

School of Media, Creative Arts and Social Inquiry

**A Quest for Meaning:
Facing Uncertainty, Anonymity, the Hidden and the Unknown
Space in Azeroth**

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Declaration

To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgement has been made.

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university.

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Abstract

In the context of playing World of Warcraft; the ways in which player characters navigate through the game is mediated by the ability to create meaning from symbols which do not have a linear interpretation to a single meaning. The game presents the player with symbols to better organise the collection of meanings and it is up to the player to recognise which meaning is the most appropriate for the context and the way in which they perform their character throughout the interaction. In this thesis I aim to explore how meaning is interpreted and adapted in relation to social performances and the emergence of blind spots.

In World of Warcraft, blind spots take the forms of anonymity of players, uncertainty of meaning, venturing through the unknown space, and the hidden. Collectively, these blind spots form types of knowledge that cannot be ascertained easily or at all while playing. However by identifying these blind spots, one can study how meaning is created with them because a bi-product of attributing meaning is a blind spot. I must make it clear that blind spots are never truly eradicated; only regarded as acceptable through the negotiation of meaning which is defined through the performative use of symbols. The symbols are embodied by both the context of social life and the character an individual assumes; which are the point of relation and interpretation for meaning. These performances then divert the interpretation of meaning to what can be known about social life rather than encourage assumptions of what cannot be known. In this light, the dichotomy of meaning and blind spots can be beneficial as they reveal the most basic understanding of reality one must know in order to interact.

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Welcome to Azeroth

For as long as I can remember, I've loved playing video and computer games from many different genres, with a preference for consoles. Although I cannot speak for all, for me playing video games was a way to have fun, and it was a great conversation starter because so many people can play them and share stories of their differing experiences. The shared fascination with these tools in the virtual domain was not so different from being passionate about other aspects of pop culture. Rarely did I encounter any game enthusiasts who claimed they used them as an escape from reality. It was treated more as a common ground for socialising, similar to how one might comment on the weather or a sporting event.

Despite my love of engaging with this facet of pop culture, the emergence of online games such as World of Warcraft was a little lost on me. Due to my financial limitations and the fact I did not possess an overly powerful PC, this wave passed right over my head. But it was a lingering topic of interest amongst fellow players who would compare their characters and speak in a strange tongue of DPS, tanks, healers, all complemented by numbers. Then abruptly there would be debate over which class best filled these roles. It appeared people openly conversed over strategies of how to deal with a particular foe or 'farm' a certain item, often becoming distressed by it not 'dropping' from the source. Most of all they praised the level of freedom they had while playing, boasting a "choose your own adventure" style of play. Particular game releases at local game stores also became highly entertaining conflicts as players took a rivalry between a certain Horde and Alliance into the real world. Players would don the symbols of their factions, teams of red and blue, while they argued over which was superior.

My curiosity got the better of me and I finally played the game during its third expansion, Cataclysm. I loaded the game equipped with nothing more than a programming window and a manual that documented loading procedures and default settings. I stared at the keyboard and mouse, unsure of how I was meant to utilise these devices without the use of a third arm. Console gaming always provided the comfort of a simple controller, and the keyboard as a gaming device was a foreign idea to me. I spent some time conflicted over how best to wield the necessary keys while playing. My fingers were clumsy on the keys, I found myself striking the wrong combination frequently. Embarrassingly I had to enquire with my cousin about how to best balance control over a keyboard and a mouse so I could actually play the game.

When I logged in for the first time there were certain protocols of translation; first I had to choose a server, then a faction and then finally make a character to complete my transition into Azeroth. My server and faction had already been chosen ahead of time by friends and family who already played the game and had been playing since its first release. After careful deliberation (and suggestions from my cousin after finding out my playing style), I finally settled on creating a female troll druid and entered Azeroth emerging in a tropical settlement on the Echo Isles. The surroundings were familiar, if one had played a fantasy themed game before, however the image on my screen was framed by an alien interface that allowed me to pilot my character with the use of my mouse and keyboard.

There were other trolls in this little paradise, some were programmed to be in an eternal war with the Naga advancing from the sea. These time locked ones were non-playable characters, NPCs, who would hopefully provide some purpose to my presence here. At this point I found myself a little puzzled because even though my screen showed a bustling settlement of trolls, I was only allowed to interact with the designated NPCs. Yet there were also freely moving trolls who leapt and ran and fought the native fauna, following their own regimes of movement, judging from the blue titles hovering over their heads I learnt that they were other players. I suspect that they noticed me from time to time as some paused momentarily, offering a glance in my direction, before taking off like animals in the wild. It was weird, given the title of this game had 'war' in it and appeared very combat focused, I was expecting a bit more conflict or tension in this world...

For the most part they appeared to ignore me as they did not acknowledge me in any obvious way, the players behind the characters did not try to message me. They were following through their own actions in the non-space of this world. They moved with purpose towards a

goal to which I was currently oblivious. For a game known for collaborative play, I was alone but surrounded by strangers. I didn't even know who the players were other than the characters they played as. I could see some wore more elaborate armour; maybe it was a symbol of their prior accomplishments? This was also reflected in their movements, they knew where they needed to go rather than randomly floundering as I did.

Some of the NPCs had strange yellow exclamation marks over their heads. By clicking on them I had unconsciously begun the rites of levelling to better my character. My first task in my long servitude to the Horde was to display my newfound combat skills and kill a small portion of local wildlife. My map suddenly revealed blue patches, markings where I could find the beasts as well as a yellow arrow acting as a compass in case I became lost in the small collection of islands. When I located the beasts in question, I charged ahead to bludgeon them to death with my staff as that was the only other option aside from the single spell I was given by the game. However nothing seemed to happen and I ended up running past them. The creature did not even notice me. It appeared my troll was polite as she waited for me to specifically target the beast before she would commence the bludgeoning. On the other hand, I probably missed the proper technique for performing a battle in this game.

At this point I felt a blade of some of form would prove more effective. However I was not permitted by the game to even pick up a spear from a nearby weapon rack. The battle was a little disappointing as I always had to be facing my opponent and could only cast my single spell when I was perfectly still. This was frustrating because I couldn't just evade if my opponent got too close. Even when it was merely a numbers game, not a skirmish, I watched my troll and the beast take turns in hitting each other half-heartedly while I sat at the keyboard and rhythmically pressed one key while the game put on a lacklustre show. If I wanted to do that, I'd be playing a turn-based role playing game, RPG (that tended to compensate for the lack of player involvement with impressive, complex visuals) not a massively multiplayer online role playing game, MMORPG. Eventually the feline beast fell to the ground in a dramatic spasm before going still.

Given it was a starting area I suspected the numbers were in my favour as my attacks dealt higher numbers compared to my foe. As I collected the loot from the monster's corpse I found myself perplexed as to why a wild animal would have coins on its body rather than just the scraps of fur I planned to sell to the merchant in a nearby camp. Perhaps more confusing was the fact that corpses in this world seemed to radiate a sparkling haze until you investigated them. I realise it was part of the game to indicate to the player that they should check the corpse as killing and looting is an ingrained RPG relation between players and NPC enemies.

Glittery decomposition aside, if I had to be completely honest... the game was rewarding me with equipment and money for my performance, but I had no idea how to spend my coin or whether this equipment was desirable for my character build... I had no idea what I was doing or what the various symbols of the game even meant... and yet I still kept playing. Soon after leaving the Echo Isles, I realised that the wildlife was much more aggressive compared to those laidback islands. They actively chased me through the barren hills of Durotar... why is everything trying to kill me!? I haven't even been here long enough to start trouble!

At this point I logged out briefly and evaluated my experience of playing this game from the perspective of a game enthusiast. Aesthetically the game was very pleasant with a semi realistic yet cartoonish style that was easy on the eye. The actual story, the purpose for your grand adventure, was elusive and only revealed by consulting my cousins, long time fans of the Warcraft series. This lack of direction made me realise that every aspect of my existence in Azeroth was restrained by the design of

the game. From a first glance, the game seemed to lack the freedom players often claimed as its key appeal. But I found that I was not free to wander elsewhere, unless I wanted to be murdered by higher-level monsters. I could not just steal a nearby raptor and run off into the sunset because I had not yet achieved a riding skill and the raptors prowling the jungles were not programmed as mounts. World of Warcraft (WoW), while boasting to be a variant of role-playing game (RPG), did not feel like the grand adventure I was promised through word of mouth among the players of this game, regardless of how pleasing the aesthetics of Azeroth were. However this did not necessarily mean WoW was a poorly designed game.

From what I could see, WoW appeared to be a game of social conflict and drama. It appeared that to play the game, one must perform in this world and overcome the various challenges it presented. The conflict arose in numerous ways, from the world itself rising to attack my druid through unusual wildlife to physically trying to decipher how to use a keyboard to play. I knew within the game, players could fight other players of the opposing faction yet this antagonism spilled beyond the boundaries too. Players often debated the validity of character class combinations for certain group roles and still persisted with this rivalry between the Horde and Alliance. One must not mistake this observation as problematic; in fact it is illuminating in how this game functions as a form of social life. Varying intensities of conflict and the resulting social drama are key to how a player positions themselves¹ in game. Now all I had to do was find a way to learn how to embrace this drama in the way I played.

¹ I realise that to write 'themselves' is grammatically incorrect and traditionally in scholarly writing the term 'he or she' is favoured. However, given that in this present era we are collectively moving away from the gender binary, and that language has not yet caught up with this development to offer a more eloquent phrasing, I choose to write 'themselves' in order to be inclusive and mindful of gender variations.

In this first engagement with WoW I could see that there was a process of interpretation at play here. My feeble attempts to comprehend Azeroth mostly relied on experiential knowledge of playing RPGs. I was interpreting from a broader language of symbols and meanings associated with online and computer games and applying it to a new experience within that scope of personal knowledge. I was connecting my experiences for a broader context of playing a computer game to the specifics of playing WoW. I then realised that I was in a situation where I lacked the knowledge to efficiently interpret meaning which made me incapable of understanding the blind spots of knowledge. I was oblivious to the nuances of the game or how I could navigate through it. Not unlike the act of conducting ethnographic research, I could clearly see something intriguing was happening yet I could not make sense of it. Where would I even start trying to explain all this? Fortunately being lost in one's research can be resolved through experience and observation of the field, by participating we actively learn to make sense of it.

In this thesis I explore how meaning is emergent in action understood as social performances. In doing so one reveals what they do and do not know about social life, therefore how does one balance knowledge and blind spots, things that are not known, in their actions to navigate through social life? I argue that incomplete knowledge should be a more acknowledged part of social interactions. I do this to show that not knowing is a normal part of social life. I seek to explore how we speak about incomplete knowledge so it is not regarded as problematic or completely overlooked. My curiosity provokes and is guided by the following questions:

- How do we learn what is vital and superfluous knowledge in a context so we can interact with it?
- How do we create meaning with the blind spots of social knowledge?

- How do we position blind spots as part of the interpretive process and a normal part of social life rather than a hindrance that must be avoided or ignored?

By blind spots I am alluding to the incomplete knowledge that accompanies our social life: information that we cannot interpret easily or accurately. In social life, we do not necessarily understand every aspect of our actions or the reactions of others. There are blind spots, from the anonymity of passing someone in a public space to being unable to fully know what someone is thinking. There is not always a neat explanation provided, so I question how one uses these blind spots to create meaning. I realise that MMORPGs are typically associated with collaborative play where players join guilds to complete difficult tasks. However, there is little on how a player navigates the game without a guild. WoW may be a massively multiplayer game, but that does not guarantee that you will be playing with a guild or even players you know on a personal level. Also even though the game encourages playing in a guild or with a group of friends, this is not a mandatory part of playing WoW. Therefore how we create meaning in situations that lack the personal intimacy of relationships should equally be observed.

In attempting to explore the unknown, I am intrigued by possible processes that allow us to fill in the blanks of social life. It is rare to see an individual completely cease all activity in day-to-day life due to a lack of knowledge. We appear to be capable of filling in blanks by attributing meaning. If the unknown is the beginning, then meaning is the end of interpreting that situation in order to navigate social life. The journey in between can be facilitated in many ways according to the great number of theoretical perspectives present in academia. Given the importance of aesthetic designs and the overtly dramatic representations of combat in WoW, I have

selected Dramaturgical Symbolic Interactionism as my theoretical foundation. I favour this variation of Symbolic Interactionism because it focuses on “how human beings accomplish meaning in their lives” (Edgley, 2003, pg143), meaning it can be attributed to all manner of interactions, not just important or critical moments of one’s development. There are other variations (such as Chicago and Iowa) which contribute to a rich complex history; however I lack the space to fully engage with each variation of Symbolic Interactionism. Instead, I have chosen to focus on Dramaturgy because it emphasises the process of sociality and negotiating meaning in a performative manner, rather than fixating on the end meaning produced by an interaction. Interactions are commonly defined by consensus of meaning between the participants involved (Edgley, 2003, pg143). Symbols are the products of interactions that elicit or influence particular responses, and whether they are desirable or acceptable is decreed by the meanings attributed to them and the contexts they are part of (Mead, 1934, pg190). This permits symbols to possess a dynamic relation with the contexts in which they arise, and also accounts for the shifting meanings of a symbol when slight alterations to the social performance occur (Goffman, 1959, pg231).

A symbol presents the possibilities of meanings that are attributed to its combination of stimuli and the way it integrates into an interaction. A symbol may influence the creation of meaning through embodying communal ideas yet it is the performance in which it is used that temporarily gives a symbol meaning. After the performance concludes, the variations of meaning are possible once more for that symbol until it is used again. The philosophy of language games presented by Wittgenstein (1953) permits an acknowledgement of the temporality and uncertainty of interpreting meanings. Also, conflict during a performance commonly arises among individuals

from differences in accessing knowledge. Language games are one way to build further on the process of performance by focusing on the use of the stimulus without compromising the foundation of Symbolic Interactionism or the ways symbols permit the creation of meaning. This has strongly shaped my interpretation of creating meaning so I have chosen to weave aspects of language games into my understanding of performance.

In the context of this thesis, a language game correlates to the entirety of a performance that displays the relationship between character, context and symbols rather than the traditional term of a form of life. Wittgensteinian language games encourage a perspective from the process of negotiation rather than a solid, tangible definition. A common error in understanding a form of life (and by extension language games) is limiting a form of life to self-enclosed anomalies rather than examining the interconnectedness of communication to convey meaning in social life (Winch, 1958, pgxxi). While I am not a philosopher, the notion that discussing language is actually about “discussing *what counts as belonging to the world*” speaks to a human desire of establishing meaning, to negotiate the possibilities of it, how it changes and reacts to the world (Winch, 1958, pg14). Alternatively, I am attempting to study what does not belong to the world through the observations of blind spots in WoW. A dramaturgical performance is facilitated through language: a method, a practical tool so individuals can communicate meanings to one another to navigate social life. To comprehend the processes of a language is to comprehend the ways in which an individual, a group, a culture, a society, attributes meaning to the environment in which they are immersed.

A synopsis of language games in relation to symbolic interactionism can be presented as such; meaning is determined as the performance or the experience of

the form of life unfolds, and in turn is interpreted and understood by the participants and audience. This can be achieved by acknowledging what the symbol does not mean at that time of use (Wittgenstein, 1953, pg6, para3). There is no simple, linear symbol-to-meaning relation; there are a variety of meanings that can be attributed to any particular symbol, all of which might possibly manifest at the start of a performance. When we interact or perform, we are negotiating which meaning is understood as most relevant, logical or acceptable for the situation (Wittgenstein, 1953, pp37-38, para70). However, the potential meanings one can choose from and how they are applied by the individual can be influenced by a broader societal context. Due to temporal and performative qualities of symbol use, individuals are also capable of sabotaging or controlling which meaning is the focus for that encounter.

Dramaturgical Symbolic Interactionism thrives when focusing on the performance of meaning, so it does not recognise structure and power as overtly or bluntly as other theories (Edgley, 2003, pp152-153). Some critics take umbrage with this development and conclude that dramaturgists take influential social structures such as politics, religion, the economy, culture, as trivial (Edgley, 2003, pg153). This critique is a matter of differing perspectives: such critics may be more sensitive to expressing details regarding social structure and the consequent limitations and enhancements these structures bring to the individual or community. Perhaps they are expecting dramaturgy to focus on the external forces that shape a social context, when instead dramaturgy seeks to observe “what people do within the contexts that are available to them” (Edgley, 2003, pg153). Meaning and symbols are all irrelevant unless they belong to a context or are the product of a reaction which encompasses influential social boundaries that help shape the variations of expression and

interpretation, for they provide the point of relation that deems the success of the performance (Edgley, 2003, pg153). However, I have found that Totemism and *Rites de Passage* complement Dramaturgical Symbolic Interactionism in a way that may satisfy some of these concerns.

A way to alleviate structural concerns is to instead interpret structure as a context which embodies a systemic knowledge relevant to a particular way of life. Levi-Strauss reconceptualised systemic knowledge through totemism, a symbolic system which helps guide communities through a common understanding of the world around them (1962, pg2). Although his meaning was less about formal functionality and more focused on the transmission of information among a community (Levi-Strauss, 1962, pp2, 11-12). He envisioned that symbolic totems and thus systemic or structural knowledge aided a learning process which “is easily transmissible in the form of habits contracted in childhood, in order to display the complex structure of a society” (Levi-Strauss, 1962, pg73). There is a point of relation, a structure, to influence uncertainty into meaning so multiple individuals can share interpreted meanings.

Totemism offers structuralism that is open to interpretation in how it is used; it is about the imparting of common meanings to facilitate communication. To relate to language games and social performances, chaos does not reign in these interactions. Instead there is a vague direction with no definitive goal until a meaning that appears logical becomes possible. The way a meaning appears logical is related to how acceptable it is to a community or a societal organisation. Overall these perspectives suggest a similar idea – that structure is embedded in every social performance, form of life and community to inform individuals of that which is considered acceptable and that which is understood to be unacceptable. The micro-

interaction among individuals represents the macro-interaction of the society they belong to. This ensures that the social performance occurs in a manner that is understood as logical for the context the individual faces. The idea of context being embedded in the symbols of our daily lives and vice versa, also permits a context to react to the ways in which individuals choose to use them.

Finally, power dynamics can become obvious in a dramaturgical sense when an individual's identity is about to undergo a change. *Rite de Passage* is a term that encompasses a variety of transformations of an individual's state, associated with their social context, place and identity within a society (Turner, 1979, pg234). These *rites* can also be interpreted as a form of social conditioning because they are used as milestones of progress for an individual's character. The individual is developing their character towards being an acceptable member of a particular context. Power becomes more obvious during such rites because there is a clearer direction in what is acceptable and unacceptable. It is a confirmation of what should be known of the systemic knowledge that guides all performances within a social context. Should one fail such a performance, that individual remains unchanged and depending on the situation they may not be given power because they cannot demonstrate that they can use it effectively.

Dramaturgical Symbolic Interactionism serves as the foundation for my thesis. Language Games themselves will be used to further elaborate on the negotiation of meaning that occurs during a performance. Totemism and *Rites de Passage* will be utilised to manage some of the critiques of dramaturgy regarding how it interprets structure and power. From here I will introduce some of the driving key words that have led me to the choice of Dramaturgical Symbolic Interactionism and how it is relevant to navigating social life with incomplete knowledge.

Finding Blind Spots

The idea of working with what cannot be known is present throughout most social research. Most prominent is the notion of man being the inventor of the negative, coined by Kenneth Burke (1966). The negative is an artificial product of using symbols and language that focuses on ideas of what has not happened (Burke, 1966, pp 9-10). "The quickest way to demonstrate the sheer symbolicity of the negative is to look at any object, say, a table, and to remind yourself that, though it is exactly what it is, you could go on for the rest of your life saying all the things it is not" (Burke, 1966, pg9). By attributing meaning through language and symbols, one is drawing a boundary between what is known and what is not; limitations are played with every interpretation (Burke, 1966, pg12). While I am not attempting to debate Burke's ideas, I am instead curious as to how these boundaries of knowing and not knowing coexist in social life. The ways in which one makes and un-makes meaning is highly reflexive according to the individual and semeiotic or symbolic interactions (Agha, 2007, pg2). There appears to be a connection between the use of symbols and the act of knowing or not knowing facets of social life.

This is mainly because to not know is just as subjective as attributing meaning to existence; not knowing can take on many forms depending on one's existence. "All essential knowing pertains to existence, or only the knowledge whose relation to existence is essential is essential knowledge" (Kierkegaard, 2000, pg205). The character one assumes, the contexts they belong to and one's interpretation of symbols reflect the essential knowledge of one's existence and their navigation of social life. So the query lies with how one comes to understand the difference between essential and superfluous knowledge? When one assumes they know or understand a part of reality, what do they in turn reveal about how they do not know?

I am not interested in illuminating the hidden to reveal secret knowledge. Instead, the ways we do not know something can reveal how a performance proceeds or a symbol is used despite a lack of knowledge. I will attempt to experiment with a vocabulary that permits the characterisation of not knowing in different ways because “we can study and better understand processes of meaning construction but only in relation to already-constructed (sedimented) meanings” (Maines, 2000, pg578). One must devise a language to communicate with, in order to permit a discussion of how not knowing can function. I have chosen the term blind spot as it appears the most direct description for this research. A blind spot is like a boundary of knowledge that cannot be accessed easily, or at all, that manifests as a bi-product of interpreting meaning. An interpreted meaning often works with the blind spot rather than against it by informing individuals the baseline of knowledge required to interact. Blind spots are not exact measurements and differ in intensity depending on the interaction. Yet the term blind spot is needed despite its vagueness because “without measurement of some sort, the world would be a booming, buzzing and *undifferentiable* enigma” (Perinbanayagam, 1986, pg113). To better understand how one knows an acceptable way to interact, one must take into account what knowledge is not known. By questioning how one does not know, discussion can then turn to the processes of interpretation that permits the comprehension of social life.

The clearest starting point for addressing my conundrum is to identify particular blind spots evident in WoW. These have been chosen because the game normalises and even celebrates them at times. The main intention is to embrace these blind spots as a vital component of creating meaning. They are to be acknowledged and respected, rather than vilified or ignored. The blind spots in this thesis are:

- The Unknown Space – The unfamiliarity of a space that hinders your ability to read or interpret it effectively. It may also include the hidden aspects of a space that you cannot identify without experience. This is also susceptible to the passing of time as spaces can radically transform over the years.
- Uncertainty – A moment in time when all potential meanings for a symbol are still possible, effectively a starting point for actively negotiating meaning. Uncertainty is to be understood as a given starting point to most interpretive processes and while it has been discussed previously (Maines, 2000, Perinbanayagam, 1986), there is a general vagueness of how to apply the term to the process of interpreting meaning.
- Anonymity – Term given to individuals or groups with whom you do not have an intimate knowledge or relationship. What entails intimate knowledge changes for each circumstance. For example, in online games, intimate knowledge would be knowing the player behind the character on-screen.
- Hidden – Types of knowledge that cannot be deciphered during an interaction. An example would be the state of the offline world of the individual compared to their place in the online world. Instead, the hidden permits reflection of what **must** be known in order to interact as the hidden knowledge is inaccessible.

