‘good place’ (*eutopos*) of the cult text” (Brooker, 2007, p. 434).

Striking similarities in such constructions of *WoW* as a cult text were found between many of my interviewees in the interviews. They all mentioned their engagement with accompanying media products as an integral part of remembering the original game, as well as their anticipation of the upcoming *WoW Classic*: Viewing screenshots from

in-game moments (both their own and those provided by like-minded fans), playing on private servers (emulating the almost-but-not-quite-same feeling of the original game), listening to podcasts (such as *Countdown to Classic*) and watching YouTube channels (e.g. *Mad Season Show*) filled with fans' stories and memories of the original game as well as reading gaming news sources (e.g. *WoWhead*, *Icy Veins* and r/classicwow community). *WoW* as a fan object is thus constructed in and through a series of surrounding paratexts, which allows fans to create highly personal readings that mark their fandom (Sandvoss, 2005). Working specifically with paratexts, Gray discusses how *Star Wars* action figures function as paratextual memory triggers: "If *Star Wars* can act as a doorway back in time, for many fans toys serve as a key to this door" (Gray, 2010, p. 184). Collecting souvenirs and recreating old armour sets in current *WoW*, engaging with the numerous paratexts surrounding the game, as well as playing on almost-authentic private servers can all be understood as media practices that are engaged with various instances of memory work, all of which seek to provide a path or a return to a place or a home in their fandom – a 'safe vault' (Waysdorf and Reijnders, 2019) for the fandom and its memories.

A fan homecoming of sorts

With all of the above fan practices in mind, we may read the original *WoW* as a cherished and lost object in the light of Sandvoss' (2005, p. 61) work on fan places: "[T]he emotional significance of visiting fan places [through emulated private servers and paratexts] lies in the ability of fans to put themselves physically [or in this case digitally, virtually] into the otherwise textual universe [the many paratexts surrounding the original, non-existing *WoW*]"'. This generates a feeling of nostalgic homecoming, of creating emotional ties to and re-joining a community that once was, and may become again, injected with feelings of "security and emotional warmth" of a fandom, which:

best compares to the emotional significance of the places we have grown to call 'home', to the form of [...] space that is best described as *Heimat*. Understanding fandom as a form of *Heimat* thus accurately combines the significance of symbolical, personal space in fandom with the importance of territorial place within which such fandom is [...] manifested (p. 64).

In Sandvoss' conception of *Heimat*, the feeling of belonging can operate through a physical space as well as at a more conceptual level. Just as football fans associate their club (as a concept) and its stadium (the physical place) with security, stability and warmth, entering the digital world of *WoW* and the many paratexts surrounding it can serve as a way of constructing an emotional home, a *Heimat*. Sandvoss' understanding of the concept of fandoms and their cult media products as a *Heimat* can be read in the light of the close connection between a re-emergence of nostalgia and media-technologies, in which

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nostalgic expressions or the creation of nostalgic worlds could indicate a twofold phenomenon: a reaction to fast technologies [...] and/or an escape from this crisis into a state of wanderlust (*Fernweh*) and nostalgia (in the sense of *Heimweh*) that could be 'cured', or encouraged by media use and consumption (Niemeyer, 2014, p. 2).

Nostalgia has a double relationship with media, it would seem, as media enable us to read nostalgia as both a sign of crisis and a symptom of progress. Either way, reading the amalgamation of (i) the anticipation of the upcoming *WoW Classic*, (ii) the memories of playing the original game, (iii) the experiences of playing on private servers emulating the almost-but-not-quite original experience, and (iv) the many surrounding, paratextual media resources interjected herein, it seems possible, if not probable, that the original *WoW* is constructed as a *Heimat*. As such, it is a place imbued with cultural memory and very much constructed or viewed through these surrounding and intermediating paratexts which, in turn, inform and affect the nostalgia for the former. Working with the intersection of paratexts and memory-work and how they interrelate through fandoms, Hills and Garde-Hansen (2017, p. 158) introduce the idea of *paratextual memory* as a scaffolding of memory in which the personal and the cultural memory intermingle:

that paratextual memory (i.e. memories of "being there" inserted around texts, and texts' transient contexts of "now-ness" and "then-ness" inserted into memory) inscribes specific texts with senses of longing and loss, identity, and experience, that such texts could not originally convey.

These constructions and reconstructions of nostalgia through the paratextual media surrounding the "object" itself are complex emotional, affective patterns of nostalgia, described by Grainge (2002) as a "nostalgia mood", making it a liminal, ambiguous phenomenon that migrates into emotional structures as well as into larger cultural, social and economic ones. In this sense, it may be a futile endeavour to try to classify or schematise different types of nostalgia into distinct categories. It may be more fruitful to allow nostalgia its plural meanings, especially when it comes to digital media such as games, where multiple and different nostalgias are at and in play. By considering nostalgia with "the freedom to treat it not as a symptom that explains something, but as a force that does something" (Dames, 2010, p. 271), allows an understanding of how different modes of nostalgia operate and intermingle within a specific fandom. The idea of the homecoming developed here draws attention to important aspects of nostalgia as a complex relationship between fandom, memory work and identity formation.

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