The curiosity lies in how these different blind spots overlap and interact in social life. Simultaneously, it feels reductionist to impose such descriptions upon something that cannot be known or bound. This presents an internal conflict, obviously I see the unknown as something worth considering in social life otherwise I would not be writing this particular thesis. However, in order for these descriptions of experiences and ideas to be relevant and understandable, I must translate them into something

that can be interpreted as scholarly by the reader. By applying these categories, I am selecting which ones I wish to write about at this moment in time. I have chosen the performance for this temporal interpretation of meaning. In the nature of performing, such meanings will shift with time.

By elucidating these terms, the dynamics of interpretation finally has a way of acknowledging the blind spots in meaning attribution. These often form a part of social life over which we have minimal control. An individual may choose to study particular facets of social life better so the individual can construct a character to collude with particular contexts. For example, one could get to know an individual or group intimately to counter the effects of anonymity. Alternatively you can learn how to behave in particular spaces, create a character that belongs to that context, so you are able to navigate them to minimise the unknown. The only two that remain as constants are uncertainty as it is a starting point to attributing meaning, and the hidden which can be elusive; those involved may have no inclination to ever reveal what is hidden. Rather than establish a way of removing these obstacles, perhaps it is helpful to consider them as factors that impact potential types of interactions. They can also be regarded as helpful ways of learning what knowledge is mandatory to learn for a form of life, and what is either superfluous or optional.

To further build on the process that allows us to use the unknown space, uncertainty, anonymity and the hidden in constructive ways I have selected the following terms to elaborate on the act of interpreting, character, context, performance and meaning. This will be further explored in the coming chapters predominantly facilitated by Dramaturgical Symbolic Interactionism and Wittgensteinian Language Games. Aspects of Symbolic Interactionism will be complemented by Totemism in how we come to organise the meanings of symbols, and *Rites de Passage* in how we

confirm that our interpretation of meaning meets the standards of a broader community (not just a guild). Language Games are favoured because they place meaning as the focal point of interaction. They rely on the use of a word, or symbol in this thesis, to impart meaning yet a language game does not seek to vilify the unknown. Instead a language game focuses upon how it is shaped through our interactions.

These keywords are selected because they acknowledge the existence interacting with incomplete knowledge. They focus on the temporal nature of interaction and how every encounter differs slightly, yet remains familiar through overlapping similarities through the presence of symbols that ground the interaction in a greater social context (Cohen, 1985, pg18). Meaning cannot be attributed until the symbols have been used during an interaction which defines their meaning for that performance (Wittgenstein, 1953, pg116, para340). A performance is a dynamic, not a static connection. The performance of the same story or play may share overlapping similarities yet they different performances always represent varied interpretations of the dynamic of character and context. The moment prior to a performance when all the possible meanings that can be attributed to the character and context are undecided is categorised as uncertainty. It is only through the temporal performance that uncertainty is controlled and shaped into logic or an explanation that appears logical for that performance.

An individual performs a character within a context to convey a language, a symbolic translation of themselves into a particular role. The character's identity is the point of interaction as it presents what needs to be known about that individual for that context in order to interact with them or "to assume an identity is to don the mantle appropriate to the account to be offered" (Scott, 1968, pg58). In same way that an

actor performs a role during a performance, a character relates to the roles social actors assume in order to navigate through particular interactions and contexts (Goffman, 1974, pg125-127). For Azeroth, the player's character is a translation of that player into the game so that the player can be understood as logical and acceptable to that context. Context is the other half of this dichotomy which relates to the setting of the social stage such as the stage itself, the props, the costumes, the basic script to interpret in a performance, the audience. Context is the game itself and all the complexities and expectations it prompts by the character being part of it. In a sense, a context presents the unique language the character is attuned to in order for an individual to navigate social life (Perinbanayagam, 1986, pg114). Character and context are not static either, as they equally influence and read one another throughout social performances.

Meaning is the product of a conscious, active negotiation that identifies the use of a symbol in connection to the immediate performance and a broader context that the symbol belongs to (Mead, 1934, pg336). By nature meaning is subjective as it is always in relation to the contexts in which it is used and the reactions to its use in a social situation. Should the overall process of performance be successful the meaning will then transcend to a symbol (Mead, 1934, pg76). Context and character are terms employed in this thesis to note how the dynamic of meaning can establish an awareness of how the interconnectivity of individual, community and society permits the existence of multiple meanings for a symbol without contradiction.

Meaning is negotiated every time according to the social performance that accompanies it. Both character and context are connected through the symbols they embody to better facilitate the negotiation of meaning during a performance.

To play a game is to play with meaning and the ways in which we interpret meaning. A game presents an opportunity to potentially challenge the ways we formulate meaning in response to symbols, as the fantasy associated with play presents an ideal medium to experiment with meaning during interactions (Fine, 1983, pg81). Thus the opportunity to study an MMORPG presents a suitable field to observe and partake in such transformations and developments of interaction. An MMORPG also normalises the types of unknown outlined because the focus points of the game are the characters of the player and how they play the game. It is true that you can join a guild to get to know the players behind the characters. However, it is equally possible to navigate this game without a guild. With the presence of pick-up groups (PUGs), players can be randomly collated into groups to tackle dungeons and raids. This game content is intended by design to be completed by groups of friends or guilds. However this is contradicted to an extent by the presence of the 'finder'² programs in later expansions of WoW, making guild membership an option rather than a mandatory part of gameplay. There is much research about how joining a guild impacts how players interact, but what of the players who choose to avoid such personal relationships? They appear to function in the game like the players of a guild, so how do you learn to play the game without a personal group to directly tell you what you need to know?

During my first log in, I was not part of a guild. I was lost and confused about what I was doing. The game did provide a basic and brief tutorial of what buttons of the interface did what and why a non-playable character (NPC) had an exclamation mark over their head. The specifics of WoW's gameplay and underlying narratives

² Finder – a program in WoW that allows players to find other players to complete certain activities such as Dungeon Finder and Raid Finder. There is also a Guild Finder, but that will not be directly addressed in this thesis.

will be given in a later chapter, what is to be acknowledged here is that even though I had never played WoW, I was recalling my experience of playing a RPG as they share similar fundamental gameplay, with the player building a character to fit a particular role that is acceptable to lore of the world the game is set in (Fine, 1983, pg7, 77, 81). As a result, a player can learn patterns of expected performances such as running errands for NPCs, slaying monsters and receiving loot for one's efforts (common in RPGs). Games such as these are also products of a post-market capitalist society, so the ways in which you build a character are driven by the variation of loot one can pillage from fallen foes or a dark dungeon, permitting one to also draw upon the experience of living in that society to negotiate the value of in-game commodities. The only reason I was at a loss of the nuances of WoW's symbols was because I had not yet acquired the specific systemic knowledge of the context conveyed through the symbols which then allowed me to effectively value the various commodities available to my character, and more importantly decide which commodities were valuable to the type of character I was building.

In RPGs, the character a player builds is pivotal to the experience they have and how they can react to the game world while playing (Fine, 1983, pp212-213). The relation between the player and their character will be interpreted as a translation. The resulting character is the product of the player translating their identity into the symbolic language of the game world. A character is embedded in the symbols of the game. They are part of the gameplay mechanics as well as the canonical lore of the game, so the player can actually engage with the game world and immerse themselves in it. At times it may be advantageous or put the player at a disadvantage based on the meanings attributed to a character's symbolic translation; at times some aspects of the game may be inaccessible as the character lacks the

skillset to achieve or complete the task at hand (Fine, 1983, pg212). The player can influence a character's abilities in the game as their knowledge of the game world permits the character to perform in a way that can be understood by other players as skilful or masterful for that particular build which is highly valued in collaborative game activities (Pearce, 2009, pp147-148). There are numerous ways to perform with character-builds, and the way a character navigates through the game is reflective upon how the player reads the symbolic code of the game, and the types of meanings derived.

The relation of symbol to meaning is not a simple, linear one either. Instead it is a complex relationship as numerous meanings can be regarded as logical to a particular symbol. It is the way in which the symbol is used that decides its meaning (Cohen, 1985, pg18). When groups or individuals communicate with each other, there is an underlying negotiation of a symbol's meaning, as each of the people involved directly with the conversation, event or experience must ascertain what possible meaning can be used in a way understood as logical and acceptable for that particular context (Wittgenstein, 1953, pg120, para355, 358, pg92, para221).

The active learning of meaning for a context occurs through interaction or a communicative language game, not limited to verbal communication, where the performance demands individuals to act and question their way through the possibilities of a symbol's meaning to shape uncertainty into familiarity (Cohen, 1985, pg16, Wittgenstein, 1953, pg6, para3, pg8, para7).

In order for the performance to be accepted, it must appear sincere to the individuals involved (Goffman, 1959, pg77). Experiencing the performance of a social event can drastically differ for each individual involved as the ways in which they personally attribute meaning, feel emotions and are knowledgeable not only of the

circumstances but the other social performers involved, can influence the possibilities of meanings an individual can learn about that context (Goffman, 1959, pg20, 67, 1974, pg445). Being aware of social performances is also confronting for an individual as they may unwittingly or purposely behave in a manner that categorises them, thus influencing the possible meanings that can formulate from a context (Goffman, 1963, pg35).

Methodology³

After careful deliberation I decided that the best way to study this virtual world of MMORPGs would be to actively engage with the game. An auto-ethnographic approach allows me to be in the midst of my research while analysing it. On a methodological level, auto-ethnography also complements Dramaturgical Symbolic Interactionist interpretations because ethnographically it “depends on an elementary principle: the homology between the social actors who are being studied and the social actor who is making sense of their actions” (Atkinson, 2006, pg402). Through active participation rather than just an observation, a deep awareness of interpreting meaning is revealed. By being part of the performance, one comes to learn how to create meaning by active learning. With this insight I intend to explore how I change from the clueless druid on the shores of the Echo Isles to a more competent player that can perform a character acceptably within the game’s context.

As noted in previous sections, I am intrigued by the process of attributing meaning through performances. This is made more complex by the presence of symbols and

³ Methodology will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 1 (pp77-86 specifically), because theory and method need to be considered together. As a result, I have chosen to write the literature review and the methodology as one chapter to better emphasise how one’s theoretical perspective shapes one’s choice in methodology.

how those present use them to navigate through the game. Simultaneously, I will be focusing upon how games like WoW both normalise and manage various social blind spots so that it is possible to play the game with incomplete knowledge of one's co-players. As a result, I intend to focus on situations without personal relationships, such as joining a guild⁴, so that I can preserve the anonymity and the uncertainty of playing an MMORPG. This will allow me to focus on how one learns to create meaning without being directly told what to know by existing groups in the game.

As mentioned in the previous section, the complexities of Dramaturgical Symbolic Interactionism for this thesis will be broadly understood as context and character. During my research I found these two terms became symbols in themselves. Context offers a point of relation that imparts social expectations of what is or is not acceptable for that situation. Thus a context embodies symbols that are unique to particular categories of knowledge that one may use during a performance to create certain meanings. This is theoretically complemented by totemism as the use of totemic species makes it possible to impart complex levels of meaning and logic in an elegantly simple way to any context (Levi-Strauss, 1962, pg16). Character accounts for the individuals and the various roles they assume to best facilitate the performance they are engaged with. A character is an embodiment of symbols and can shift from a passive part of the context to an active participant of a performance with ease. Language games complement character because they deal with the negotiation of meaning in relation to a context and that as each context varies,

⁴ I am not against the idea of being in a guild. It can be a really helpful way of learning about WoW. However, what I noticed from being in a guild which is not reported here is that even if there are 100+ members that is not a guarantee that you will find players who want to talk or play with you. This is another reason why I focus on dealing with learning about social life without direct guidance because collaboration among players who know each other is **not** a given in online games.

meaning must be negotiated each time in relation to present context thus permitting the existence of multiple meanings for the same symbol (Wittgenstein, 1953, pg6, para3).

Collectively, context and character are the components that create a social performance, and the labels I chose were not by chance, as they are terms that can be used easily in a theatrical setting that complement a Dramaturgical interpretation. Made popular by Goffman's theatrical frame⁵ (1974, pg125), this is when social life is understood like a theatre where actors perform on stage to an audience and the audience is not usually expected to interact, akin to an interaction occurring in a public place surrounded by people. The stage is utilised in conjunction with various props and costumes: symbols to prompt meaning. There is a backstage where rehearsals of roles and hidden details that ensure the performance function is kept away from the audience. All these combine for the purpose of conveying and sharing interpretations of meaning in relation to a specific performance (Goffman, 1974, pg125, 127). There is a presence of the unknown through the existence of a backstage and yet the interpretation of meaning still proceeds.

Significance

From traversing some of the literature available about online games and social scientific enquiry, it was frequently common to see earlier analysis from the 2000s focus predominantly on the example rather than the theoretical significance (Ducheneaut, 2004, 2007, Bessiere, 2007, Squire, 2002, Besley, 2010). Not to say

⁵ However, when Goffman wrote *Frame Analysis* he was progressing away from Dramaturgy and into what he eventually labelled the Interaction Order. Theoretically this order follows a more structured approach to interpreting meaning that loses ambiguity, which is a central part of this research.

that these examples were inaccurate in describing and analysing the virtual domain or that the quality of such research has not improved with time. Instead it serves as a reminder that analysis may be more insightful if theory from the researchers' academic backgrounds is incorporated into the observations rather than them becoming excited by a newer variation of socialisation. Regardless of whether one is from sociology, anthropology or psychology, so long as there is a form of life that exhibits interactions and behaviours we should be able to extensively research them using all the theories and methodologies we possess, refine and study. This is needed so that our wealth of knowledge can evolve with the introduction of new methods of interacting rather than shy away from them because we cannot decide how to comprehend them. Technology is rapidly integrating into our daily lives and is forcing a change in the way we communicate and socialise. Academia cannot ignore this facet of social interaction based on this idea that it exists in a virtual domain and is therefore out of sight in our physical reality, making it irrelevant.

I am not the first to make this observation; many researchers have been at the forefront of questioning how we regard the virtual world (Boellstorff, 2008, Taylor, 2006, Rowlands, 2012). But I will admit I was bewitched by the use of technology to complement social interaction. Once I immersed myself in actively playing an online game, I soon saw through my own foolishness as I began to identify behavioural patterns that were the same in physical reality. Just as the nature of symbols and meanings are relational to context, technology is a product of society and connected to our habits of sociality. From social networking sites to online games, these programs and specialised sections of the virtual world are not an alien frontier occupied by a superior race. They are the invention of our technology-focused society and free to access so long as you have the means and time to do so. More

importantly, virtual reality is shaped, influenced and populated by people from physical reality. So even though they may adopt an alternative identity, there is still a person controlling the programming and using it to navigate the virtual realm. Most of the culture and social understandings they possess are transferred to this realm so the ways in which online communities are organised and behave are exactly the same as the way they function in real life.

Such a claim can be refuted and argued against because of the presence of technology in these interactions undermines the formation of identity (Besley, 2010, pg13-14). This is due to the assumption that the digital identity created is a result of adhering to self-preservation to avoid potential cyber-bullying and harassment through the creation of false identities (Besley, 2010, pg20-21). However from my perspective this could be understood as the performance of a character that is deemed acceptable and logical for this context, although the prevalence of abusive behaviour in the virtual world is a problem that needs to be addressed. For this research, the creation of a digital identity is a valid performance of character that incorporates technology into the interaction. Akin to the interpretation of meaning, technology, in all its forms, is merely a tool that we can use for our own purposes and interests to navigate through social life. In its simplest form regardless of how much it changes, technology will always be a tool that has the ability to facilitate experiences, interactions and communities such as playing an online game.

Sadly this attitude persists beyond academic means, often appearing in sensationalist journalism and talk shows as moral outcry. The idea still endures that socialising through technology is “in some curiously unspecified way, less ‘real’ than any other experience of social interaction, self and community” (Waskul, 2003, pg23). The common concern present in such outcries is that when one chooses to

partake in virtual reality, one loses what it means to be human (Katz cited in Waskul, 2003, pg23). Usually such claims do not spend any time defining what they consider being human entails and often ignore the fact that people use technology in conjunction with their lives (Waskul, 2003, pg23). They are not stolen by strange machines in the night; they are still part of physical reality and socialise within it but may also enjoy socialising virtually. Criticism of virtual reality being less authentic as being a less authentic experience can be confusing. Predominantly this stems from a lack of clarification in how one defines such supposed authenticity.

As a result, social scientists cannot be discouraged to study these topics just because they occur in virtual reality. More importantly, social scientists should not be expected to downplay their extensive theoretical knowledge just because they are faced with a newer variation of facilitating social interaction. Throughout my thesis I aim to demonstrate that the ways players use online games and the way they interact through their characters is similar to the way we interact outside the game, by focusing on the negotiation of meaning to shape social uncertainty. This is achieved through the dynamic of character and context to perform social life. When each of the theories I have mentioned was conceived and developed, I doubt the original academics ever imagined these concepts being tied to virtual reality or possibly did not ever think technology would evolve to the point where a virtual reality is possible. However, that is an advantage of social sciences: theories are reflexive in a methodical manner, even updated when necessary, to meet the perspectives of the researcher and their interpretation of their observations, no matter the topic they are examining.

Recently, much insightful research has manifested about gaming. Kirschner's (2014) detailed exploration of gameplay as a semiotic domain opened discussion over the

socialisation of games between players and the NPCs or virtual denizens of the game world. Deterding (2013) has created an extremely detailed breakdown of framing, keying and comparative contrasts for modern games, allowing the theory to evolve to a new level through a contemporary context. Chen (2010) explored how players make sense of a game through belonging to a guild and working or not working as a group, and the social/cultural capital a game creates for the players to use. However, what I have noted is that in a methodological sense, there is an overabundance of understanding games through terms of belonging to a guild or a group of some form. There is an emphasis on how a game functions by what is observed yet seldom thought given to how one cannot know about the players around them. There is also little on how a player discovers a game world and how to attribute meaning in it as they play through it. In this observation, I have identified a potential gap that I can contribute to through my research. I chose to play solo to avoid being told by others how to read the game so I could identify what must be known to interact with this game and what is superfluous or unknowable.

Structure of Thesis

The thesis has been structured into six chapters, two of which are focused on setting the scene by examining Dramaturgical Symbolic Interactionism and how it is complemented by Language Games, Totemism and *Rites de Passage*. I will be using the design of WoW to provide examples of this relationship. The first chapter will provide a literature review of Dramaturgical Symbolic Interactionism which leads to using auto-ethnography as a way of observing how the theory functions in reality. The second chapter will focus on the existing theoretical discussion of virtual reality

followed by a contextualisation of WoW. The remaining four chapters will primarily show the auto-ethnographic accounts I have collected with each chapter focusing on a different social blind spot. This is not to claim that the blind spots are exclusive, they tend to appear collectively, but for the sake of interpretation I will be highlighting particular blind spots in each chapter. It will follow the order of anonymity, the unknown space, uncertainty and the hidden.

The first chapter is about the theoretical understanding of meaning, symbol and interaction, followed by a description of auto-ethnographic method. The logic behind this chapter structure is that method and theory must be considered together in order to communicate one's research and the researcher's perspective. Meaning is interpreted through the dynamic of character and context, which are theoretically based in Dramaturgical Symbolic Interactionism. As most variations of Symbolic Interactionism are focused on micro-interactions, an auto-ethnographic approach may be utilised to experience the use of symbols. However, other theories need to be considered such as Language Games, to illuminate the potentiality of meaning or hidden knowledge of an interaction, Totems, to permit the symbolic influences of structure in each interaction, and *Rites de Passage*, to allow discussion of power in interactions through the application of specific meanings. The chapter will start at Dramaturgical Symbolic Interactionism before building further on the notion of interaction with Language Games. The purpose of the transition is to attempt to describe the attribution of meaning in an abstract way. From there the discussion will move closer to the ways in which one performs in a game by focusing on the understanding of a skilful performance. Ultimately this chapter aims to demonstrate that symbols permit the capacity to interpret potential meanings with ease rather

than define meaning thus permitting and accepting the existence of uncertainty during an interaction.

The second chapter will construct WoW or Azeroth as a virtual world through examining how symbols are organised into complex networks of relationships. It will also build further specifically on how researchers have understood virtual worlds and cyberspace. A virtual world is a representation of social life with a technological barrier between what is known on-screen and what is not known off-screen, thus normalising blind spots in interactions. In WoW, anonymity is normalised by interactions focusing on the player's character rather than the player, the unknown space is celebrated as exploration to new lands is a central part of playing the game, uncertainty is common as players have little control over who they will be performing with and the hidden is overt because there is a physical barrier of a screen between the player and the context. As a result, players are free to experiment with their performances and character identities within the context of a virtual world. The result establishes a game world where social blind spots are normalised and even celebrated at times. By carefully considering the extensive evolution of Azeroth as a virtual world, one can better comprehend how the game's symbols have formed. After all, Warcraft as a series has a history starting in 1994 and has continued to evolve reflexively to appear as games, comics, manga, films, novels, tabletop games and card games. I will focus only on the game aspect of the franchise for this thesis. However, it is hard to overlook the complex relationships of meaning this franchise has created.

The third chapter will focus on anonymity and character by using four brief accounts to explore this relationship. A character is a socially acceptable representative of the individual within a context. Characters are created to comply with the boundaries of a

context and are influenced by structure so they often embody totemic symbols to notify those around them of how they belong in that context. Anonymity is a by-product of creating a character, as the character becomes the point of interaction instead of the whole individual. Each account demonstrates crossing paths with random players while logged in. Each time I knew nothing of their characters and yet I was still to interact with them to navigate through the performance. Instead, all I know of the characters involved were the totemic symbols they embodied rather than the identity of the players behind them. Levi-Straus' totemic species (1962) will be employed to elaborate on character identification through combinations of particular categories of symbols and symbolic species, so foundational knowledge of the broader context of Azeroth can be used easily. The example of symbol species relative to character includes race/faction, class/level, equipment, and achievements, which are used to evaluate characters at a glance. However the potential meanings the totemic symbols prompt are reflections of the acceptable logic of the context, thus establishing a clear relation between the character and the context to which they belong. The totemic symbols are ways of creating a character so the individual remains anonymous.

The fourth chapter will show how we navigate the unknown space and its relationship with context. Context creates boundaries of acceptable interpretations that are influenced by structure and embodied by symbols to be used in a performance. This allows a context to be identified as a place or non-place depending on how strictly upheld such boundaries are. The unknown space is a by-product of creating a context because the context defines the intended use of a space and the unknown space occurs when the performance does not comply with that intention or the performance of familiar meanings are challenged by the actions

of a character. Individuals may lessen the effects of the unknown space by experiencing and learning about a particular context, however their lack of knowledge will not omit them from a performance or the consequences of performing incorrectly. Most of Azeroth's regions can be regarded as non-places where the unknown space is more likely to manifest. This will be explored using a longer log-in that extended over two days where I navigated my character through a region of the game while levelling up. Auge's non-space (1995) will elaborate on place and space to define the categorisation of meaning for Azeroth's regions based on the activities they can facilitate. This has an impact on how character and context perform in the game. Curiously, the unknown space is revealed to be more elusive than I anticipated. Rather than being limited to space or place, the element of time is also crucial. Performances can stir revenants of the place's past when certain behaviours were more acceptable or expected. The unknown space in this way is revealed through interaction, it is not a simple matter of becoming familiar with a location.

The fifth chapter will focus on negotiating uncertainty in a situation where power is in flux during a performance, a dungeon run. In such places the mastery of a performance gives a player more power within a group as they demonstrate their skill at playing the game through a balance of meaning, uncertainty and power.

Uncertainty is the start of an interaction where all potential meanings are possible to interpret, meaning is the end of the interaction and power comes into play in decided which meaning should be dominant for that interaction. A *Rites de Passage* magnifies this dynamic because there are limited ways to perform in them which adds expectations for a performance to go a certain way or specific meanings to be interpreted. Power is often displayed in a *Rites de Passage* as characters may attempt to convince other performers to interpret similarly, this can lead to the

sabotage and sacrifice of a character in order to control the procession of attributing meaning. The dungeons of Azeroth have this effect because they are liminal periods that demonstrate how a player validates their character role within the game, thus reflecting how well they have built their character and understood their role in the performance. Characters are put to the test under controlled circumstances where they undergo an activity reminiscent of Turner's *Rites de Passage* (1979) in order to evaluate how effective their character is. This leads to players heavily scrutinising each other based on their understanding of the game's symbols, and possibly sacrificing the mistake through acts of sabotage. The stories that embody this theme will be focused on dungeon runs with pick-up groups or random assortments of players who have usually never interacted prior to the dungeon.

The final chapter will not shed light on the hidden, as to do so would destroy this blind spot. Instead it will seek to explain the imposition of an acceptable logic to the game world that allows one to create a familiar and understandable context that functions primarily through what is seen on the screen. The hidden often allows one to identify what must be known in order to interact by diverting the focus of meaning away from superfluous details. Hidden knowledge of social life makes it possible to interpret meaning as one must consistently create characters to navigate contexts and use symbols. To better understand how one understands social life, they may resort to different logics that are often simple and lacking complexity. As one learns more, the logic should develop and their use of symbols becomes more complex. As a result, seeking out the hidden is to play with meaning and to play is to question social life in fantasy representations of contexts and characters. This chapter will outline some of my earlier theoretical understandings of the game such as structuring Azeroth around narratives of post-market capitalism and urbanisation to

make it accessible to all. By using this as a starting point, I was encouraged to apply Symbolic Interactionism as it fitted better with my interpretation of 'play'⁶. In keeping with the process of negotiating meaning, one must observe how such symbols are used in order to learn the shaping of uncertainty into meaning and so an explanation of one's actions can be provided in hindsight (Wittgenstein, 1953, pg116, para340). This chapter is an odd meeting of my past notes and my present reflection on 'play' to establish that the hidden is not an unseen enemy. The hidden is almost encouraging in that it reminds one that there is always more to learn in social life and that is an incredible experience in itself.

Overall this thesis will use an MMORPG to emphasise a process of interpreting meaning that acknowledges the presence of blind spots and offers insight of how one manages them in social life. Anonymity, Uncertainty, the Unknown Space and the Hidden are never vanquished, only managed through the interpretation of meaning. I have chosen symbols and performances to explore these interpretations; however, I am confident that other explanations could be offered as well. The blind spots will always be part of the interpretive process because to interpret meaning means that there is a point when all possibilities of meaning are still viable. In turn, a blind spot can reveal the basic knowledge of a performance that must be known in order to progress to an acceptable level. In the absence of information, one can learn to fill in these blanks with experiential understanding of the context.

It is the performance, the interaction, that temporarily shapes these blind spots into a meaning that can be understood as logical and acceptable for that time. This performance is facilitated by the dynamic of context and character. Both parts of this dichotomy function by embodying symbols to be interpreted, prompting reactions

⁶ Play is more thoroughly conceptualised and interpreted in chapter 4 (pp226-230) and chapter 6 (pp304-312)

unique to a language of meanings. Through the language of meanings invoked by symbols, characters can relate to the context they are immersed in so they may be permitted to navigate through social interactions. When interacting there are possibility of meanings that manifest from reading symbols and the one that takes focus in a social performance has been interpreted collectively as most relevant to the context.

In the context of playing WoW, the ways in which player characters navigate through the game are mediated by the ability to create meaning from symbols which do not have a linear interpretation to a single meaning. Instead the game presents the potentiality of a collection of meanings and it is up to the player to recognise which meaning is the most appropriate for the context and the way in which they perform their character throughout the interaction. It is the character's responsibility to learn the possible meanings for symbols through interacting with others so they can actively experience how these meanings are relevant to the context. Despite the experiences they gain, they will never be free of blind spots for they are a natural part of the interpretative process and a bi-product of meaning.

Chapter 1: The Dynamic of Meaning and Symbols (Theory and Method)

Social blind spots allow us to play with the interpretation of meaning by interacting with symbols. Meanings are attributed to symbols through the dynamic of character and context during an interaction. It is through such performances that one can learn patterns of meaning and symbol that are crucial to understanding a way of life. This allows individuals to interact, regardless of whether they are part of a community or experiencing it subjectively from outside. With more experience, comes a deeper understanding of the nuances, yet it all begins with attaining a basic understanding of those symbols. Symbols are embedded within a context to aid the character by prompting various expected meanings to aid the process of validating a character's performance; however this is a dynamic relation as the character must be capable of interpreting meaning from the symbol in question (Wittgenstein, 1953, pp39-38, para70). Thus symbols, while a crucial component of context, permit characters the ability to interpret meaning rather than define meanings (Cohen, 1985, pg16). A character manifests a particular hierarchy of symbols to be interpreted. A context defining the meanings of those symbols influences their interpretation.

This chapter aims to show the progression of logic involved in the attribution of meaning that ultimately leads to my decision to use auto-ethnography. The

progression is as follows: a brief overview of Symbolic Interactionism that then goes into detail of Dramaturgy. To build further on the abstract machinations of meaning and performance I will use the concept of Language Games. Then there will be a more specific overview of how Symbolic Interactionists have understood play in a RPG, ending with the exact details of my auto-ethnography. The purpose of this chapter is to initiate a starting point, a theoretical understanding and method to accompany how we collaborate with blind spots. It seeks to present a theoretical foundation which embraces and accepts such blind spots as part of social life rather than ignoring them. It does so through interpreting symbols as reflective of the meanings from a society and reactive to how they are read by others; like a Wittgensteinian language game it is the use of the symbol that defines its potential meaning rather than the symbol itself (1953, pp37-38, para70).

The Grand Theatre of Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism arose between 1870-1940 in the context of the nature-nurture controversy that became apparent when intellectuals attempted to comprehend human behaviour and its possible links to scientific theory (Musolf, 2009, pg306). This methodology was developed as researchers sought to observe social interactions from a personal level rather than an outside perspective looking in. The theory behind this movement was to make it possible to observe the way individuals function in the environment of a society and respond according to various stimuli, much like the reflexive nature of a language game. This theoretical perspective has been able to contribute to most forms of social science due to its ability to combine “structural and institutional concerns of power, race, class, gender,

ideology and social organisation” (Musolf, 2009, pg308), or to allow sociologists to consider “the self, the act, social interaction, objects and joint action” (Blumer, 1969, pg62). The strength of Symbolic Interactionism from a sociological point of view is that it accepts the dualities that can exist simultaneously within all social activities like group and individual, society and sociality, acceptable and unacceptable acts, in a way that permits them to coexist despite contradictions. The theory is about the process; how potential meanings are drawn from symbols to interpret meaning from a social setting. They permit a degree of difference to coexist so the researcher can take note of the process of interpretation, rather than focusing on the end results of establishing meanings.

Superficially, Symbolic Interactionism can appear to be focused on temporal moments of social life that are disjointed and irrelevant to other moments as they superficially differ to the eye of the observer. That is due to a misunderstanding of the aspect of social interaction. Blumer states “social interaction is a process that *forms* human conduct instead of being merely a means or a setting for that expression or release of human conduct” (1969, pg8). The ways in which individuals react to the surrounding context, in all its variations, that permit meaning to be attributed to particular details of a context (Mead, 1934, pg121). Symbolic Interactionism is focused on the way those meanings are established and accepted, not the specific meanings drawn from an interaction. This has allowed Symbolic Interactionism to be applied to many topics ranging from social institutions, reflection of conceptual terms, stages of an individual’s personal development and social movements through various eras (Reynolds, 2003, ppv-viii).

As the name suggests the core elements of Symbolic Interactionism are symbols, the stimuli that trigger certain reactions in an individual and which are found

throughout society to allow the interpretation and creation of meaning. Symbols can come in many different forms such as behavioural, visual, verbal, written, sensory and physical that all prompt a definite or practised response when presented to an individual. Cohen states “Similarly with symbols: they do not tell us what to mean, but give us the capacity to make meaning” (1985, pg16). Most symbols are often very simple and prompt us to define complex ideas, much like the complexities of meanings found in Wittgensteinian language games (1953, pp36-37, para70). They allow a foundation of knowledge to exist and be shared among individuals in order appear to one another as similar. The existence of a symbol overwhelms the comprehensive interpretations attached to it and instead enforces what is acceptable in society, uniting individuals and groups. Symbols provide individuals with a method to create social boundaries for communities by establishing a point of relation that defines acceptable meanings; or at least meanings that appear acceptable.

To further comprehend the implications of learning how to interpret symbols there are three characteristics of a symbol that need to be outlined. The central characteristic relies on “the meaning of a symbol to be based on the agreement of a community of symbol users about what the symbol stands for” (Hewitt, 2003, pg310). The symbol has the potential to create meaning because they are somehow connected by the people who interpret them (Sidnell, 2012, pg307). Communication is a shared activity, so in order to be understood, both individuals and the group require a basic shared understanding, whether the process is conceived as a Wittgensteinian language game where groups of specific meanings are associated with a form of life (1953, pp6, 8, para3, 7) or a systemic organisation of metaphorical totems that permit a communal logic to be easily shared (Levi-Strauss, 1962, pp7, 11, 16). To reinforce a meaning or to establish a symbol so that it transcends to a

communal knowledge, it must be shared and understood as logical or acceptable for a specific stimuli or symbol.

The second characteristic is the way a symbol influences an interaction, that “symbols can be produced at will, regardless of whether the things or events they signify are present” (Hewitt, 2003, pg210). The metaphoric aspects of a symbol are brought to attention here, as symbols begin to morph from primary and secondary qualities of association to a meaning allowing them to be capable of transition according to the interpretations of those who wield them (Cohen, 1985, pp26-27, 37). For example symbols can often denote social boundaries, commonly to help define communal identities, and this is only possible due to the symbol existing in relation to another aspect of social life which simultaneously establishes the expected givens of the community the symbol defines (Cohen, 1985, pg58). This characteristic outlines the process a symbol goes through in order to be shaped and used as a method of interpretation. It allows individuals to autonomously evaluate the ways in which information is imparted to social experiences and be able to judge the empathetic nature of the encounter or whether it is acceptable or inappropriate.

Leading on from the process, the final characteristic relates to that which symbols can potentially become, forming “complex systems in which symbols stand for other symbols” (Hewitt, 2003, pg210). With this perspective symbols can transcend to a metaphor to allow familiar experiences to be applied to unfamiliar or new contexts to encourage interconnectedness of meanings (Turner, 1974, pg25). Theoretically a metaphor is metamorphic in that it is “a way of proceeding from the known to the unknown” (Turner, 1974, pg25); a metaphor permits the transfer of meaning from prior experiences and existing knowledge to temporal encounters where all knowledge may not be known. In essence, a metaphor or a symbol allows an

individual to make educated assumptions of the unknown based on their existing understandings of life. Individuals and communities can then use symbols to aid them when they are faced with the unknown because they can identify a myriad of symbolic variations relevant to a collection of meanings. By following this level of understanding most social experiences can be navigated in a way that is acceptable, logical and not regarded as disruptive or inappropriate through associated implications that denote the characteristics of an experience (Turner, 1974, pp29-30). The metaphorical application of symbols is also why symbols are allowed to take the forms of complex layers of meanings to be appropriately applied to whatever situation an individual or community faces. The symbols embodied by a character are not linear; it is the surrounding context that influences and alters the possibilities of interpreted meanings.

Despite the fact that symbols can take the form of any stimuli, not all stimuli automatically become symbols. As Parmentier notes, “Nothing actually functions as a sign unless it is to be a sign of some sort” (2016, pg4). Semiotic anthropology⁷ deals with the linguistic and non-linguistic appreciation of signs in how they impact the agency of the individual. With the example of language, Semiotics can be understood as “the value of a word is first recognized when one sets it against the value of neighbouring and opposed words. The word has meaning only as part of the whole” (Pettit cited in Perinbanayagam, 1986, pg113). Symbols are not an automatic given from interaction unless they are identified or valued as such by the individual (Perinbanayagam, 1986, pg113). This term is most notably shaped by Pierce and Saussure. Pierce focused on the individual’s role in linking sign and meaning, while Saussure separated the act of speaking and social conventions that influenced the

⁷ While I will not be delving fully into the literature of Semiotic anthropology, I acknowledge that it is a helpful tool in connecting the importance of interpretation and that it is a layered experience.

potentiality of meaning (Parmentier, 2016, pp2-5). Nevertheless they reinforce the importance of interaction in creating symbols and that attributed meaning is the sum of the individual, the community they are part of and social conventions (Parmentier, 2016, pp4-5). These approaches represent two sides of an interaction, one focusing on the character of the individual while the other is about the context that facilitates it. Both are helpful in understanding that without interaction, a symbol has no meaning.

To interpret meaning, one must interact with a symbol. To interact is to partake in an activity that “can be described as ‘acting-in-the-world’” (Kaptelinin, 2006, pg32).

Therefore, interactionism relates to the subjective and objective reports from an individual who has been created through a combination of personal experience and the interaction process (Denzin, 1992, pg2). It is not usually focused on a broader scale as insights are provided from personal interpretations of society. This process has the potential to reveal details about the individual and displays to what extent society, and the broader context, have influenced their response. It can also demonstrate the way other people interpret the same thing or whether they agree with the most popular interpretation which is commonly endorsed by the majority of people within a society (Cohen, 1985, pg16). This all connects back to the potential that symbols possess to either unite or divide people in social situations based on their interpretations or how well people understand the language game for that particular form of life through the application of meanings.

Broadly there are many symbols that signal various boundaries between what is and is not acceptable behaviour for a setting, environment or activity (Cohen, 1985, pp12, 16, 21, Goffman, 1974, pp41, 45-46). There are times when there are self-accepted restrictions such as obeying traffic laws for safe passage through an urban

environment. At the same time an individual may choose to recognise a symbol in a public space but disobey its meaning. This can reflect negatively on an individual's credibility, as they have abused the routine trust present in most societies (Goffman, 1959, pp77,168-169). An example Goffman refers to is workers in services trade, specifically the Shetland Hotel, where servers and customers would criticise and mock one another when out of earshot yet "when speaking to one another, staff and guests showed mutual regard and sweetness of temper" (1959, pg169). There is a duality in absence and presence; in how individuals negatively or positively regard each other when they perform together they uphold acceptable meanings of the context (Goffman, 1959, pg169). In order for symbols to function there is an underlying trust that everyone within the boundaries of a particular community or society will abide by similar meanings while performing. At times a misinterpretation can be life-threatening to an individual, but for the most part it damages their integrity and stigmatises them with a deviant label which isolates them from everyone else.

Underlying most interactions are overlapping similarities prompted by the existence of symbols. Cohen wrote "People construct community symbolically, making it a resource and repository of meaning, and a referent of their identity" (1985, pg118), which suggests that boundaries are related to the protection of interpretations from outsiders as the ways individuals relate to a symbol is important in order to be accepted by that community. From this perspective communal acceptance is not focused upon the performance of a particular role but the ability to *think* like the community (Cohen, 1985, pg12). An individual finds meaning in their relation with a community, they create a character to invoke desired understandings so they can navigate through that community in an acceptable manner (Cohen, 1985, pg12). These boundaries are not absolute because they will change with time as the

interpretations of symbols are considered from more perspectives. In contrast the importance of thinking like a community will not alter because it appears to be a fundamental component of socialisation; without it groups may not be able to form so easily.

Symbols can be attributed to a context in a similar manner to invoke a communal relation which bestows a passive reflexivity ingrained in their interpreted use. However passive reflexivity in interpreting meaning does not guarantee that the same meaning will be interpreted by an individual or that the same meaning is interpreted using the same method. Collectively the symbols of a context are shorthand ways to refer to complex interactions and reactions to particular stimuli because “these entities have each a character such that other sets of entities occur having the same characters and related by the same relation” (Ogden, 1927, pg58). By attributing character or meaning in this instance to particular symbols some interactions related to specific communal or societal knowledge can limit the potentiality of meanings and condition individuals into rationalising that a reaction has occurred due to a certain event transpiring. An example of this process was provided by Ogden in the form of lighting a match, the presence of a flame could be related to three possibilities, that when there is a scrape a flame will probably emerge, that the flame is a product of the scrape or both (1927, pg59). The three meanings appear as somewhat uniform in their logic of interpreting a flame, yet they have been achieved by reacting to the flame in different ways. Even though context may limit the potentiality of meaning, context does not always control the way an individual interprets the meaning.

This social theory allows the acknowledgement of both the influential aspects of larger communal or social interpretations of normalcy and the reflexivity of personal

experience by focusing on the process of interpretation through the relation of symbol to meaning (Reynolds, 2003, pg15). Notably this has been driven by the works of George Herbert Mead, particularly in how he defines the concept of Symbolic Interactionism as “Human behaviour is behaviour in terms of what situations symbolise” (cited in Reynolds, 2003, pg17). It is possible to regard the relation of symbol to meaning as linear and one-dimensional when it is deemed acceptable to do so by social constructs. Yet it is also plausible to regard a symbol as a complex set of variables that open up possibilities of meanings depending on society. The individual and their negotiation through various symbols locates a meaning that can be understood as accurate, acceptable or logical for that context and the people present at that time (Reynolds, 2003, pg17-18).

For characters to immerse themselves in a context, they need to react to its existence and by doing so meaning can be attributed. This is done to shape the existing uncertainty of which particular potential meaning is relevant for that temporal encounter. Prior social researchers have sought to explore this concept by attempting to identify a sole mechanism as the answer to our interactions (Mead, 1934, pg119). Yet by focusing on a single answer, the interconnection of meanings has been overlooked because in order to react there must be “a way of indicating characters of things which control responses, and which have various values to the form itself” (Mead, 1934, pp119-120). The act of engaging with the context creates a preferred result corresponding to the understanding of the individual and their place in the world (Mead, 1934, pp119-120). Symbols can be used to focus on certain meanings by drawing focus to particular relationships within an interaction. That specific relation can then be set apart from the context and react solely to that connection of meaning and symbol (Mead, 1934, pg121). The result leads the broad

notion of context, as opposed to structure, to be equally as interpretive and dynamic as the interaction it subliminally influences.

Introducing Dramaturgy

The use of a dramaturgical perspective in Symbolic Interactionism interprets meaning slightly differently; although it shares overlapping similarities with Mead's interpretation (1934) used to explain Symbolic Interactionism in the previous section. Goffman's work on performance and impression management is a solid starting place for theoretically comprehending a performance (1959). His perspective on performance, despite being separate from any formal school of the theory, relates to a dynamic and interactive conceptualisation of dramaturgy. Meaning from this perspective is not an automatic given from social structure or culture nor is it determined by biological categories: instead, meaning is actually the routine of human interaction that permits meaning to exist (Edgley, 2003, pg144, Perinbanayagam, 1968, Scott, 1968, Cohen, 1985). The malleability of temporal possibility coupled with the manner of expression or performance is the forefront of meaning, and the way it potentially is shaped by the components of interactions and experiences as an ongoing social phenomenon (Edgley, 2003, pg144). Dramaturgy is characterised by its temporality in meaning and that it adjusts these meanings with each performance, it does not attempt to create a universal meaning to be applied blindly as that can be easily defied (Mead, 1934, pg259). The process of expression or performance, as I have come to favour due to the works of Goffman and his dramaturgical metaphor wherein he relates the physical environment to the setting, the individuals to actors and interactions as performances (1959, pp90, 109-110,

1974, pg129), can be applied to social life regardless of superficial differences. A performance is not limited to a specific combination of culture, class, race, or any other combining factors; it occurs when we interact with one another. Performing an interaction and conveying meaning through expression is a central component of communication and sharing information about the world with each other (Edgley, 2003, pp146-147).

Using the metaphor of a stage to explain social life offers dynamism in the potentiality of meaning and the complexities of identity while focusing on a temporal social performance (Goffman, 1959, pp90, 109-110). Symbols also contribute to a theatrical perspective of society as they allow meaning to be constructed and expressed publically. Goffman states “Within the walls of a social establishment we find a team of performers who cooperate to present to an audience a given definition of the situation” (1959, pg231). Through an elaborate display of open expressiveness and making impressions, individuals can demonstrate familiarity and fulfil specific character roles in a given situation. They can manipulate these encounters to encourage people to believe that the role they are playing is genuine and that they agree with the circumstances. If a performer breaks character, the other participants will carefully put them back into the scene through communication, as it is usually crucial to underplay opposition to the performance to avoid conflict. However as I mentioned in the previous section, performances are complex with the opportunity for deception and secrets to maintain an illusion of acceptability (Goffman, 1959, pg 87, 90-91, 142-143). This results in performances becoming temporal, sensitive to change and reliant on which characters are present and how these characters relate to the context (Drew, 1998, pg67).

To elaborate further, Goffman describes society as a stage on which we are all performers just acting out our roles, usually in conjunction with a team of other performers (1959, pp90, 109-110). This divides the act of performing as a character into two parts; the first being focused on how the character engages directly with the performance and the second on how the character behaves as part of the general context like setting the scene of a stage (Goffman, 1959, pg110). The end result is to “give the appearance that his activity in the region maintains and embodies certain standards” (Goffman, 1959, pg110). Characters can be regarded as an active participant or part of the context as another symbol from which to derive meaning. Despite the experiences and past rehearsals that may have gone into crafting that character, a successful social performance is “being an unintentional product of the individual’s unselfconscious response to the facts in his situation” (Goffman, 1959, pg77). The skill of a character is decided by how well they interact with a context; that they are normal and acceptable by the standards of that context. Characters, like those found in WoW, are constantly combining and differentiating between personal identity and specialised functions or roles in order to navigate through contexts (Goffman, 1974, pg129). Overall, characters are strongly based on the feedback from peers and bystanders as they rate their performances to inform whether or not they are successful in the role in relation to the context.

Much like a stage, there are metaphorical boundaries within and outside a character in order to perform effectively. These boundaries are divisions within a context that influence ways of understanding the stage itself, the public, the back stage and the individual. Such boundaries offer an interdependence of self and society where they both need one another in order to function (Edgley, 2003, pg149). Behind the main stage in rehearsals an individual may practise their acting to ensure they uphold

social expectations and standards so their performance is acceptable. An interaction is regarded as both a personal and shared experience because “when we interact with others, we are not solely attending to the particular topic of the interaction but are also assessing how those others respond to us” (Gottschalk, 2010, pg515). A performance is understood simultaneously with different perspectives from the individual to the broader context that facilitates it. In turn, a single performance has the ability to attribute a myriad of meanings to help comprehend incomplete knowledge. This creates an active interpretation of structure (or context) where the surroundings are reading and reacting to the presence of the performers. In turn, the performers are testing their abilities to comply with that context’s description of logic. Both sides are reacting to one another, leading to diverse interpretations of the same symbols. This embraces the fluidity of comprehending meaning as any interaction has greater impacts than just the immediacy of the performance.

If dramaturgy presents the acknowledgement that aspects of social life are active participants in the interpretation of meaning, then how do we synthesise that overwhelming abundance of knowledge into something comprehensible? That too can be found in the qualities of a performance. While a performance can present our surroundings as active participants through the symbols they embody, it can also present a way of reflecting on how we use such symbols. Bauman (1990, pg60) comments that “Performance rather provides a frame that invites critical reflection on communicative processes”, i.e., the reflection occurs with the deconstruction of how the performance made sense. From there one can surmise the influencing factors of the surroundings, the way performers behaved and how these two combined to create meaning. Like applying a focal lens to social life, by studying a performance, one has the potential to uncover a lot of hidden or unspoken meanings in the

mundane (Bauman, 1990, pg61). By focusing on what is not directly acknowledged, one can potentially learn how performers navigate alongside the blind spots.

Alternatively, performance can be a description of one's actions in a semiotic domain. Such domains are understood as "any set of practices that recruits one or more modalities (e.g. oral or written language, images, equations, symbols, sounds, gestures, graphs, artifacts, etc) to communicate distinctive types of meaning" (Gee cited in Kirschner, 2014, pg22). When an individual performs in a context, they are in turn displaying what they have learned in the semiotic domains they have encountered (Kirschner, 2014, pp22-23). More importantly, a performance reveals how individuals of different semiotic domains use the same symbols to communicate diverse meanings (Kirschner, 2014, pg24). The potentiality of meaning is then decided by which semiotic domain is dominant and the capacity of the individual to comply with that domain. From here, performance can be understood as the following components: the individual's character that communicates the interpretation of meaning; the context that presents the potential symbols for interaction, and the interaction or negotiation of meaning among individuals. Each individual represents their knowledge of semiotic domains and their sensitivity to acknowledge which one is in play for that time. The only way for an individual to improve their ability to read different semiotic domains is to be socialised into them (Kirschner, 2014, pg24).

When considering an individual's character in a performance, they must first recognise the role they are playing in a given situation. If you are to reflect on the concept of self you have to see yourself from the perspectives of others. An individual can only define themselves by the way other group members react to them, they then choose to either focus on the opinions of specific individuals or a

generalised shared view (Branaman, 2001, pg169). Once an individual has realised their role in the social activity they then can attempt to perform accordingly, whereupon this performance is judged by their peers and themselves. Goffman explains social encounters or interactions as “the reciprocal influence of individuals upon one another’s actions when in one another’s immediate physical presence” (1959, pg26). This narrows what social activities can be interpreted as an interaction and sets boundary between the actors and the audience; active and passive parts of a performance. It also acknowledges that the level of information and context about a social interaction is limited or enhanced by one’s level of participation and past knowledge of the performers. This reinforces the character in a performance whether openly chosen or enforced by the interpretations of their peers (Goffman, 1959, pp28-30). The variation of characters in an individual’s repertoire depends upon the influence of other performers in their presence and setting of the scene. When one is familiar with the performers one is aware of the range of characters they can play to an acceptable degree, whereas if one does not know them, one will take the character one interacts with as their main identity.

The meanings of an individual’s characters are never disproven, they are only altered or lost to the audience and actors’ focus so they fade to the background that creates an interpretation of reality (Edgley, 2003, pg148). When differentiations in meaning come to light, this can be constructed as deception, because dramaturgy focuses on the performance of social life as a whole rather than focusing on a particular aspect such as verbal communication (Edgley, 2003, pg146). This is further elaborated by thinking about the individual and “the expression that he gives and the expression that he gives off” (Goffman, 1959, pg14). Interpretation in social situations is not limited solely by how the individual expresses themselves, it is also

influenced by how others regard the expression they perform which can lead to misunderstandings, negotiations over which meaning is viable through a language game, resorting to a systemic knowledge as a guide of how the experience can possibly proceed and the validation of an individual's expression of a meaning given that other individuals can derive the same meaning from it.

A theatrical perspective of social life also presents limitations, most of which stem from a lack of moral direction or motives that neatly explain the performance (Edgley, 2003, pg150). However, as I have stated in previous paragraphs it is the process of performance that is central to dramaturgy so the implications of using this perspective solely for deriving a concept like motive is a poor fit given they are attempting to study differing aspects of interaction. It is like comparing questions that start with 'How..?' to those that start with 'Why...?' or 'What...?' as they elicit different explanations of the same thing. Yet a lack of scholarly alignment can give the impression that dramaturgy is not a theory after all, which it formally is not as it does not possess an associated formal, linear, theoretical vocabulary (Edgley, 2003, pg150). Dramaturgy is often defined by an underlying theoretical perspective such as symbolic interactionism, social psychology, ethnomethodology and many other facets of social sciences. It is through these theories that dramaturgical observations can be expressed academically in a variety of ways, depending on the background of the researcher (Edgley, 2003, pg150). For the most part these challenges are misled because in the circumstances of criticising a lack of formal methodology or concepts it implies "that there is, or should be, a proper, unitary move of studying human behaviour and knowing when you have it right" (Edgley, 2003, pg150). Academically this could be interpreted as a scholar attempting to control their field

through the power that comes with a tightly formulated methodology, thus compromising the potential observations they can make of the field.

Dramaturgically, power in social life whether it is being exerted by a scholar in the field or through an institutional arrangement can be read as relative to which meanings are dominant for that temporal performance or how the social actors interpret it. An individual crafts their character in reaction and relation to a context which “requires a conception of structure to show how the actor forms his or her conduct against certain institutional and organisational backdrops” (Edgley, 2003, pg153). Similar to a lack of formal methodology, critics take umbrage with a lack of formal concepts to dramaturgically regard institutional arrangements and social structure (Edgley, 2003, pg153). This can be interpreted as a misunderstanding because “rather than dwelling on the structural limitations and enhancements of the interaction order, as many critics do, dramaturgy focuses on what people *do* with the contexts that *are* available to them” (Edgley, 2003, pg153). Such contexts do not manifest from a world alone as it cannot speak directly to us and instead needs translation into a language of tangible meanings (Rorty, 1989, pg6). Contexts are actively built by groups and communities to form the institutions of societal structure, so in order to interpret a specific performance the dramaturgist is also aware of the broader society that contextualises the interaction (Edgley, 2003, pg153).

The lack of formal boundaries and methodology permits dramaturgy to become a dynamic scholarly perspective to describe social life accessible to all rather than an elite few (Edgley, 2003, pp151-152). Marvin Scott responded to such criticisms of inadequate and incomplete methods by stating that dramaturgy’s strength lies in its undivided observations of social life and the complex relationships and interactions it entails (cited in Edgley, 2003, pg152). The lack of sentimentality, as Scott refers to it,

towards a specific hierarchy of methodology “enables us to talk about ideas normally repressed, or at least not normally mentioned. Through a language that depicts life as theatre, the dramaturgical perspective illuminates the dark secrets of society” (Scott cited in Edgley, 2003, pg152). For this thesis, dramaturgy is a chosen language to explain the interpretation of meaning because the act of interpreting meaning is so complex and relational that it is difficult to explain with a static or formally bound theory. Instead it must be understood relationally in its temporality while acknowledging all prior socialisation that cultivated the individual’s comprehension of the context in which they find themselves, so they can navigate through it by performing as a relevant character.

Dramaturgy does not produce universal statements to generalise social life as some other theories do. By nature dramaturgy is biased to the situational nature of social performance; it permits uncertainty to exist in social life as an acceptable part of socialisation. It does not remove uncertainty in favour of neat theoretical explanations. The resulting critique is that due to the specific contexts of each interaction, such observations cannot be relevant to others (Edgley, 2003, pg150). More specifically, the critique suggests that dramaturgy only complements the situational behaviours common in the Western world and therefore is irrelevant to other cultures or societies (Edgley, 2003, pg151). Such a critique is perplexing, possibly stemming from a more linear and positivist interpretation of social meanings, as a similar critique of a lack of overly specific criteria requirement is attributed to Wittgenstein’s language games (as discussed by Chihara, 1965, pp286-287, Bogen, 1993, pp56-63). The similar critiques resonate with the focus of dramaturgy, symbolic interactionism and language games as they are about the process of attributing meaning or how we navigate through day-to-day life.

Navigations are possible through an interconnected exchange of meanings in relation to contexts. Neither critique is specifically tied to a particular culture even though they may have originated from the Western world (Edgley, 2003, pg151).

To elaborate further on this criticism, it also claims that there are no connections between meaning and experience as discussed by Chihara (1965, pp286-287) and Bogen (1993, pp56-63). This arises from confusion between commonality and similarity when making comparisons. Wittgenstein defines similarity as overlapping familiarities between situations that allow individuals to draw comparisons when interpreting meaning; this permits a reflective ideal as familiarities do not have to be exactly identical when manifesting in reality (Wittgenstein, 1958, pg87). Whereas commonality speaks to the presence of a single, universal quality that statically reproduces throughout reality; this encourages a more positivist interpretation because the quality is not allowed to be dynamic (Wittgenstein, 1958, pp86-87). The circumstance in which this criticism would hold power would be if the researcher was defining the interconnectedness of meaning through commonality. However, as demonstrated throughout this section, dramaturgy and symbolic interactionism favour similarity as opposed to commonalities because they conceptually complement the dynamism of symbol and meaning during an interaction.

Another concern from critics of dramaturgy is regarding its' "no specific, systemic method of testing its propositions about the world" (Edgley, 2003, pg151). This critique can give an expression of misplaced concerns because many qualitative or ethnographic methods do not possess an empirical measurement to evaluate whether the topic of study can be labelled as correct. It is an arbitrary alignment given the potentiality of meaning that can be derived from symbols and expressions of social performance, a topic I have sought to tackle in this section. Whether a

dramaturgical method of testing responds as correct, whatever that may mean, is not necessarily relevant to understanding people. As we navigate through social life we can learn to be sensitive to the power of our performances on the social stage because “being sensitive to the expressive dimension of behaviour demands no special methodology” (Edgley, 2003, pg151). It is meant to be a perspective that allows the researcher to express aspects of social life that may be repressed or regarded as mundane by certain contexts and therefore not worthy of mention in scholarly writing (Edgley, 2003, pg152).

Overall, Symbolic Interactionism and Dramaturgy are challenging to academic methodology because it appears that synthesis is pivotal to its relevance. The idea of synthesis is present in all forms of producing knowledge where “philosophers like to suggest that science is cumulative, that over time, findings build to support conclusions” (Best, 2006, pg473). While this commonly takes the form of literature reviews and studying the past (Best, 2006, pg473), for a Symbolic Interactionist this is acutely present in each ethnographic description. As each interpretation of a symbol varies on its use, every time a researcher observes the use of that symbol, it is prone to change before their eyes. The interpretation of meaning happens at a rapid pace and each change is noted. This is not to discredit the other theories: all forms of academic pursuit possess synthesis. My point is that when the focus is upon symbols and performance, these changes are much more obvious which contributes to the ambiguous nature of Symbolic Interactionism methodology. It is up to the researcher to build conclusions but there is a deeper understanding that synthesis, the accumulation of knowledge, occurs frequently in daily life so it can be unhelpful to place such constraints on how one can approach it.

To Play Games with Symbols and Meaning

No symbol or meaning is static, as interaction is an imperative aspect of Symbolic Interactionism. The ability to communicate on a communal level perpetually evolves to facilitate the shared interests and knowledge of that social group, for it is the embedded and shared knowledge which permits symbols and meanings to hold relevance to that community (Prus, 2003, pp31-32). Wittgenstein elaborates on the nature of reflexive meanings when explaining the process individuals use to associate symbols and meanings as a process that is learned with time to allow different combinations of symbols to attribute to the same meaning or a variety of meanings that can be connected to a symbol (1953, pp38-39, para72). A by-product of learning is that interaction is focused on surmising which meaning is relevant to a particular variation of a symbol, often defined by receiving feedback from whoever is part of the interaction (Wittgenstein, 1953, pp37-38, para70). Symbols and in turn their meanings adapt to the needs of the individual or community that wields them. The relation of symbol to meaning is focused on the possibility of meaning and the ways these meanings are negotiated in a performance to decide relevancy to a context.

The focus on context is pivotal because a character, the persona an individual performs, can only create meaning when in a temporal interaction, during which time a symbol is formed as it is being acknowledged and interacted with thus giving it meaning (Parmentier, 2016, pp4-5, pg42, Ogden, 1927, pg21). To simplify, no meaning can be derived unless a character possesses the ability to interpret it from a context. Symbols and by extension the contexts they manifest in offer what is understood by language games as “objects of comparison which, through similarities and dissimilarities, are meant to throw light on features of our language”

(Wittgenstein, 1953, pg56, para130). Structure becomes embodied in a context of the interaction as a way of learning to perform. It is a difficult task to undergo as performers must learn “the use of heterogeneous stylistic resources, context-sensitive meanings and conflicting ideologies” (Bauman, 1990, pg60). All these aspects unite in a performance which in turn illuminates the relationships between them and the potentiality of meaning they prompt. It is not an arena of structure, but a critical focus of how we have come to attribute meaning through interaction (Bauman, 1990, pg61). Structure is acknowledged as part of the context rather than a dominating component separate from context.

Wittgenstein preferred to understand context as a criteria that helped existing knowledge guide the direction of a language game and the essence of meaning (1953, pp5-6, para1-3). He states “In this picture of language we find the roots of the following idea: Every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with a word. It is the object for which the word stands” (Wittgenstein, 1953, pg5, para1). The ways he elaborates on language games throughout *Philosophical Investigations* tease out the nuances of this initial sentence and what he omits at the beginning is that “we have so far said nothing whatsoever; unless we explain what distinction we wish to make” which speaks to the complex idea of the possibility of meaning depending on how an individual characterises the word of a language to then apply this meaning to the world around them (1953, pg10, para13). Power comes to the forefront as those who actively use a particular language of meanings have the ability to shape how these meanings manifest. How meanings are applied to criteria is reflected by which interpretation of language the individual holds and how they learn alternating possibilities of meaning. For the sake of the research’s context, a language game extends beyond linguistic concerns to include symbols and non-verbal

communication. With this development, any sequence of stimuli that can be interpreted has the potential to become a language, and by extension a language game.

There are scholarly concerns that Wittgenstein's theories are not as cohesive as first assumed. Language games are hypersensitive to various social contexts which makes them quite insular and inaccurate in examining social phenomena as there is no possibility for different dialects to have shared contexts (Bogen, 1993, pp56-63, Chihara, 1965, pg286). The ability to judge the application of a language game as correct is to perform it so there are no empirical correlations but rather a need for preexisting criteria to allow the evaluation to occur (Chihara, 1965, pg287). When there is no preexisting criteria or experience it is not possible to evaluate whether the language game is being used accurately. While this is a valid concern, it can be managed by considering language games as a social framework that can be alternated, overlapped and drawn upon by an individual. The collective experiences of an individual are unique to them. Prior logic, as presented by critics cannot exist as we can only learn explanations in hindsight. So by that criticism, no one should be able to interact as we are all speaking different language games with no prior criteria to know which languages, symbols and meanings are applicable. Yet we still interact because an individual can recognise similarities between different contexts and attempt to perform in an acceptable way, in turn learning from the feedback of others (Hacker, 2012, pg32). It is not the mastery of a language game that allows individuals to function in society, it is the way a character learns to utilise the language game in various contexts that make the individual relevant.

Further concern about language games arise from their relativistic character. A language game can explore the various applications of a word or rule but does not

allow one to focus on the effect of the meanings it potentially imparts and there is no guarantee that relevant criteria will exist. Epistemologically, a relativistic approach is ineffective as it does not allow a correlation to be established and discourages the fundamental interconnectedness of meaning by ignoring external influences to groups and individuals (Lynch, 2005, pp161-162). There is no way to formally determine different ways of life; as Lynch states, “there is no reason to believe that communities are cohesive in the sense of depending upon ‘shared’ rules of understandings” (2005, pg163). This is a valid point because no ethnographer can accurately state that cohesion is a by-product of consensus. Yet there is still recognition that meanings evolve and shift by performed agreement (Lynch, 2005, pg163). Perhaps what epistemologists neglect is that no language game truly ends, they merely shift in function and meaning according to the relevance of the situation, language games form a dynamic and creative process that keeps evolving privately by characters and actors to be applied publically in contexts (La Licata, 2012, pg4, Da Silva, 2012, pg85). A variety of language games can coexist, like in WoW, it is merely the context that allows players to decide which one takes focus and which character to perform.

For an epistemologist, language games can be puzzling and regarded as vague, insular and dependent on too many specific variables to be relevant. Perhaps that is because the games have been understood as a concept rather than a process, as a language game is not a rigid, clear, neat set of descriptions, it is “a medium or form in which the criteria of real and unreal appear and in which speakers make reality claims and express beliefs with respect to what is true and false” (Gunnell, 2009, pg609). A language does not have the luxury of neat boundaries to follow, even logic or what we assume is logic are merely words arranged to appear exact and

definitive. They adhere to particular expectations of what we have learnt to understand and assume as logical (Galvez, 2012, pp56-57). The purpose of language games is not to destroy the idea of being logical or methodical when regarding social life, instead the concept allows the ability to see numerous perspectives of the same experience so the social scientist can identify various opportunities for social theory to manifest in reality, and be understood and represented methodically in academia. After all, academics are people who play with the meanings and applications of their words.

When meaning is organised by context, the two create relationships of ideas to be conveyed through language games, in turn the language game decides the use of the symbol at that time. A shared way of communicating during performances allows individuals to interact. The use of symbols then follows a basic pattern, "(1) a Sign which (2) refers to a Place and (3) is being interpreted by a person" (Ogden, 1927, pg21). From here we see the transformation of a language from just symbolising references to being capable of conveying specific purposes that usually correlate to an individual's understanding of a context (Ogden, 1927, pg16). This process persists throughout Peirce's terms of sign, object and interpretants which are used to explore the progressive evolution of reality (Parmentier, 2016, pg122). Linguists and researchers have sought to understand these components independently to better observe their characteristics before combining them to complete their analysis (Parmentier, 2016, pp122-123). The same could be said here where I am focusing on character, context and symbol as components of a performance. In turn a performance allows one to interpret blind spots to surmise what must be known on a basic level in order to interact.

Describing meaning is a tough challenge as it remains mostly abstract and only revealed as incomplete pieces through our actions. A by-product of interaction are blind spots, parts of a performance that are unclear or unknown. One then uses their knowledge of language, symbols, character and context to provide the knowledge concealed by blind spots in order to surmise an acceptable interpretation of what they have experienced, or more accurately a description of what they have experienced. “If people act on the basis of meanings, of what they define as real, then meanings must be at least subjectively real, and are *realised* through action” (Kirschner, 2014, pg51). From this position, every individual carries their own understanding of reality which has been shaped by socialisation and experience. It is when an individual communicates or interacts with others that they externalise their internal understandings, the result of which is meaning. The difficulty arises from the amount of information we lack or cannot assert with confidence, taking the forms of uncertainty, anonymity, the unknown space and the hidden. When knowledge is limited by blind spots, an individual draws upon their understanding of reality and based on the reactions of the other people present and the environment around them. These actions coalesce to create meaning which presents a description of what is perceived to be real.

Performing Skilfully in a Game

Games, like World of Warcraft, are useful for observing the significance of symbols because they create a separate reality with numerous outcomes for the players influenced by “a small set of interdependent rules and practices” (Goffman, 1974, pg5). A game and the players’ interactions directly influence the resulting experience

they have by their ability to obey the rules or perform the various activities. However there is no guarantee that anyone is capable of interpreting all possible meanings as they all interpret them differently because context also includes “the organisation of experience – something that an individual actor can take into his mind – and not the organisation of society” (Goffman, 1974, pg13). In WoW, fellow players may not always share the same experience, as they have varying levels of intensity and interest in the matter but nevertheless have the ability to engage with an experience in game (Hage, 2002, pp193, 200-201, 205). The ability to comprehend experiences allow individuals to create meaning, learn new interpretations through such an experience and define social activities regardless of whether it is from active participation or observation.

Within the fantasy of playing an electronic game, player characters are subjected to an illusion of choice, in that they are not completely without boundaries in how they play a game. The game’s context ensures that characters adhere to an order, a tangible logic to justify their performances in relation to the context to which they are reacting. Ultimately they fall into the pattern of play that allows achievements and progress for that particular game (Nardi, 2010, pp39-41, 102-103, 115-116). In this circumstance, Blizzard decrees the gameplay mechanics of WoW which outline acceptable interpretations of characters and contexts. These mechanics appear logical and unquestionable because most players are living in a similar social structure outside the game, assuming they are familiar with or immersed in a western capitalist structure. The various rules are already grounded with a definite meaning which translates to shared meanings of how to play the game in an acceptable way.

There is an assumption of logic because firstly, players are anonymous with only their Azeroth characters to represent them, making communication impulsive and temporal, relying on assumption (Pearce, 2009, pg140, Isabella, 2007, section2.1-2.2). Such anonymity allows the rules to transcend to a state of symbolism to immediately establish complex understandings at a single glance, allowing individuals to perceive that they are united by a common knowledge, a logical way to play the game. The rules have been adapted into a dialect, a condition of normalcy: as Wittgenstein stated “When I follow the rule, I do not choose” (Wittgenstein, 1953, pp91-92, para219). A rule is a meaning that invokes acceptability, and the only way to determine if it is being followed is to examine its application to the context, rather than the rule itself (Lynch, 2005, pg144, Keucheyan, 2012, pg70). With this understanding, any type of rule is like a broader social script that reinforces the assumption that this is something that will not change and will always be the same unless decreed by context. A rule is not usually challenged because the decision of how to perform socially in an acceptable manner has already been decided beforehand.

In Azeroth, a rule provides a sense of the game and how the game is intended to be played from Blizzard’s perspective. As demonstrated throughout the various accounts, players have a complex understanding of the game and use it to the best of their abilities which leads to many different interpretations. In this light, the dialect of rules is dependent on the interpretations of the players and then validated by success of the performance. Like all symbols, this also allows an opportunity to deviate from the intended meaning of the rule. Wittgenstein follows his previous quote with “My symbolic expression was really a mythological description of the use of a rule” (Wittgenstein, 1953, pg92, para221). While it is unclear as to how one

speaks mythologically, it has been theorised that the way in which one speaks of obeying a rule is similar to how plans and expectations are discussed (Das, 1998, pg176). When applying this interpretation to the situation of playing a game, rules are symbols of the assumed progression of the game and the expectations of the experience. Upon reflection, the validity of the rules used to justify a performance imposes whether the game occurred in an acceptable way.

This transcends the rules to a language game, a way of speaking about the specific game and the types of play it entails. When rules are regarded as a dialect, they are also open to interpretation which allows individuals and groups not only to utilise these rules but to perform a different interaction based on them. The validity of an interpretation is up to the understanding of the individual and how they choose to partake in language games, whether or not they accept that language game rather than whether they can explain its machinations (Dinishak, 2014, pg69). This can result in conflict between players when it is unclear as to what language game is dominant in the current situation or a player's assumption of what is logical is defied by the players around them. The resulting language games are constantly shifting and evolving on the whims of those who use them and the contexts to which they are applied. Rather than examining a game wholly as a static structure, it is the construction that is crucial. Language games cannot exist in a vacuum, they need to synchronise with a form of life in order to be appear logical and therefore acceptable (Wittgenstein, 1953, pp5-6, para1-3). The ways players use the game then translates into symbolic rules that are dependent on interpretation and a language game in order to share these interpretations.

By being familiar with the potentialities of a language game players use to convey their interpretation of the game, players can potentially turn play into a more serious,

mundane routine. The severity of a player is performed in how skilful they are at the game which is reflected by their performance of a language game with other players and the game itself. Learning a language game and demonstrating they have learnt it is based on the correct application of that language game. Whether they fully understand every piece of its meaning is irrelevant as it is the performance that validates one's understanding (Dinishak, 2014, pg71). In WoW, the leisurely connotations of play are often used as a reason for explaining or defending a disparity in player skill level when confronted by another player which speaks more to the problematic cultural understanding of what it means to invest one's time in playing an MMORPG (Snodgrass, 2014, pg481). The common cry of "It's just a game, don't take it so seriously" came to light frequently while logged in, when players clash over differing interpretations of meanings or various language games overlap in the same context leading to confusion over the acceptable way to behave. This draws a distinct categorisation between serious and frivolous which alludes back to the individual regard to work and play that has shaped their language game for Azeroth. This attitude is perplexing as the narratives that give the game logic are reminiscent of aspects of capitalism and the ways in which players communicate and perform identities mimic reality. Yet there still appears to be a bias or pejorative judgement towards gamers as socially inadequate because they choose to play games as portrayed by mainstream culture, which seeps back into Azeroth when players disagree with one another (Snodgrass, 2014, pp481-482, 484). Therefore, the game is actually much more serious than originally assumed, yet it is still regarded as mindless play when a language game deems it so to be.

There is no concise definition to help categorise play, and yet in interactions and experiences individuals and groups can be playing and then suddenly stop. Play

appears to be fluid and impulsive, even spontaneous and creative during interactions. Such creativity rapidly shifts the way we establish meaning as we can turn the mundane into a temporal fantasy. This elusive quality suggests that play may not be a suitable concept for social analysis as Huizinga alludes to throughout *Homo Ludens* (1950). Play does not appear to have a true essence to be conceptualised. As the following chapters will explore, play is too fluid and shifts drastically in its meaning with each context it manifests in, even within Azeroth. There are too many boundaries and exactness unaccounted for when attempting to explain it not because of ignorance, but more in tune with how we use play in our language (Wittgenstein, 1953, pg37, para68-69). Instead play can be regarded as a process and relational constituent part of reality that allows us to construct meaning, a key aspect of the language games we are immersed in (Wittgenstein, 1953, pp32-33, para57-59). Therefore, attempting to apply a static list of criteria is futile as it will share little semblance to application in daily life. Instead, it may be more accurate to regard play as a language game, a way we talk about particular dispositions and activities rather than a limited concept or theory.

The conundrum of attempting to label play as a social concept to analyse originates from the use of language or from within a language game. Mistakenly, it is common to assume the ways in which we label qualities of social life in that “They must have something in common, or they would not be called games” (Wittgenstein, 1953, pg36, para66). However this paragraph uses this quote example to emphasise that activities are given the same label not because they are exactly alike or adhere to an exact criteria. Instead their commonality and likeness is more to do with elaborate networks of overlapping similarities so that we are able to use incomplete knowledge to perform with logic and meaning (Wittgenstein, 1953, pp36-37, Dinishak, 2014,

pg71). Language games function because they are incomplete: whether they are deemed correct is dependent on how they are used and performed so that society can determine its acceptability (Keucheyan, 2012, pp67-68). In a performance, all a character needs to do is apply their existing understandings of meaning to the language game in use; they do not need to formally rehearse as they are improvising. By focusing on a language game, anyone experiencing social life can participate as it is not vital to know the complexities of an actor or the backstage. The actor improvises in the moment of performing and then evaluates their performance when the curtains close to decide whether it was acceptable for the context.

To advance in a game, players must perform in a way that can be understood as skilful for that particular game context (Pearce, 2003, pp147-148). The categorisation of skill depends upon a player's ability to engage with the game and learn about what is possible within that context: as Fine states, "a novice referee plays according to what he thinks the rules are; later, when he is more knowledgeable, he creates his own rule variants" (1993, pg116). The categorisation of a player's performance in relation to the game allows them to learn further meanings and the nuances of a context and their character; their ability to read a context permits the possibility of more meanings (Fine, 1983, pp7, 60, 116). While engaged with playing a game, particularly role-playing games, the individual must create a character to enter a world different but similar to our own (Fine, 1983, pp194-195). The challenge is more focused upon awareness of the context they are in because that changes the information or the symbols they have access to in order to establish meaning (Fine, 1983, pp194-198). Some aspects of context, such as the rules of the game, are stable and give the fantasy and activity of play a sense of order and certainty. The players are the ones who alternate between contextual boundaries and

performances, from discussing matters outside the game to leaving the game temporarily to attend to personal matters (Fine, 1983, pp196-197). This highly fluid mobility of characters through the overall game context can only work if the players are aware of their various characters in relation to the contexts of the game.

Fine elaborates this idea using Goffman's theories with the example of a typical roleplaying game in which players adopt various characters to participate. This is recognised as a vital step for playing MMORPGs, in that the player can be represented and assimilated logically into the canon lore and aesthetics of the game world (Nardi, 2010, pp45, 54). The transformation also translates the player into the symbolic code that allows them to be interpreted within the context of the game (Fine, 1983, pg186). The entire time the performer is aware of both themselves, their *real* identity (the player), and the character, their *assumed* identity for that context, as they cannot allow a crossover of information from these two roles or else it would disrupt the context of the game and the overall performance (Fine, 1983, pg195). This is observed when a game has a medieval setting. In this instance, the character in the game cannot possibly know about advanced technology as it is inaccurate to the context (Fine, 1983, pg192). At the same time an actual player would usually have no idea how to slay a dragon or transmute rock to gold using alchemy (Fine, 1983, pg195). Games follow a symbolic code embedded in the context to react to the various meanings a player can interpret from the symbols. If this interpretation is successful the character, the *assumed* identity, can be understood as real to the audience observing the performance (Fine, 1983, pg195).

The act of performing a character while engaged with the context of a game presents a predictable and calculable risk which makes context an easily understandable parody of reality (Malaby, 2007, pp96, 98). The predictability has arisen from the

design of games on a foundational level which is theoretically understood from three broadly identified frames. Juul devised this from his extensive research on video games and recognised that the first frame is about “goal orientation, or the desire to win”, the second is “the game experience consideration, or the desire for fun (challenging, uncertainty)” and the third is “the social management consideration, or the desire to manage a social situation” (cited in Moore, 2011, pg379). This relates to the nature of playing a game in Western society. A game is regarded as a demonstration of specific skills often with the allure of a prize in sight, even if players choose varying strategies to win such a prize, in conjunction with an extremely social event for both the participants and the observer on the sidelines (Huizinga, 1950, pg65). The level of interest and the strategy employed for the game firstly relates to the language game a player is using to interpret the game, and secondly what type of activity the game is about. This is more related to the personal interests of the individual as games, particularly MMORPGs, often present a range of tasks to partake in so there is “no single way to play” (Snodgrass, 2014, pg482). It is also because of such choices in how to regard a game that there arise social divisions of players depending on their engagement with the game.

The ways in which an individual comes to care about a particular activity depends on how implicated they are, as “the more one becomes implicated in a reality the more one feels it intensely” (Hage, 2002, pg201). The level of implication relates to how accepted the participant feels as part of the society, group or community and the extent to which they enjoy a sense of control and contribution. All individuals are affected by reality in a variety of ways on differing levels of interpretation so it is important to realise an intense or engaging experience compared to one that is defined as hard-hitting or severe (Hage, 2002, pg201). This connects to the divide in

the skill levels of players within a game as each player is experiencing varying levels of intensity depending on what particular game they are playing. As a result they may choose to practise their skills of play in order to intensify their experience and receive a more engaging overall game for the duration of play.

The emphasis on practicing a masterful or skilled performance while playing creates a divide within a game context based on the skill level of players that correlates with how well they play the game (Fine, 1983, pg116). Socially this variation in skill level can have beneficial effects such as a feeling of satisfaction from overcoming a challenge as well as negative such boredom from it being too easy or anxiety from being too difficult (Juul, 2005, pp112-113). In some circumstances and thanks to the creativity permitted by the meanings of play, game rules can be socially altered based on how players learn to perform the act of skilfully playing (Fine, 1983, pg116). Players can choose to change, ignore, enforce and invent new ways to play within the context of symbols such as the rules of a game (Freie, 1999, pg83). It is common for players to have different interpretations of the same game and if players cannot agree or negotiate a common ground then they leave the context (Freie, 1999, pp86-87). This differentiation often leads to divisions in game based subcultures as players often form groups and communities based on a shared interpretation of the same symbols; allowing a prompt understanding of a symbol and its meaning without negotiating which possible meaning is relevant to the context (Cohen, 1985, pg12).

To set the Ethnographic Stage

As I have explored through the perspective of Dramaturgical Symbolic Interactionism, Totemism and Language Games, to create meaning is sensitive to how it is used and the relationships of the symbols that embody the meaning. "When studying human social life we are looking not merely at relations (between things, e.g. between a ritual scar and a social status, or any other instance of signifier-standing-for-signified) but at relations between relations" (Enfield, 2013, pgxvii). The key relationships I will be focused on are, meaning and blind spots, context and character, to better explain the relationship between knowing and not knowing while interacting. I acknowledge that these terms and the relations they represent are prone to evolving through application but I will summarise the general concept of them. By creating initial descriptions I realise that I am imposing limitations on what these symbols can potentially mean which contradicts my attitudes of uncertainty as part of social life. The imposition of order, of control, to the possibilities of interpretation allows us to ignore that social life is dynamic. However if I do not attempt to do so, my scholarly style can be understood as shallow or ineffective. This is related to performance, as by neglecting such details I am performing that I lack the qualities expected of this context. I am playing the character of a scholar as I write, there are certain expectations of how I am to discuss my observations. Therefore I must formally address my methodology so others can attempt to understand how I made sense of socialising in an online world.

Meaning is a sense of familiarity, the logic of the known that is the result of interpreting social life. The blind spots of uncertainty, anonymity, the unknown space and the hidden allow us to surmise the mandatory knowledge we need to know so we can interpret meaning. These blind spots do not possess morality; they are

neither negative nor positive. They potentially reveal vital meanings to interpret that allow interaction on a regular basis. This is not to discredit the helpfulness of extra knowledge. But by understanding what must be known, one can still participate in a performance without understanding all the nuances and details that are learned over time. For this fieldwork I used auto-ethnography to explore these dichotomies and their fluctuation of meanings based upon their use. I also selected this method as it offers insights on one of the blind spots, the hidden monologue that happens in one's mind when they interact. By positioning myself as part of the ethnography I am privy to the journey one undergoes when learning about social life (Ellis, 2006, pg431).

Auto-ethnography can be regarded as “we want to dwell in the flux of lived experience” and through that lived experience I can learn what the blind spots of WoW can teach me (Ellis, 2006, pg431). Therefore, regardless of which situation I found myself in, I always asked these three questions in hindsight. How did I make sense of what happened? What symbols did I pick up on and react to while playing? In turn, did I or another player do anything to make the performance proceed in the resulting way?

By focusing on what is not known as opposed to what is, it is difficult to identify a formal group of informants in WoW. Instead, I see my informants as the characters I cross paths with during my sessions. I do not rely on a single group; instead I describe my experiences with whoever is willing to perform with me in game. The resulting descriptions may be messy but like most auto-ethnographers, I hope “they will instruct our readers about this world and how we see it” (Denzin, 2006, pg422). This would be difficult to capture for an online game with other methods. Due to the technological barriers in place, simply filming someone else playing leaves a lot of game knowledge unknown and standing behind someone as they play would prove

difficult. As a gamer, I can acknowledge the tediousness and irritation of non-stop questions while playing. Therefore, for practical reasons, it is more logical to play the game directly and write an auto-ethnographic description of my experiences to better explore how a player navigates this context.

As noted in the introductory account of my first login in the previous chapter, WoW is a game of dramatized conflict. The player navigates the game from conflict to conflict, some are grand adventures others are mundane routines of questing. The game world and narratives of Azeroth are based around the conflict between the Horde, Alliance and any other greater foe that attempts to destroy or control the world. The characters one encounters are often wearing gaudy, cumbersome costumes that can be understood as robes or armour and wielding impractically ornate weapons to represent the costume of a force to be reckoned with on a battlefield⁸. Visually and design-wise, this is a game that thrives on dramatic conflict. Dramaturgy is a theoretical foundation that takes conflict into detailed account by focusing on social performances. The conflict can be understood as pivotal or trivial, but it is still noted as a performance and given the same level of analysis. The strength of Dramaturgy is that it identifies and accepts the mundane as equally important to overarching societal structures. In that sense, an auto-ethnographic account allows me to better experience and observe the dramatic conflict of WoW in all its intricacies and nuances.

In order to comprehend auto-ethnography, one must also consider a basic conceptualisation of ethnography or “an approach for studying everyday life as lived by groups of people” (Boellstorff, 2012, pg1). The methodological process varies

⁸ Such costumes and props in real life would be too impractical to use in an actual fight. Yet they are logical within the context of the game and necessary components of a performance.

according to the field in question, the propositions raised by and theoretical processes that influence the researcher; allowing a level of specialisation depending on what topic or scholarly background a researcher possesses. However the most general understanding of the methodological process entails the researcher “immersing our embodied selves within the culture of interest” (Boellstorff, 2012, pg1); there is a process of learning through experiencing what elicits a researcher’s curiosity. Prior developments of ethnography were focused on the practice of fieldwork in new conditions, such as virtual worlds, or critical examination of the fieldwork in question (Marcus, 1998, pg10). In recent years criticism of ethnography has turned to the formative phase where scholars form the presuppositions of their research (Marcus, 1998, pg10). This has permitted ethnography to remain relevant in this modern era because it provides a way of experiencing reality while being critical of how we understand it.

Favourable qualities of auto-ethnography are its sense of authenticity in the descriptions of experiences it creates. The researcher has not forgotten that despite superficial differences between sites, all social life “remains a system of reciprocal social relations, all of them built up by mutual subjective interpretations of the actors within it” (Schultz cited in Honer, 2015, pg550). Social relations fortify our understanding of the world yet remain subliminal in the sense that they are never clearly spelled out or announced unless you understand how to read them.

Regardless of whether you are part of a specific group or experience the field subjectively through indirect action, auto-ethnography acknowledges that we are working with learned or experiential knowledge (Honer, 2015, pg551). It is subject to bias, it is subject to change and rebuke with each description of an experience potentially contradicting one another within the same body of research. Yet by

observing the differences, one could possibly learn the commonalities between them. This is the vital knowledge that allows one to perform and interact on a basic level while not being hindered by blind spots.

Auto-ethnography works well in conjunction with a dramaturgical perspective. To perform effectively one is aware of one's actions and must be able to engage with how the context reacts to one's character, there is a delicate play of thinking reflexively while being part of what is to be interpreted. This is akin to an elementary principle of auto-ethnography where the quality of the description depends on how the researcher has integrated into their field (Atkinson, 2006, pg402). There is no level of distortion between the performance and the ethnographer as they are fully aware of their presence in the midst of it. Even if they were observers they would still be part of the audience, their presence is in the performance. Auto-ethnography makes the researcher's position as part of their ethnography definite and irrefutable which allows one to be aware of the sensitivity of a performance.

The quality of reflexivity is used to describe auto-ethnography's strength as a methodology, yet it is seldom considered or conceptualised (Atkinson, 2006, pg402). Reflexivity can be regarded as part of the performance which means the characters, context and symbols present are heavily implicated in social life. Auto-ethnographically, reflexivity is the recognition of the researcher's presence so "that there can be no disengaged observation of a social scene that exists in a 'state of nature' independent of the observer's presence" (Atkinson, 2006, pg402). A researcher can only describe their experiences when they are present so it would be illogical to assume what occurs when they are absent. From this perspective, reflexivity is the acute awareness of one's existence and place in social life which permits one to create meaning in response to one's surroundings. In the process of

interpreting meaning, reflexivity is a quality that allows one to identify symbols and apply them during a performance. Once the individual has used them and navigated elsewhere, the meaning is reset for the next interaction as the use has been fulfilled.

I do have reservations of whether to label my descriptions of experiences as analytic or evocative. There are scholarly concerns of how auto-ethnography is used and whether it has been used effectively has caused a divide between the two types of analytic and evocative (Anderson, 2006, pg374). Auto-ethnography is alluring to a researcher, it allows one to “become part of their studied scenes rather than absent, objective narrators of them” so one can understand social life from within (Charmaz, 2006, pg397). That by acknowledging one’s presence in social life, one can question how life regards us through the reactions of the characters performing (Ellis, 2006, pg437). As a result I have understood auto-ethnography as a methodology that unites the analytic and evocative to create fascinating insights into the lived experience of daily life. So to keep with the theme of interpreting meaning, I will leave it to my readers to decide whether to apply the labels of analytic or evocative or not use them at all.

I am aware that the term auto-ethnography has been used to “mask a lack of method (or even justify deception), rather than pursue a legitimate course of study that, when carried out with rigor, can yield new insights and discoveries” (Boellstorff, 2012, pg44). However I am being rigorous in my interpretations, but not necessarily with the regime of my field work because “ethnography should not be overdetermined before it begins, that there should be something to be discovered, found out, in a world that in the literal (geographical) sense has been discovered already” (Marcus, 1998, pg17). While I might be traversing the fantasy realm of Azeroth it is by no means an undiscovered frontier. Instead I am curious about how players create

meanings and share those meanings with each other while playing the game. As an auto-ethnographer I will be able to catch fleeting glimpses of what this community deems ordinary and mundane, a fundamental aspect of Symbolic Interactionism.

Symbols are designed to be understood as the mundane and are used to prompt meaning associated with particular cultural significance, it is intriguing to observe what an individual takes for granted and how they formulate elaborate meanings from a specific symbol (Simmel, 1950, pg17-18). By using auto-ethnography, I can witness the players of the game utilise the resources available to establish meaning whether it be exciting like the much-discussed dungeons and raids to the mundane routines of questing, the result of which is to “seek to understand shared practices, meanings, and social contexts, and the interrelations among them” (Boellstorff, 2012, pg67). I can come to understand, first hand, the process of learning the symbols and associated meanings of the game as well as notice when these symbols cross the line from intriguing to mundane. Such information is not easily available outside the context of the game as there are rare spectator chances in game. Online forums and discussion among players may include descriptions of experiences while logged in, however they may not consider the subtle nuances of actually playing the game.

The specific details of this auto-ethnography are that I played World of Warcraft and collated the various stories of my interactions with other random players for this thesis from October 2012 to November 2014. During this time, the Mists of Pandaria expansion was the latest addition to the series. I have continued playing WoW beyond the Pandaria expansion and am still part of the player community. I chose to focus on player-based interactions as they have more variation in the potentiality of meaning that can be interpreted. The descriptions of experiences I have chosen to interpret are firstly examples of how anonymity manifests and is managed in the

game by players; one-off encounters while exploring the game world. Secondly I examine how venturing into the unknown space dramatically influences one's performances by tracing my steps while questing through an open region. Thirdly I explore how uncertainty is negotiated and the resulting power struggles for which particular meaning dominates that performance. This will be explored by two dungeon runs that prompted very different reactions among group members, based on my performance.

I rotated between seven different characters, each possessing different roles within Azeroth⁹, that all operated on an American PvP (player vs player) server¹⁰ where player interaction is encouraged. I actively participated in activities that are aligned with PvE (player vs environment) which include questing, exploration of the overall world, farming resources and dungeon runs of normal and heroic difficulties. When I logged in, I very rarely had any formal plan and left the possible interactions to chance while playing the game. It should also be noted that I am not a competitive player or a raider (a player who actively participates in raids) and hold no allegiance to a guild. However this did not limit my potential pool of informants as players log into WoW at all hours of the day and night due to the different time zones of each country. So there were always individuals, other than myself, to interact with the game and give the symbols of Azeroth meaning.

Interactions of note were collectively screenshotted using the PrtScn key on the keyboard or recorded as video footage using the Bandicam program. When a particular event in game struck me as intriguing I took brief notes of my own

⁹ As a player, I do often rotate between different characters in a single log in depending on my mood. For this research I used experiences as my Druid, Mage, Shaman and Warlock, who are also all Trolls in the Horde.

¹⁰ Oceanic servers were not introduced until the Warlords of Draenor expansion in 2014. Up until then, players in Australia had to play on American servers. There was also high competition for space on PvE servers so many players ended up on PvP servers regardless of whether they wanted to or not.

emotional state and perhaps anything happening off-screen. After logging out I then revised the footage or images in question and my notes to construct a description of the experience. As all participants in these interactions remain anonymous or known solely by the character on the screen, ethical concerns were kept at a minimum as I did not engage in any formal interviews or contact with the players behind the characters. This is because I was only focused on the performance on-screen among characters as opposed to the identity of the individuals, off-screen.

Observing the use of symbols through active participation can often uncover social behaviours that are commonly overlooked or deemed unimportant but still practised diligently. Wirth explains this idea as follows: “The most important thing, therefore, that we can know about a man is what he takes for granted, and the most elemental and important facts about a society are those that are seldom debated and generally regarded as settled” (cited in Maines, 1977, pg239). Symbols can manifest in any way and be obvious or subtle leading to a myriad of interpretations and meanings by varying levels of comprehension or information about what it means as well as differences in how important such meanings are to comprehend. Perhaps one of the more curious social phenomena is the blind acceptance of particular symbols and practised behaviours. As these are commonly taught through socialisation there is usually a lack of information as to why they are accepted. A predominant focus of Symbolic Interactionism is to identify how these symbols are understood, the variations of meanings they create and ultimately how they potentially conflict or complement one another (Maines, 1977, pp238-244).

Conclusion

A character marks a fragmentation of one's identity to facilitate daily routines and socialisation. The individual performs relatable identities or characters to create divisions of seen and unseen knowledge so the relationships they have with a community can be easily understood (Hannerz, 1980, pg205). An individual may possess many characters to fulfil different roles, they can still learn about one another's fuller identities and they can incorporate past, personal experiences into their performances. In WoW, a character and individual can be referred to as a player to differentiate from characters piloted by the programming. In our daily lives, we may assume the characters of a worker, a family member, a friend or a bystander to navigate through a city. In its broadest sense, a character relates to the constructed symbols with which an individual adorns themselves to integrate with and fulfil a role within a context.

In contrast, I use context to refer to everything beyond the individual that influences the individual's autonomy to navigate through life and influences the creation of character. This can include societal structures, communal and class hierarchies, systems of kinship, all manner of societal relationships that impact the perception of the individual. The context defines the terms of the character by relating what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. A character complies with the context regardless of the individual's personal opinions. Symbols connect character to context by facilitating the ability to create meaning, however it is the engagement with such symbols that temporarily defines the interpretation of meaning through context and character. A context can be comprised of symbols, other characters, places and influences which personal experiences and prior knowledge are relevant from the individual. There can be numerous contexts at play simultaneously which

further complicates the interpretation process. There can be overlapping contexts such as when players log in to WoW but still remain engaged with the world off-screen. There can be contexts within contexts such as a player engaging with WoW who then abruptly leaves the game due to a blackout at their home. Even though contexts may not directly meet, they can still affect one another during an interaction.

Dramaturgical Symbolic Interactionism has been constructed by focusing on the sociality of interactive performances by individuals and groups in order to establish meaning in reaction to a particular context. To interact is a communicative process that draws upon the individual's experience and the underlying societal influences on that individual. Should there be other individuals present in the context, they add to the symbols to react to as they present alternative interpretations of meaning.

Interaction is then focused upon the negotiated of meaning between the character and the context to temporarily shape the uncertainty of potential meanings into an acceptable sense of social order. With the use of character and context as the focus of an interaction, uncertainty of meaning is normalised and accepted. They permit meaning to be interpreted without speculating about the unseen to navigate through a social performance. My method for this thesis is auto-ethnographic to better observe this process of interpretation. It allows me to embody my theoretical perspective, to acknowledge that by conducting any form of ethnography I am part of the interactive process I wish to learn more about. In this way I am a symbol contributing to how players navigate through the game, instead of a ghost watching from another realm beyond the screen. WoW provides a virtual account of the character and context dynamic which is isolated from surrounding distractions due to only being able to observe what happens on the screen. Therefore it is important to consider the symbols embodied by a playable character in WoW, the overall game

mechanics of WoW's context and the normalisation of blind spots that permit the interpretation of meaning.

Chapter 2: The Virtual World of Azeroth

There needs to be an acknowledgement of virtual interaction to understand how life in Azeroth is organised. The curiosity of virtual reality is that it appears to have normalised blind spots in interactions yet also draws attention to them by the design of a virtual world. The use of technology for socialising allows such focused insight because it is explicitly constructed and whatever is presented on-screen is a representation of social life. Therefore one can reflect critically on how select aspects of social life are presented in virtual reality. In a way it reveals one's perception of structure, their place within it and their navigation through it. When I draw the line between physical and virtual realities, it is for the sake of description rather than believing them to be separate. They are closely entwined despite superficial aesthetics.

The focus of this chapter is to establish Azeroth's identity and the contextual influences I interpret from it through its symbols. In short, how do I develop a language to speak about this world on numerous levels? The engagement of the virtual and the physical needs to be acknowledged in order to ascertain the awareness and normalisation of blind spots. The chapter will begin this discussion by considering the languages used to explain an online game, firstly with a general

overview of the scholarly discussion of virtual reality from the formation of cyberspace to virtual worlds. Then the chapter will specifically focus on the division of self between realities that allows individuals to find a place within a virtual world. The second half of the chapter will specifically focus on WoW as a virtual world, from Azeroth's tumultuous history to the ecology of the world itself. Finally there will be a description of WoW's communicative process and the tools players have at their disposal to communicate with the game. The underlying narrative of this chapter is to demonstrate the contextual background that has led to the making of online games, such as WoW, positions online games as relatable to social life regardless of whether socialising manifests in a virtual or physical reality. In turn, by examining online games, these games can offer insight on negotiating meaning because virtual reality and games offer an engaging representation of social life. The way the representation has been constructed reveals the maker's perception of reality which is inextricably linked to their experiences in the physical. Virtual reality can offer a helpful position of insightful reflection on the way we perceive life.

Conceptualising a Virtual World

In order to comprehend the interpretation of meaning, one must have a way to speak of the world whence it originated. The basis of this chapter is to create a schematic of WoW's virtual world that can then evolve as more languages of meaning contribute to it, permitting an interpretation of meaning as an individual can acknowledge previous meanings and react when a social performance deviates. This increases the potentiality of interpreted meanings and how these meanings manifest during interactions. The scholarly motive for sequencing the order of

chapters in this thesis lies in the statement “The world does not speak. Only we do. The world can, once we have programmed ourselves with a language, cause us to hold beliefs. But it cannot propose a language for us to speak.” (Rorty, 1989, pg6). The challenge is navigating through which basic knowledge needs to be known to interact in a way that appears acceptable, and then to build a complex network of understandings from there. Throughout this thesis, many languages will be programmed into my interpretation of how this game illuminates the way we interpret meaning. At times these languages clash as the theorists who passed them on through their work designed them for different purposes. Yet they all share the commonality of a way of interpreting meaning that acknowledges and normalises uncertainty instead of dealing with it as a plague on social life.

The notion of a muted world that we speak for sparks a curiosity; how would a world even speak in a way we can comprehend? Perhaps the world can speak but we lack the ability to understand it directly so we need to translate it into the comprehensible, a language of meanings; in a direct sense a world cannot speak (Rorty, 1989, pg6). Yet an alternative thought lies in the presence of symbols because a world can provide us with stimuli to prompt the creation of meanings. A world provides a foundation to create a language to explain our place in it, even if the application of meaning is finalised by the individual, group or community (Rorty, 1989, pp6-7). This permits the translation of the unknown into the familiar by interacting with a world because “*Languages* are made rather than found, and that truth is a property of linguistic entities, of sentences” (Rorty, 1989, pg7). We impose a language upon a world, one of our making to serve our purposes of interpreting meaning, of making truth. This can lead to the creation of hierarchies of acceptability; the illusion of tangible, quantifiable logic and the relationships between each combination of

symbols and meanings. These languages also possess a complex past as they have been utilised, modified, ignored and reimagined by past and present generations who spoke or speak them.

Conceptually, prior to *virtual world*, another term for virtual reality was *cyberspace*. The original meaning was coined by Gibson in 1984 and described cyberspace as a consensual hallucination facilitated by incomprehensible and endless arrays of technology (cited in Waskul, 2003, pg21). To an extent, cyberspace acknowledges a unique level of abstraction due to inclusion of technology whether that takes the form of a computer, smart phone or another device that has yet to be invented. Yet the concerns of using the term arise when there is an “an overemphasis on the ‘cyber’ (the technology) and an underemphasis on the ‘space’ (which is something that is socially produced)” (Waskul, 2003, pg21). As with symbols, it is not the stimulus itself that creates a symbol, it is the whether the stimulus is interpreted that creates a symbol. Technology is meaningless unless there are people who use it to communicate and interact, imbuing virtual reality with meaning (Waskul, 2003, pg22). Online interactions are closer to a description of social life “for which there is no ultimate referent, and whose status as ‘real’ can only be assumed” (Waskul, 2003, pg27). Virtual reality or cyberspace removes the value of being ‘real’¹¹ by making it explicit that what is physically real is irrelevant in such spaces (Waskul, 2003, pg27). This creates an opportunity to create and experiment with new

¹¹ Given that reality and meaning are dependent on interaction, it is difficult to ascertain what being real actually means. To perform meaning, one is navigating social life and often meeting the expectations of the world around you, whether it be symbols placed by a broader society or other individuals. So in what circumstance or by what criteria do we understand something to be ‘real’ instead of a performance? It feels like a term that cannot be simply grasped in that to be ‘real’ is dependent on how meaning is attributed which can only be ascertained with an interaction. Yet to perform, one is assuming a character that belongs to the context which in turn is a reflection of how the context comprehends the individual.

identities, places, roles and interactions. Collectively these components can be used to create new worlds in certain circumstances such as online games.

Finally, a more recent term added to the vocabulary of discussing online activities is the concept of *terminal* or the *terminal self* (Gottschalk, 2018). Compared to cyberspace and virtual world, terminal is more focused upon the individual's use of technology, such as using phones, tablets and laptops on a regular basis. More poignantly, "the terminal evokes well the idea of a portal between those two once-distinct domains of experience" (Gottschalk, 2018, pg5), and applies further consideration for the overlap and resulting amalgamate of different realities. I will not be using terminal as a concept for this thesis because I am more focused on virtual reality rather than the world off-screen or the merging of them, at this point in time. However, terminal will become a helpful conceptual tool as technology continues to evolve and integrate into our social world.

A virtual world, like WoW, has already been explored academically often emphasising the resulting place in virtual reality instead of the technology that facilitates it. Celia Pearce provides a synthesised definition (2009, pp18-20), that starts with "virtual worlds are, by definition, social constructions" (2009, pg17), thus allowing the physical and virtual realities to intertwine as they are not separate, isolated entities, they had to be created. More importantly is that virtual worlds are designed to be highly reactive which complements my interpretation that context can be active during a performance as "players in virtual worlds are essentially playing *in* and *with* space, and, in many respects, the space is also playing *with* them" (Pearce, 2009, pg20). At times the game's ecosystem changes as the player explores and ventures through the fabricated world which is commonly influenced by either fantasy or a parody of reality (Pearce, 2009, pp18-19). The player has little influence

over these qualities as they are pre-programmed qualities of the game to give a virtual world a sense of identity to define what game is in play. A virtual world is also unique in its context because it is inhabitable, populous and embodies persistent identities (Isabella, 2007, section 1.2). These qualities are more to do with the player of this type of world as it remains “on” and are dependent on active, accumulative participation. Participation in the context then contributes to the abilities that any player’s character possesses, however the abilities one comes to possess is dependent on the type of game.

A virtual world thrives when there is a player to actively engage with the experience of playing in that realm and with other players (Pearce, 2009, pp18-19). Virtual worlds do not become worlds unless interaction occurs. Pearce identifies this as consequential participation where “your presence is actually a *part* of the world and of other players’ experiences in it” (2009, pg19). Consequential participation is part of the dynamic of character and context that permits reflexivity while interpreting meaning. The presence of a character impacts the context around them. In turn the context shifts in meaning as more variations of character are introduced. In virtual reality the world population is commonly made up by non-playable characters (NPCs) and if there is an online version or it is a MMOG then other players’ characters will contribute to this amount. It is challenging to obtain an accurate number of players as the player population fluctuates greatly and anonymity is normal in this domain. Games can be regarded as separate from daily routines because they can be understood from a capitalist perspective to be leisure, which is contradictory to work (Fulcher, 2004, pg8, Isabella, 2007, section 1.1). Thus the times in which players log in and how long they play in each session are determined by their personal schedules and priorities. Anonymity is also central to the virtual

world as discussed earlier because a player's identity can potentially disrupt the logic of the game's context (Isabella, 2007, section 1.1). Protection of the player's identity is also a concern as it is a key section of Blizzard's Terms of Use, to which all players agree before logging into WoW.

The label of 'virtual world' calls for conceptual scrutiny as it encourages a divide or a necessity to segregate such interactions as somehow different from reality (Calleja, 2015, pg217). This rhetoric of separation is elaborated by Calleja with the example of the 1984 novel *Neuromancer*, noting that "the rhetoric of the frontier is problematic because it creates the notion of boundary between the real and the virtual rather than seeing the latter as a constituent of the former" (2015, pg216). Such rhetoric, common in works of cyberpunk fiction, is detrimental as it severs the possibility of virtual and physical worlds sharing interpreted meanings and processes of socialisation. Instead it suggests that technology is an alien frontier we cannot comprehend despite the fact that humans created it (Calleja, 2015, pp216-217). An alternate perspective, similar to the development of cyberspace, proposed by Castranova is to refer to a virtual world as a synthetic world to promote meanings of an artificial design or to regard a virtual world as "a world rendered by a computer" (cited in Calleja, 2015, pg217). The ways in which this debate manifests in game-related studies displays a confusion over the way to attribute meaning to the virtual domain of play, wherein most meaning is filtered down to oversimplified dichotomies that ignore the interactive processes that allow such boundaries to be drawn (Calleja, 2015, pg217). This academic query is one that relates to the way we attribute meaning to technology in relation to our lives. From these perspectives, cyberspace entails all virtual reality whereas a virtual world may refer to a specific

part of cyberspace. Both of these denote a difference between a world rendered by a computer, and a world in which we physically exist.

There is a critique over whether *world* is the correct term for games in virtual reality. Game worlds are often designed to facilitate player interactions leading to Azeroth for example to be “not a proper world, or even a fictional one, but a ‘world’ in the theme park or zoo sense, a conglomerate or parkland quilt of connected playgrounds built around a common theme” (Aarseth, 2008, pg121). With the theme park description in mind, I do not seek to disagree with Aarseth. The layouts of the regions do resemble a patchwork of realms that do not always make sense ecologically and have perpetually replenishing resources. Indeed, it can feel at times like crossing into different playgrounds with each migration so it is not inaccurate. From the perspective of game designers, MMO games are designed in this way to accommodate a vast number of players, while also making play possible on most computers. If the graphics and memory limits are too demanding on a machine, players are effectively excluded by the financial limitations of not owning high-powered, expensive gaming computers capable of running and loading a complex game.¹² This potentially creates a problem among gamers as only those who pay can even play the game which would be crippling for a MMOG which thrives on many people playing either together or alongside each other.¹³ In a theoretical

¹² An infamous example of complex games is the original Crysis, a first person shooter for PC from 2007. The programming of the game, the CryEngine, was so advanced that it would break the processing power of computers. Since then, the CryEngine has been utilised as a benchmark for programming. The catchphrase ‘Can it run Crysis?’ is regarded as a common question to ask when examining the quality of new computers.

¹³ In some ways, reducing who can play the game is also classist, as having the time to play games and the money needed to maintain the various consoles or computers that permit access to them, can reveal divisions in class and exclude people from joining in based on their income. For MMOGs that have subscriptions this is crippling to the game developers, in a business sense they cannot make a profit, in a communal sense, they are potentially telling players who they want to play their game and who is not welcome (I am no economist but I suspect this is also bad for business). Theoretically, the questions of ‘how does a game function with no players?’ or ‘how do players fit into the context of a game, what is their significance to the process of play?’ arises from this situation.

sense, is worldliness vital for player participation or do they have alternate understanding of worldliness that makes the game world appealing? These concerns mainly cross off-screen which is not the focus of the field here. However, this is a curious line of thought to consider under different circumstances.

From a scholarly perspective, whether you choose to refer to a game as a virtual world is up to the individual's discretion. In this circumstance, the term virtual world is helpful as virtual reality or cyberspace are understood as a description or representation of social life. It is a type of reality that emphasises "representations of what these things mean are all around us, and these meanings are of utmost significance" (Waskul, 2003, pg21). Any representation has limitations in that we can only observe interactions, the reactions and the places they occur (Waskul, 2003, pg21). I doubt that technology has reached a point where it can completely render a world that matches what a world entails in the physical reality or whether such a sense of worldliness can ever be truly obtainable through replication.¹⁴ For virtual worlds it is not a literal application of the term, world. It is a way of describing how we perceive, describe or represent the world that is rendered by a computer. Regardless of how it takes shape, a virtual world is a representation, not a perfect replication of a world. Virtual world is also favoured as it refers to a specific context within virtual reality and cyberspace, allowing one to focus their attention on a particular part of social life online.

¹⁴ Although, worldliness has improved consistently in single player RPG series such as The Elder Scrolls, Dragon Age, Fallout and Mass Effect (to name a few). This is primarily because worldliness is achieved through narrative, character developments and the irreversible changes that occur in the game world when the player makes a decision of how to respond to story events. Alternatively the Souls series (Dark Souls 1-3, Demon's Souls, etc) achieve worldliness through atmospheric environments and far more receptive AI (artificial intelligence) in their enemy NPCs which allows these NPCs to better counter player combat strategies leading to a more dangerous and potentially engaging world. So to actively pursue an exact replication of a world in games rather than a representation of a world is a difficult criterion to meet. Replication of a world may be possible in the future, but we will not know until game designers achieve it.

It is said that games of a virtual nature and in the physical world are appealing because they are designed to be entertaining regardless of the game's genre (Juul, 2010, pg2). Jesper Juul relates this idea to a jigsaw puzzle, "in all likelihood you know how you would complete it. You can imagine the satisfaction of moving the final piece, of finishing the puzzle. The jigsaw begs you to complete it" (2010, pg2). The pull is an effect that manifests in a variety of ways and it is a player's interpretation that controls how it manifests. Even though the game context is identical for every player, the way they behave within the game and the strategies they employ to reach the same goal is the choice of the individual. So long as the game's programming recognises that the task has been completed, the game will react and reward the player for their efforts. A player's style or method of play often divides or unites players who enjoy the same game as they are reflecting how they understand and value the types of experiences they have. They are able to share the common ground of the game's context to create a foundational logic for a subculture (Pearce, 2009, pp38-39).

There is a broad range of gaming platforms and genres of games easily available to the public at an affordable price. Video games are crafted to appeal to various interests so players can achieve the engaging experience they seek (Juul, 2010, pp106-110). MMORPGs such as the World of Warcraft must appeal to a range of demographics because it sustains itself through subscription fees paid by the player. If no one is purchasing access to the game, it cannot be maintained by the programmers. The first-time player is overwhelmed by the possibility for adventure within WoW through Azeroth because when wielding a virtual realm to facilitate interactions, it is extremely easy to alter a character's identity or even start anew. The acceptable possibilities are numerous as players do not need to know one

another, they just need to know about the character and how they fit into the game (Isabella, 2007, section 1.2, Nakamura, 2009, pp129-131). WoW encourages a perception of freedom with claims on its original box from 2004, still sold in 2013, such as “an infinity of experiences await”, indicating there are many activities to engage with in Azeroth and that the world itself evolves.

The context for the World of Warcraft (WoW) is set in the world of Azeroth. WoW is understood as the processes that consistently keep the game adhering to a contextual foundation, allowing the interpretation of meaning and hierarchy of social acceptability for such meanings. This foundation establishes a language game that allows the dynamic interpretations of meaning through the temporal interaction between character and context. In order to facilitate the interpretation, symbols of the game are used to act as reminders of logic for the game. The acceptability of logic is reinforced by the organisation of meaning through totems. The totems provide a language and hierarchy of symbols and meanings to be used while performing, these totems are then used as guidelines to evaluate the acceptance of that performance. Symbols and meanings are not randomly selected; the use of symbols can be understood as relative to temporal performances and their acceptability can vary among performances. Symbols can be defined by use or pre-defined by a community depending on their use in the community’s understanding of social life. Collectively these processes generate shared knowledge of how the game functions as they form from the same context, possess the potential for certain events to occur and offer a point of comparison to evaluate the skill level of players (Isabella, 2007, section 1.1).

The influences that shape the use of a symbol can be traced to how a group interacts and understands the world. This is reflected in the works of Mauss and

Levi-Strauss even if they may not refer to it in the same way. Totemism permits a totality of social fact to exist, both as a collection of institutions to establish the make-up of a context as well as a range of dimensions that are possible within this context (cited in Auge, 1995, pp39-40). Auge summarises these scholars; Mauss “refers back to two other totalities: the sum of different institutions that go into it’s make up, but also the whole range of different dimensions that serve to define the individuality of all those who live in it” (1995, pp39-40). Levi-Strauss suggested “an interpretation of the social fact which includes the picture any of its indigenous members might have of it” (cited in Auge, 1995, pg40). Both of these scholars acknowledge the existence of a collective identity and the individual identity that influence each other to permit a shared language of meaning to facilitate communication. This creates an interpretation of the world that is understood and used by a group of people and individuals who live within the group. For a game, like WoW, which possesses a virtual world, this interpretation of totemism can be related to the gameplay or game mechanics which act as rules to be interpreted. The individual and the community use these rules to talk about the context they move through as they are shared, relatable knowledge. They also use such rules to read each other’s character and in turn, be read by others. These rules can influence the potentiality of meaning and gives rise to uncertainty, not chaos, when they are not upheld so they act as points of relation to validate or dismiss the interpretation of meaning.

The shifting, interactive ecology of Azeroth is the backdrop for all the possible adventuring, from delving dungeons, exploring forgotten ruins and generally enjoying the scenery as the player drifts from region to region. The vast open surroundings invite the meanings of fantasy and exploration as the player delves through these well detailed environments. This environment presents intriguing symbol variations,

particularly when the built natural world is involved, as some meaning cannot be negotiated from a symbol. Instead the game decrees that the symbol's boundary is absolute which raises further questions of how the society that produced the game regards the natural world. For example the natural areas, such as forests, mountains and ocean have boundaries which are promptly realised when a player attempts to direct their character to a path not allowed by the game's mechanics, as I found out during my various log ins. There are areas that are too rocky to ascend until the character acquires a flying mount, and then they will eventually hit an invisible wall when they fly too high. There is also a dreaded fatigue countdown to their demise when they travel over open sea, unless they safely make it back to land again. Even within a game city, the player has no control of its layout, the architecture of the buildings or where its inhabitants wander. The act of navigating this landscape presents many variations of reactive contexts for characters to interact with. This means a player must be aware of the context they find themselves in so they can survive the temporal encounter. They must also be aware of when the game will not permit the interpretation of meaning resulting in the player making the adjustments to their performance to continue; usually regarding the construction of the virtual world itself. So while there is an aesthetic of freedom conveyed by the accompanying artwork of WoW that has been produced by Blizzard, the limits of programming by the game's developers utilises structural components so that the game is actually playable on a grand scale without facing technical errors. Yet the choices by Blizzard in how the world is built can prompt scholarly queries of how a society regards nature; a topic of future interest. This reminds us that Azeroth, while entrenched in fantasy, can reflect our perception of reality.

Items that are available to interact with are commonly associated with a sparkling glow or they become highlighted when the player rolls their mouse cursor over them. When a player's character is interacting with an object such as a chest they must also perform the action of opening it for a few seconds and cannot be interrupted while doing so. This creates a system of risk evaluation as players will judge whether a particular item is worth venturing through an enemy-infested area, which is how the tempering of one's greed comes into play; players need to effectively judge whether the item is worth the labour involved to collect it (Weber, 1958, pg17). When a character 'levels up' and gains more abilities to wield, this risk diminishes, allowing the player to overcome greater challenges. The meanings affiliated with that character also shift as they can interact with a broader variety of contexts. Regardless of how powerful a character becomes from their journeys, they still obey the protocol of interaction in which they must target or click on everything to open the option of using it.

Azeroth is a shared world and playing WoW is a shared experience among its players. Events in the game are constructed to be handled individually such as basic quests in open regions, or as a group such as dungeon runs and raids. Regardless of their choices players are all playing World of Warcraft, but they are all playing in different ways according to their personal logic or meanings that appear logical and that shape their interpretation of the game. This is observed by the multiple realities that exist within the game, from travelling between regions on the main continents to being sealed off from the world in a separate pocket of virtual reality in a dungeon, battlefield, raid or arena. All these areas are part of Azeroth, and all are being explored by the constant rotation of players who log in and out. However the game

itself is only turned off once a week for maintenance by Blizzard, meaning that Azeroth is mostly occupied by players at all times.

The grand scale of this game facilitates the actions of an entire population of players from all over the world. Even though they cannot see the player behind the character, a player can still see every character on-screen doing different activities, going to various locations and playing alongside one another on numerous planes of virtual reality. By decree of WoW and the mechanics of the game, the player can only engage in the activities it was programmed to run, can only explore what the game designers have built and can only interact with the NPCs that populate the space and offer guidance and rewards for quests. The character can only interact with the game environment in limited ways, only being able to use pre-programmed items and NPCs. The result is that players will often run to a schedule or have a list of things to do when they log in, so that they may progress their character in order to engage with more of Azeroth.

When a player 'sees' another player they must be in the same area and visible on-screen. What is actually seen is the character that the other player pilots. Therefore it is vital to be able to read the other character in order to make a logical assumption of their behaviour (Cohen, 1985, pg12). As the context provides controlled variables, symbols and common knowledge to draw upon, the player is the unpredictable element or experimental variable because even though they are limited by the game context they still possess autonomy to negotiate meanings. The game's formal manual provides information on the game's mechanics and methods of installation. Players learn how to play the game by gaining insight and observing the ways other players use the game as well as drawing on collective experiences (Fine, 1983, pp73-75). Knowledge of how to interpret the game is discovered by interacting with

other players and observing how others play or perform their characters. The pivotal starting point of this experience is a player's first encounter with another player, where they are directly exposed to the symbols attached to their characters and identify the criteria and context so they can react appropriately for the circumstances (Malaby, 2009, pp17-18).

The Virtual Community – The Player's Place

Interacting in virtual reality prompts experiences of separation between one's character, one's performance, one's being from their physical form. While playing in a virtual world, I can only describe it like an out of body experience where you watch over your actions on-screen instead of embody your actions.¹⁵ Playing the game creates a unique environment where anonymity and the hidden are acknowledged and normalised as a by-product of this separation. Anonymity manifests because there is a distinct division between the character on-screen and the person behind it. A player can choose to reveal more of themselves and their off-screen life but it is not mandatory knowledge needed to play, one can still use technology to socialise without ever revealing personal details. The Hidden is more subtle but still staring you in the face, when online or logged in to whatever you choose to do, you are limited to what you can see on your screen. You have no other avenues of knowing what's happening to the people off-screen unless they tell you directly. Curiosity then turns to how one can possess a sense of identity in a context that is impersonal.

¹⁵ For example, in one log in or a few hours, my druid walked extensively through three different regions, four dungeons, killed countless monsters and completed many quests without breaking a sweat. I know if I physically tried to do any of that hiking or travelling, I would've been exhausted after the first trek and unable to do much else for the rest of the day. There's this eeriness of seeing all these things happening on-screen and yet, you're almost numb to the physical tolls of these actions and the resulting injuries. I cannot say all sensation is removed while playing games. Players still become emotive when certain events happen. If one enjoys horror games they may experience fear and depending on their health, heart palpitations. It appears to be a shift in sensation based more on emotion rather than a physical toll.

Culturally there is a preference to treat the individual as a unitary self that is applied in every circumstance instead of identity entailing a series of characters that shift according to the interaction (Waskul, 2003, pg56). With the more fluid and multi-faceted conceptualisation of identity, there are little behavioural differences between virtual and physical interactions once you remove identity as an innate object (Waskul, 2003, pg60-61). One's self online is "viewing these self-constructions pragmatically as a means of getting on in the social world" (Waskul, 2003, pg61), new variations of self can emerge with the liberation of the unitary self which is a fascinating paradox given that most online interaction is anonymous and acknowledged openly to be anonymous (Waskul, 2003, pg64). While it is the individual's decision to describe their online personas as more real or true to themselves, an online environment confronts the construction of identity. In a context where it is acknowledged that there is a hidden backstage that remains unseen, that people assume various characters to participate in online experiences, this can become liberating. A sense of self can be rebuilt and reimagined online to fulfil different purposes or even allow experimentation with one's identity (Waskul, 2003, pg66). By placing anonymity and the hidden as obvious rather than subliminal, this can refine what 'real' actually entails, where 'real' can even be defined in any sense or even if 'real' is an ideal that cannot be achieved. The online world makes it clear through the structure of chat rooms, games, online profiles, etc., that we cannot know everything about the people with whom we interact. It also raises the question of how much do we need to know in order to socialise with them anyway?

The answer to that question is specific to the context. In the case of online games, your character or avatar is the point of interaction. "Avatars are central to both immersion and the construction of community in virtual spaces. They are mediators

between personal identity and social life” (Taylor, 2006, pg110). The avatars or characters are the ones who are members of guilds in the game. They are the ones who fight the monsters or enemies. They are the ones who belong in the game world. The player is an observer off-screen who uses the character to navigate through social life in game. If they happen to be a member of a guild, they may choose to speak with the players behind other characters who are present. It is always up to the discretion of the player. The character is a point of relation, the bare minimum of knowledge one needs to interact with that player or for that player to interact with the game’s context. In order to perform effectively, one must know how to read the character, while knowing the player’s identity off-screen is optional.

Even the process of building a character reinforces levels of separation between the player and their character. Regardless of how the player wishes to navigate Azeroth, the starting point is always the subscription to the game. This is where a player pays a monthly access fee, has a stable connection to the internet and installs the game on their computer. Following this, the terms of use must be accepted, which has multiple sections outlining acceptable behaviour within the game. It also comes with an age bracket of who should be playing and emphasises the precaution of anonymity in order to protect the player as outlined in sections 2 and 7. Blizzard or the moderators reserve the right to monitor your RAM and CPU (components of the computer) as stated in section 15 (Blizzard, 2012). Most players tend to overlook these details as they usually scroll to the bottom and agree to the terms in order to be allowed to log in and play. The fact that you must first pay Blizzard, then have the equipment to load and play the game followed by agreeing to the terms of use permits entry into Azeroth can potentially limit who has access to this world.

Once logged in, a player must then select a server on which to create their characters. These servers are categorised by geographic regions such as America, Europe, Latin and Oceania. A player can choose to play in whichever regions are available through the region of the subscription they paid for. The servers are then divided by population density and type, which refers to Player VS Environment (PvE), Player VS Player (PvP) and Roleplaying (RP)¹⁶. The server types are totemic as they describe particular relationships a player will have and the potentiality of interpreting certain meanings with the game context. PvE focuses on interacting with the game environment which means players can choose to disable the PvP option so that they cannot be randomly attacked by players of the opposing faction. PvP allows players of opposing factions to attack one another on sight without initiating a duel or tagging their character as PvP; potentially leading to a free-for-all killing spree. RP is focused on creating characters and playing out elaborate stories among players, to the point where in order to create a character they must fill out an electronic profile for them before they can log in.

It is common to find PvE players on a PvP server due to the PvE servers reaching their population capacity. American servers appear to share a rich multicultural diversity given that America was one of the first regions to receive servers in 2004 and was the region that Oceania players had access to with their versions of the game. The international region holds little value within the game itself and it is not crucial information to be known in order to interact with players. The type of server is a more important categorisation of the player and the potentiality of meanings that hold value to that character. This is because when a character is labelled with the symbol of PvE, PvP or RP, it allows other players to make assumptions of what

¹⁶ For the sake of this account, RP will be left out because I know very little of it at this point in time.

kinds of activities that character partakes in while traversing Azeroth. For example if a player is on a PvE server, it is assumed that they mostly participate in questing, dungeons and raids, whereas a PvP server permits the assumption that the player partakes in duelling, arenas and battlegrounds. The server type increases the chances of encountering players who use Azeroth in similar ways. Servers permit logic for assumptions to be made; not guarantees.¹⁷

When a player has selected their server they are then permitted to create a character to represent them in the game. Their new character lacks many skills that would allow them to survive their adventures. Once they enter Azeroth with a level 1 character, a player quickly discovers they cannot ride mounts, and most of their abilities are locked until they reach the correct level. Superior equipment is out of reach until they brave various dungeons, a primary social event for PvE players, or win enough battlegrounds to earn them, the PvP equivalent. The majority of the world is limited as all players start in a particular low level zone, decided by the race of their character, to begin the process of levelling up so players can access more parts of the game. From the moment they log in, a player almost goes into a working routine as they strengthen their character from playing the game and migrating to various zones to complete quests or menial tasks set by NPCs in exchange for uncommon or rare equipment, money and XP.

Online games have no definite goals or endings; they function by players being represented by characters within the game context to make choices about how they play to receive rewards for their endeavours (Isabella, 2007, section 1.1). In order to receive rewards a player must win a contest or complete a difficult task for a

¹⁷ Over the expansions of Legion and Battle for Azeroth, server type has been downplayed into two categories. Normal and RP, Normal is the merging of PvE and PvP with PvP being an option a player can turn on and off in main cities. Again, none of these changes were in play during the Mists of Pandaria Expansion.

guaranteed prize. This creates a condition of anonymity for social life because labour or one's use to a community influences one's place in it and one's acumen of valuable symbols. This is reflective of a society, particularly a capitalist one, through the tempering of an individual's impulse to value particular commodities or profits which then drives the individual to obtain such rewards in exchange for labour or another commodity, if such an opportunity arises (Weber, 1958, pp16-18, 48-52). The processes involved in evaluating the worth of commodities can be tied to language and sociality, as work is a communal act and value is derived in context to a broader community (Weber, 1958, pp48-52). Commodities have the ability to be judged as priceless or worthless depending on the context in which they are accumulated. Without a context no scale of value can be accurately determined.

To claim such a change in the ways we socialise through a virtual medium as new is misleading. Western society faced a similar transformation in social life in the 1930s as urbanism became a prominent way of life. As Wirth suggested when conceptualising this development, these changes have occurred for better or worse, so as sociologists we must attempt to understand such changes as a fluid theory that can not only identify similarities but aid in recognising differences in the variations (1938, pp3-8). There are admissions of uncertainty and fluidity of interpreted meaning because Wirth's definition of a city or any sociological concept "obviously cannot be so detailed to take account of all the variations implicit in the manifold classes sketched above" (1938, pg7). Wirth's article admits the limitations of a scholarly writing style in that we can only focus on certain characteristics at a time. It accepts that one definition is not universal but contextual in its application to reality, thus embracing the uncertainty of interpreting meaning; the sensitivity this process

has to a theory's application to reality no matter how imperfect rather than forcing reality to reflect theory.

The Virtual Context – Framing the Canonical Lore of Azeroth

From my experiences, WoW and Azeroth can be played with in conversation as both are words, coded to refer to the identity of this particular MMORPG and part of the criteria to construct a way of life. Azeroth refers to story elements and aesthetics of the game's identity to be interpreted by the player while WoW connects to the underlying programming functions of the game that permit Azeroth to exist as a virtual, online world. Like the terms player and character, the two labels are interchangeable in the field as they are defined by their use. The game is designed to focus on the character of a player rather than the player themselves (Fine, 1983, pg194). Like most RPGs, a player's character acts as their representative in the fantasy realm. Characters are inherently structured to complement the canonical lore of Azeroth and remain synchronised with the gameplay mechanics of WoW. This allows the character to be understood as a logical product of the game's overall identity and acceptable to the contexts of that game (Fine, 1983, pp194-195). The game's identity, channelled through the word Azeroth and the acronym of WoW, is focused on a dynamic of relational meanings that permit players to interact by relying solely on a collective knowledge of that game. This allows them to work with the uncertainty they face during such performances because they can relate it to a broader context of experiences associated with playing a game.

Azeroth provides an aesthetic identity for the virtual world of WoW; a specific symbolic language that grants it an identity: a grand history that has transpired

among the various races that inhabit this world to create a society. This history has shaped the role of the player's character has within each game. Each context, built from the game lore, presents an interpretation of potential meanings that speaks to multiple conventions associated with it to allow interpretation on both an individual and communal scale (Auge, 1995, pg65). Together, WoW and Azeroth represent a grander narrative of social interactivity, weaving together on a structural level to permit the game to exist as a virtual way of life, a possible criteria for a Wittgensteinian language game.

Azeroth is a realm rich in a culture of social complexity, since first unveiled to the public in 1994 with *Warcraft: Orcs & Humans*, this realm has developed a sense of identity that has evolved over the decades alongside improvements in technology. This is facilitated and accelerated in the development of gameplay mechanics to make them more appealing to a broader range of demographics by present day access to mass-produced and affordable devices and a stable connection to the internet in numerous countries (Pearce, 2009, pg38-39, Juul, 2010, pp7-9). Presently *Warcraft* and the world of Azeroth has been transformed into the MMORPG, *World of Warcraft*, with the antagonistic factions of Orcs and Humans becoming the Horde and the Alliance and boasting a player population of over 100 million across 244 countries and territories (Blizzard, 2014). Numerous expansions open up further chapters and continue the stories of the mighty champions and warlords leading these juggernauts through perpetual battle. A player is but one small replaceable piece of the greater machine, yet gameplay is always focused on the individual player's journeys across the land and how they overcome any adversity. Azeroth marches on regardless of whether a player logs in or not.

Games mediated by a virtual medium have highlighted the relation of player and game through the development of technology and the autonomy exerted by the players (Nardi, 2010, pg151). An example of this is modding and the creation of macros, where players actively alter the game code to change how their interface appears while logged in. While this example is not included in this thesis the existence of it is noteworthy for interactions facilitated by technology. As Nardi describes this “games such as *WoW* are to some degree reflexive, allowing the experience of playing to feed back on the game and aspects of the software through which it is enacted” (2010, pg151). The game can be regarded as reflexive; it is now an evolving process that can accommodate changes introduced by players. Whether it is by engaging with the virtual world or choosing to create elaborate macros and mods to enhance the play experience, the game will react to any action performed by the player while upholding the aesthetic quality of the game (Nardi, 2010, pg151). The game, the context, is an active participant in the interaction because it reacts to the ways in which players choose to navigate Azeroth by allowing players to share similar and varied experiences of playing the game without directly contradicting one another.

Understanding and using the game’s symbols appropriately are critical for players in order to validate their characters and performances in game. These symbols have evolved extensively since Warcraft’s original debut. It is important to briefly acknowledge the game’s development to better comprehend the explanations of acceptable logic for the context. The World of Warcraft franchise is presently owned by Blizzard and has branched out into trading cards, novels, table top games and countless collectibles, all of which are extensively catalogued publically by the manufacturers and fans of the series. Their move to develop computer games is

through technological advancement on table top gaming in which elaborate graphics to compliment playing. The first computer game of the Warcraft franchise was released in 1994 and was titled *Warcraft: Orcs & Humans*. The game was set in the fantasy world of Azeroth where the orcs and the humans were often in conflict with one another leading to an antagonistic, bloody and brutal relationship. Aesthetically the humans form sophisticated medieval societies while the orcs are barbaric, savage tribes, a design that has not changed in WoW. By aesthetically, I refer to the visual appearance of the game on-screen which in itself is a collection of symbols from the game context. Gameplay at this point was focused around real time strategy (RTS) where the players took the role of a commander who mobilised an army within a set environment to take down their opponent or achieve a particular goal in order to win the level. The plot of the game was heavily involved with telling the history of Azeroth and establishing the canonical lore of this world.

The success of the first game spawned two sequels: in 1995, *Warcraft II: Tides of Darkness* follows the events of the Second War, an important event in the lore. This sequel was so popular it earned an expansion in 1996: *Warcraft II: Beyond the Dark Portal*, which shows the rise of Ner'zhul as the Lich King and the march of the Burning Legion. The third game in the series is *Warcraft III: Reign of Chaos* from 2002 which has the expansion *Warcraft III: The Frozen Throne* in 2003. This game started to display a change in the player's role. Within armies there were also heroes and heroines who took prominent roles in the plot and story development; specific individuals rather than faceless fodder. The events of Warcraft III document the corruption of Arthas, the prince of Lordaeron, and the rise of the Scourge in Azeroth. At this point in time the Warcraft games were RTS with strong linear stories to engage the player.

2004 marked the beginning of a new gameplay direction for the series when the *World of Warcraft* (WoW) was released online. The game mechanics were radically shifted from RTS to a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) which meant that instead of the player commanding an army, a player now had to create a single character to represent them in Azeroth, akin to the hero mechanic introduced in *Warcraft III*. Also, instead of a linear path, the player now had more freedom in choosing how they spent their time in Azeroth and the activities in which they participated. The series still focused around the conflicting antagonism between orcs and humans which had now grown to become the Horde and Alliance, as seen in the events of *Warcraft III*, but the element of linear story telling had been played down while player mobility and autonomy became the focus. This led to a broad divide and categorisation of players based on style such as player vs environment (PvE), player vs player (PvP), role-playing (RP), dungeon runners, raiders, professionals, gold farmers, auction house players, casual/social, etc. Players became able to form relations with one another based upon a shared interest in similar game activities or method of play, which is just one facet of how this online community functions.

WoW's expansions introduce new regions to explore, shifts in the abilities of each class a player must assume, the variety of class and race combinations available to select, and new dungeons, raids, arenas and battlegrounds. It also develop the folklore that explains the manifestation of historical events; usually somehow connected to the actions of the Night Elves and their ancestors. So far there have been seven expansions, Burning Crusade in 2007, Wrath of the Lich King in 2008, Cataclysm in 2010 and Mists of Pandaria in 2012. Mists of Pandaria is the expansion used for my fieldwork, although the fifth expansion, Warlords of Draenor, was

released in 2014, the sixth expansion, Legion, was released in 2016 and the seventh expansion, Battle for Azeroth, was released in 2018. I know more expansions will be added in the future, which will further evolve the lore of Azeroth and alter the acceptable meaning for the players to justify their performances. Each expansion creates shifts in the player population and the types of players who log in as at times players can either love or hate the new content and developments. For example when I was playing Cataclysm for my honours dissertation, *Adventuring through Azeroth: Navigating places and meeting new faces in the World of Warcraft* (2011), there was a lot of outrage over how difficult the dungeon runs had become, often expressed in the forums and public chat channels in game. As an MMORPG along with accessible devices to play it with, the game now caters to a broader demographic range of players rather than a minority (Juul, 2010, pp8-9).

Azeroth as a World

Ecologically, Azeroth has four continents for the Mists of Pandaria expansion; the remains of Draenor or the Outlands still remain within reach through the Dark Portal in the Badlands from the Burning Crusade as well as the four elemental plains that became accessible after Deathwing's rampage during the Cataclysm. Each continent is divided into various regions either politically or by the changing environment. This is seen visually within the game because when a player travels between regions there is often a drastic change in the environment around them. For example they could be trekking through a savannah and then end up deep in a mysteriously dense forest just by crossing the border of a region. The environment is very diverse, much like our world, ranging from freezing tundras to scorching deserts and everything in

between. There is day and night, and the seasons are limited to regions or continents with some areas permanently in the grasp of winter or the embrace of night.

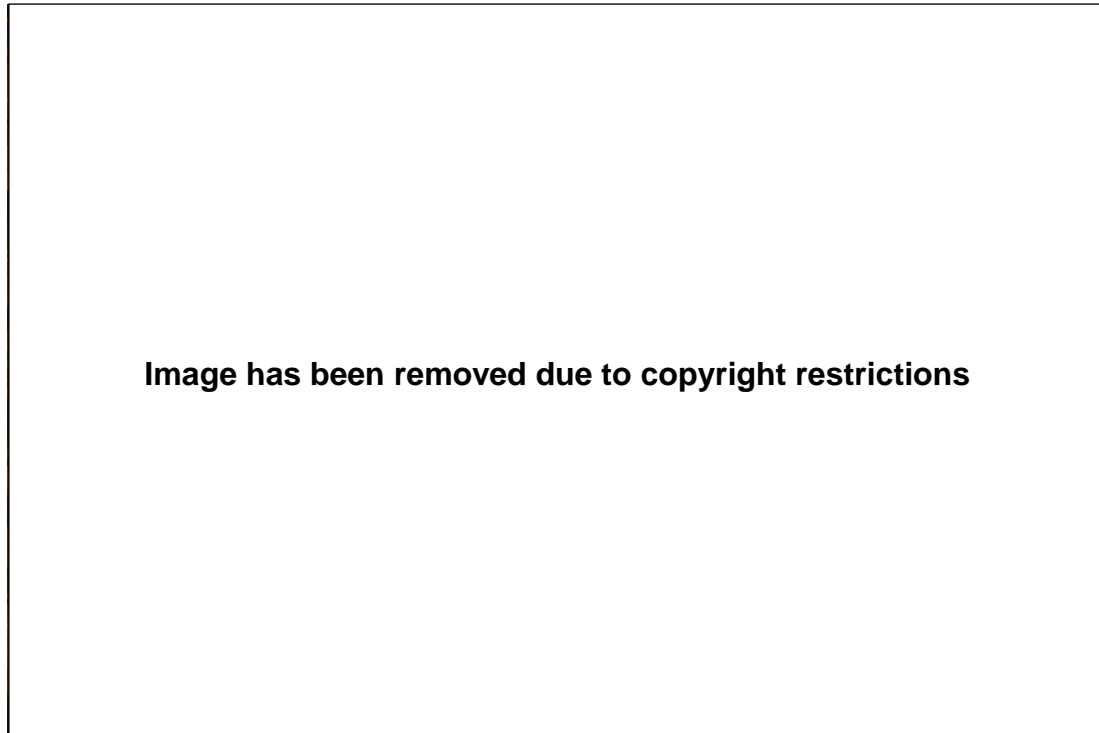


Figure 1: *In game picture of Azeroth's World Map for Mists of Pandaria. Outlands and Elemental Plains not included.*

As seen in the map above there are four main continents that surround the Well of Eternity. Whilst the maelstrom cannot sustain life, Kalimdor and the Eastern Kingdoms are home to most races and a vast array of flora and fauna. Northrend is considered an icy wasteland and still is in the grasp of the Scourge, loyal minions of the Lich King, making it more inhospitable. Pandaria is a mystery as the mists that protect this strange land have lifted allowing races to travel there for the first time and its history was revealed by playing through the *Mists of Pandaria* expansion. The land of Azeroth is prone to evolving with the addition of new game content. It should be stressed that even though the player is entering an alien world, Azeroth is still familiar to us. Given that games are a parody of reality or a fantasy, there must

always be inspiration for the parody in the form of an event, culture or symbol that sparks the variation. As a result the visual aspect of this world is similar to our own with elements of fantasy woven in.

Image has been removed due to copyright restrictions

Figure 2: *Spying on Ogres in Nagrand, Outlands (Recommended for characters levelled 64-70)*

Image has been removed due to copyright restrictions

Figure 3: *Flying through Deepholm (Recommended for characters levelled 82-83)*

Azeroth is socially divided by the Horde and the Alliance with a few other neutral races that these two forces have either fought against at some point or have no quarrel with. The Horde, originally led by the Orcs, is also home to the Darkspear Trolls, Tauren, Blood Elves, the Forsaken Undead and Goblins. The Alliance, originally the human race, now has connections to the Night Elves, Dwarves, Gnomes, Draenei and Worgen. With the emergence of Pandaria the Pandaren have also chosen to involve themselves with the conflict between these two forces; however, the Pandaren remain neutral until they have chosen a side to fight alongside.¹⁸ This also depicts the playable races a player may choose from when creating a character to represent them in Azeroth. Each race also has a unique set of traits and can assume certain roles or classes which also structures and publically identifies the playing methodology of the individual. Race and class are two domains of social relation in this community and will be discussed in a later chapter.

Alongside the players there is also a population of non-playable characters or NPCs. These types of characters are in a sense nonliving things as they “are inert in not having needs” (Kaptelinin, 2006, pg247). NPCs are artificially controlled characters that can serve numerous purposes from acting as merchants, leaders of each race, foes to fight, quest givers or simply decoration to make a town look populated and thriving. By artificially controlled, I refer to characters that are controlled by programming and codes written by Blizzard so the character is part of the context. NPCs do not need to actively develop as characters to belong to Azeroth, unlike player characters. However as NPCs they are determined by the game to be locked

¹⁸ Another factor of race that wasn't live during the Pandaria expansion are Allied races. These were introduced towards the end of Legion and were made accessible in Battle for Azeroth. These are races that can be unlocked after the player has performed specific tasks or taken part of unique events. They are not automatically unlocked with the purchase of the game like the main races. The Horde and Alliance have unique Allied races, whereas Pandaren must always choose a side to fight on.

in a permanent routine of interaction based on whether the player chooses to acknowledge them and are often confined the same place, with no freedom to wander. NPCs can also be neutral groups important to Azeroth lore such as the Argent Crusade, the Ebon Knights, the Earthen Ring, the Cenarion Circle, etc., who have appeared at critical moments in this world's history as a response to a powerful threat. They also create an understanding of the occupants of Azeroth depending on whether they are controlled by a player or a program, meaning that characters that move autonomously are also called players. The dangers in Azeroth are also plentiful, from monstrous beasts of high fantasy to incomprehensible terrors such as the Old Ones, a nod to eldritch horrors commonly associated with the works of H.P. Lovecraft and C.S. Lewis. NPCs are capable of assuming any form in order to populate Azeroth with canon or knowledge native to that world, as well as to challenge players to explore the world.



Image has been removed due to copyright restrictions

Figure 4: *Fighting through troll ruins on the Isle of Thunder (recommended for level 90 characters)*

Image has been removed due to copyright restrictions

Figure 5: *Riding a shark in Kelp'thar Forest (recommended for characters levelled 80-82)*

Ultimately this is a world of adventure and experiences that cannot be easily accessed in day to day life. The constant allure of new frontiers to explore, dungeons to delve into and monsters to slay almost celebrates the unknown space. Every expansion either introduces new regions or completely changes existing ones beyond recognition, making the unknown space a central element of the game. One is rewarded in game by venturing to places your character has not visited, often in the form of receiving specialised loot or viewing significant events. When a player starts a new character, they have a blank map of each region that is filled in as they explore it. When a player enters a new area, they are notified that they have discovered it¹⁹. The unknown space is something to actively pursue although it never seems to disappear completely as players keep finding intriguing things in Azeroth of which they were previously unaware. Pursuing the unknown space has led to the formation of groups of players dedicated to finding all the secrets in the game, who post their results online so others can follow in their footsteps. The secret finding

¹⁹ Discovery is meant to be individualistic given that when a player finds a new area that their character has not been in before, it is most likely occupied by at least a number of NPCs.

discord is located outside WoW but still online through the discord app/website. Membership is open to any player willing to join the hunt for the unknown space. Their actions are similar to a scientific process. Players are required to have a username so if they locate a secret the collective community can set to work confirming or disproving it before they reveal their findings to the broader WoW community. Often their findings are presented on major sites such as Kotaku, Youtube, Twitter, Twitch and WoWhead. Inadvertently, they have contributed to the excitement of the unknown space present in a fantasy aesthetic and then elevated it. They have created a section of the player community that focuses on exploration and discovery beyond that which is stated directly in game through quests and adventure guides.

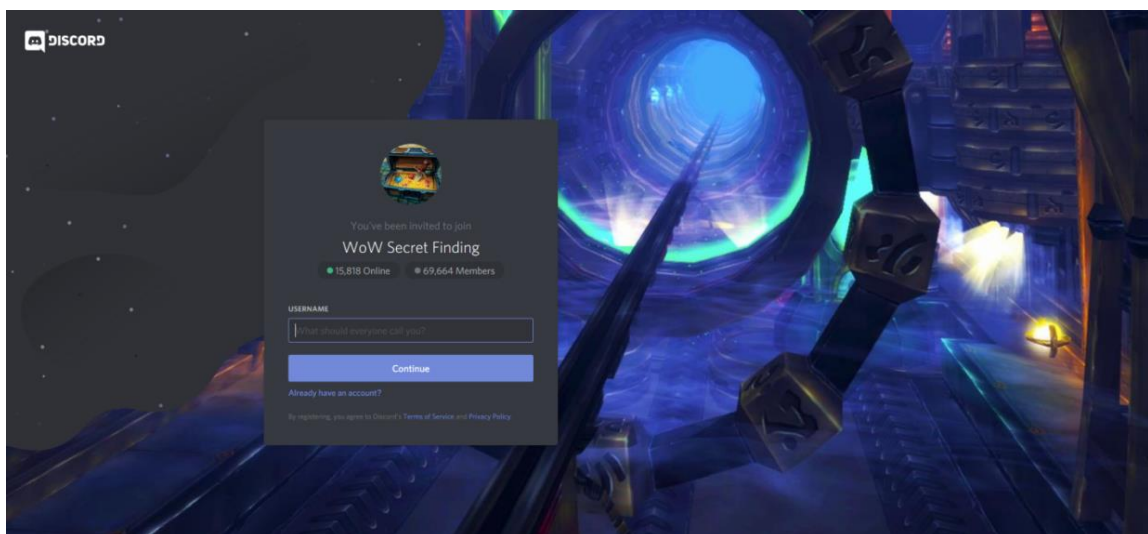


Figure 6: Secret finder discord log in screen on main website

Players, the moderators and programmers who are backstage to the game introduce an alien element into Azeroth. Knowledge of our world seeps into this world in a variety of ways, the most obvious being the ways in which players interact, often discussing the mechanics of gameplay and popular topics from our reality. Both of these would be extremely out of place and confusing to the average Azerothian who

happened to eavesdrop on them. The actual moderators and programmers expand the lore and write the story of Azeroth with each expansion and patch (a minor program that adds new content/revisions to the game) and also create various parodies relating to pop culture or events from our world. One of the many examples is the numerous appearances of a character named Harrison Jones who often takes the player on quest chains related to adventuring and delving into tombs much like Indiana Jones.

Yet even simply looking at the world of Azeroth the player can readily identify familiar sights. For example, the human race is influenced by English medieval imagery, trolls are reminiscent of Aztec society and tauren share common designs with Native Americans. From such observations I should note that most aesthetics associated with Western or European cultures are dominant in the Alliance whereas non-Western aesthetics are frequently found in the Horde. This has not gone unnoticed by scholars such as Nakamura (2002), Fernandez (1999) and Langer (2008)²⁰ who have used the representation of gender, race and sexuality in games as a point of reflection and criticism on racism and inequality. The aesthetics in Azeroth's context, whilst remaining separate within the game, can be traced back to the aesthetics from our reality. This offers a unique position for insight on how we regard the world we live in through how we virtually represent identities and environments. Such aesthetics are symbols that permit the connectivity of interpreting meanings in the physical reality to be carried through and replicated in the virtual reality by presenting the players with a fantasy realm that is different yet still familiar to them. Fantasy is

²⁰ It should be noted that collectively Nakamura (2007), Gray (2014, 2018), Paul (2018) and Kendall (2002) are currently at the forefront of the discussion of online identities and the existence and presentation of racial and gender categories in virtual worlds and game design. I will not be citing them here as I am regarding the game characters as a translation of the individual into a specific context to allow interaction and communication. Of course, this notion can be taken further as a character is a sense an extension of an individual rather than a separate entity, but to do so here would be to completely change my research questions.

focused on creativity in how symbols take shape and forms of interaction. In order to make this process easier to comprehend, games may resemble aspects of mundane routines.

Azeroth, like many places in cyberspace, allows creativity in meaning-making. However to reduce such games to terms of escapism is misleading. As seen in many MMOs like WoW and EverQuest, when you play these games regularly the meanings a player interprets “come to resemble too closely those of the real world, the illusions of escape and immersion began to dissipate” (Rowlands, 2012, pg143). The fantasy aesthetics become familiar when players start to identify similarities between the games they play and their daily lives (Rowlands, 2012, pg142-143). Escapism appears to focus on player motives, that there is some allure or reason for the player to escape from reality to fantasy “expecting that somehow they will be better, more fulfilling, than other alternatives” (Rowlands, 2012, pg143). I cannot speak for the motivations of players, but perhaps the term escapism needs to be interpreted more thoroughly with each application. I am not debating the existence of escapism as some players may play games for that reason, but I think the term, escapism, should only be used if one’s research indicates it to be a factor for consideration. In this circumstance where I am more preoccupied creating meaning with incomplete knowledge then I cannot assume escapism to be the reason why players log in. The reason players log in is not my concern here as I am focused on what occurs on the screen. When Azeroth is positioned as a virtual world in cyberspace, escapism could arise in the shift of how meaning is attributed and the variations of symbols and performances a player can choose to interact with. Again, this is impossible to confirm without intruding in player’s lives off-screen. To assume

escapism is the sole driving force of online games discredits the communities who play them.

Communicating in and about Azeroth

Language is an extension of an individual's ability to make meaning. The ability to wield a language in turn reveals that individual's comprehension of reality and whether they can interact with the symbols around them (Ogden, 1924, pg98). "The meaning of any sentence is what the speaker intends to be understood from it by the listener" (Ogden, 1924, pg193). To be understood presents the challenge which leads to uncertainty as to be understood does not mean the intended purpose will be interpreted from the speaker (Ogden, 1924, pg193-194). There is a strong multiplicity in the use of language that establishes meaning as an elusive ideal, one that cannot be strongly confirmed or denied due to what is hidden regarding the comprehension of the speaker and listener (Ogden, 1924, pg193). Language is indispensable because it allows communication the exchange or sharing of meaning. However by using language, it develops defects, contradictions and inconsistencies through the interactions and ideas of individuals (Winch, 1958, pg4-5). The exact process of how one uses a language or how one interprets meaning is obscure due to the sensitivity of context or the circumstances that lead to the use of a language.

From this perspective, one must be selective in how one chooses to explain the attribution of meaning while leaving alternative methods as possible. For this thesis, performance is key to communication and language. The field takes place on a screen where one can only observe the actions of characters in game. There is a clear distinction between what is visible or relevant and what is hidden or irrelevant to proceed further into the game. In WoW, performance is distilled throughout player

interactions regardless of whether it is with other players or NPCs. They must create a character to represent them before they are permitted entry into the game.

Anonymity is further maintained at player discretion, and it is common to not exchange personal details within the game. It is actually common to know more about the characters on-screen rather than the players off-screen (Fine, 1983, pg55). Instead they read the embodied symbols of the character in the context of Azeroth rather than attempt to speak with the player controlling them. The word player has different meanings depending on its use; it is a term that can refer to the individual off-screen as well as a character that is not controlled by the programming of the game. Symbols facilitate player interaction to establish a hierarchy of interpreted meanings based on their perceived acceptability to act as reminders that the context and character are part of a greater community (Mead, 1934, pg163).

An individual performs a character and so conveys a specific purpose; a symbolic translation of themselves into a particular role, to better facilitate the shaping of uncertainty into the familiar. A language provides a script of possible meanings to be interpreted based on the characters present and the context in which they interact.

Character relates to the roles social actors assume in order to navigate through particular interactions and contexts much like an actor performing in a theatre (Goffman, 1974, pp125-127). Azeroth is the context that has shaped the characters of these interactions and its symbols are built into the game. It is a fantasy realm, home to a diverse array of sentient races that have highly evolved cultures, aesthetics and languages. There are seventeen languages spoken between the Horde and Alliance, some of which are derivative dialects of a main one. The totem of race/faction impacts the aesthetics of a player's character and the sections of the player population that can communicate amicably and antagonistically. A character

can usually speak multiple languages, one being the overall general language of the faction such as Common or Orcish, and the other the native tongue of the character's race. This character symbol reaffirms canonical lore for the role players and segments players according to faction or teams. Even if players are speaking English, if their characters do not share a common language they cannot understand each other.

The gameplay mechanics offers tools to facilitate communication between individuals and groups while logged in. All players instantly have access to the in-game chat box which constantly feeds the player information from all public channels, these channels vary depending on what locality or region they are currently in. Players can create private chats or whispers amongst friends in the player's friend list through the chat box and by clicking on other characters. The limitation is that players have to have characters of the same factions, to be able to understand one another's language and comprehend the meanings and terminology of the game among those particular individuals. The chat box can also accept numerous codes or emotes such as /dance to make the character perform a pre-programmed animation and voice recording of a certain gesture which is determined by the character's race. These are used primarily for non-verbal communication when the player does not want to type out a conversation and tend to be used in fast-paced situations. Emotes can be utilised to bridge a language barrier between players who may not speak the same language in reality. Having a character point in a general direction while performing a dungeon run or getting them to graciously thank another for their help often facilitates simple conversations in day to day play. Non-verbal communication is more than the employment of character gestures. It reveals a player's understanding of the game through the actions of a player's

character in Azeroth. Players can identify certain behavioural patterns such as how game-controlled non-playable characters (NPC) in an area behave, or how to tell if a playable character (a player) of the opposing faction is going to attack. The difficulty in understanding this form of communication is that there are no formal behavioural guidelines. This exponentially increases the potentiality of meaning as the performance that imparts it is at the mercy of the character's autonomy. The interpretations of meaning become "actively and continually negotiated, not merely the programmed communication of already established meaning" (Giddens, 1993, pg111). Communication understood through dramaturgy allows a researcher to actively observe the power of interpretation and warped meanings of mundane symbols. It also highlights the importance of reductionism through symbols to represent social relationships that allow interactions between individuals or groups through shared meanings. The presence of a symbol increases the potentiality of a particular meaning to be negotiated (Giddens, 1993, pg111). As it is a negotiation among characters, a symbol is temporal and prone to change meaning. If a particular meaning is not considered a possibility by the present characters, then it cannot be considered for that encounter (Giddens, 1993, pg111).

The uncertainty of communication is elaborated by the theory of map-territory relation, originally conceptualised by Korzybski and has been reinterpreted over the years by academics (Bateson, 1973, pg180). The theory states "the fact is that a message, of whatever kind, does not consist of those objects which it denotes" (Bateson, 1973, pg180). With the use of a map as the metaphor; a map explores the idea that communication is better understood as the relation between a symbol and a meaning. The internal machinations of processing meaning in response to a symbol are conveyed through communication because it provides the context and

character to prompt various reactions (Mead, 1934, pg97). In contrast, the language that facilitates the communication of meaning “is a process of indicating certain stimuli and changing the response to them in a system of behaviour” (Mead, 1934, pg97). This evolution of metacommunication relates to a fluidity of language; invoking the unspoken rules of interpretation that are developed between individuals, groups or societies.

Social organisations, such as those understood through totemism, exist because meanings can be easily transferred to a community through an organisation of definitive meanings (Juul, 2005, pg8). When a meaning becomes definitive it indicates that the meaning is shared among a community thus sharing a narrative of relationships (Juul, 2005, pg8). The definitive meaning is a point of relation to evaluate the acceptability of a player’s performance and the design of their character. Playing a game and focusing on just on the game as opposed to life happening around it permits further questioning of the processes that permit meaning to have relevance. For example, “the meaning of the chess piece stems from its relation to other pieces in the game, and is independent of its shape or makeup” (Juul, 2005, pg8), this relates to the importance of a player crafting a character to play a RPG because a player does not have a shared narrative with the game. Their character does while playing a game, pieces or characters that move autonomously are regarded as players. This creates an alignment of the player and the character within the context of the game to unite them as one entity; offering a symbol that reveals the use of the game context. The use relates to the way a player moves through the game, which then reveals their character.

It should be noted that the use of audio channels and headsets are also a communication option but not one that will be touched upon in detail in this thesis. A

player must firstly purchase the necessary equipment and load the corresponding programs to access this option. Headsets and audio channels allow the player to use their entire keyboard to play the game rather than type their messages. This makes headsets favoured by raiders, arena fighters and hard core or more intense players who need to be fully alert while playing. The types of activities they participate in are difficult in nature which usually requires all their effort to be focused on playing the game. There is an advantage in speaking to players during a fray, and this can be the difference between winning and losing.

While playing WoW, symbols were always present, even embodied by the characters themselves, the specifics of which I gave in the previous chapter. They acted as subtle reminders that one was playing a virtual game and therefore had to abide by what was programmed to be possible. The symbols of Azeroth were rarely mentioned directly by player characters while interacting with each other and the context. The symbols were ever-present, acting as reminders of the broader game in play and the world of Azeroth, they established a sense of logical familiarity which transcended fantasy to normalcy. Therefore it was challenging to be aware of when symbols were influencing my interpretations. Therein lies the power of symbols, they are discreet, they are overlooked and subtle in their manifestation. Yet symbols are always present and capable of subconsciously influencing our interpretations of context and the performance of our characters. In hindsight they permit detailed reflection of how and why we behaved in a certain way by establishing social boundaries and hierarchies of acceptable reactions, or at least what could be interpreted by others as acceptable. Symbols are powerful because they are subtle in their manifestation yet influential in their presence. They alter our perceptions of reality without needing to be directly acknowledged during an interaction.

Conclusion

The conceptualisation of cyberspace and virtual worlds reveals a form of reality where the encrypted symbols of a context and the importance of characters are explicit and normalised. Virtual worlds have the potential to create a description of the makers' understanding of reality which prompts academic enquiries of how these meanings are created in the first place. By positioning virtual worlds as representations of reality, one can potentially challenge perceptions of identity, of worldliness and the perception of what it means to be real. To an extent, identity, worldliness and being 'real' are still present, but transformed into more dynamic forms. Identity is multiple as individuals can assume many characters online. Worldliness is more focused on how one would represent a world instead of a replication of our world. The value of 'real' starts to lose that value online, this is a form of socialisation where symbols are in the forefront and displayed overtly. They are not subconscious influencers that can be taken for granted. Understanding symbols in a game's virtual world heavily influences a player's capacity to interact with it. Therefore, how one conceptualises 'real' is rarely the focus of interactions or performances in virtual worlds and by extension cyberspace.

There is an assumption that being online implies a level of anonymity through character or avatar focused interactions. The hidden is glaringly obvious as one can only witness what they can observe on-screen. Then after getting to know more of the characters one befriends, may one catch glimpses of the off-screen world mainly through interactions. The unknown space is celebrated in virtual worlds, most commonly in online games, where exploration of a game world is encouraged by the game's design and sought by players. Virtual reality has allowed a field to exist that reveals and illuminates how much knowledge we do not have when we interact with

others. Then how do we work with incomplete knowledge to make sense of such virtual worlds? This process always begins with the creation of a character, something that will be documented in detail in the next chapter.

Chapter 3: Anonymity through Character Identity

Technology presents a segregation of self for the player because it makes the individual anonymous by emphasising a character in the virtual world. Before any player can enter Azeroth, they must create a character to represent them and they pilot that character through the game world. The symbols embodied by a character establish their relationships to the game context. However, there is confusion over the character and the player due to the boundary of technology; a modern backstage. The boundary of the virtual world offers a point of reference to which individuals can react, as each player logged in can observe the game and its characters. Attention is then drawn to what is happening on-screen and the ability to decipher the symbols of the game allows players to interact despite absent or hidden knowledge. In interaction the player's characters are encoded with specific symbols that allow meaning to be interpreted prior to a performance. Character symbols have the capacity to reveal where that character fits in Azeroth and the role they carry within the game. Collectively, character symbols can be understood as totems, which provide individuals and groups with language to facilitate communication in game. Totems can be regarded as reminders of structure or context, as they are present in contexts for a particular type of social life yet seldom acknowledged until a

performance needs to be queried. Totems act as the connection between the broader context and the immediate context in which individuals find themselves. The performance and the use of those symbols at that time permit a totem to be acknowledged.

Totems are embedded in the characters of the individuals and the broader context that facilitates the interaction, thus engaging in a dynamic of character and context in the making of meanings. In WoW, character totems allow players to interact while remaining anonymous. The chapter starts by building the relationship between Totemism and Symbolic Interactionism as totems provide a way to consider structure as part of micro interactions. I then provide an example in the four types of totems for player characters; race/faction, class/level, equipment and achievements. I then share four encounters from my time playing WoW to illustrate interactions among player characters, primarily focusing on the totem of race/faction during a performance. The first will provide an example of players reaching a mutual understanding. The second will demonstrate the application of assumption in hindsight to explain the interaction. The third will display the enforcement of meaning through a performance that can be understood as masterful for that context. The concluding encounter will demonstrate how players break a context and attempt to speak to the player beyond the character. In each performance, I know nothing of these players beyond the screen. We interacted anonymously using the symbols embodied by our characters.

The Virtual Totems – The Embodied Symbols of the Character

When a player makes a character for a game, it is a symbol of their commitment to playing that game. For RPGs and by extension MMORPGs, the dynamic intensifies as these games are designed to encourage the player to “contextualise their in game motivations with the lore of the game world” (Rowlands, 2012, pg27). A player’s character allows the individual to create meaning in the fantasy of a game context. The resulting character is the main actor that the performance focuses on while the player remains anonymous to an extent (Eladhari, 2007, pg172). The character is encrypted with categories of symbols or totems that reflect the structure or lore of the game and the choices of the player (Rowlands, 2012, pg144, Eladhari, 2007, pp171-172). For RPGs, the lore and rules establish the options a player has for building a character. These choices are then reflected by the symbols embodied by the resulting character and their combination of totems. Awareness of totems is important to gameplay as most of Azeroth is a non-place (to be discussed further in the next chapter) so “as non-places serve various functions, one useful way to distinguish between them is to attend to the most conspicuous kinds of signage they display” (Gottschalk, 2015, pg7). A character, regardless of whether they belong to a player or are a NPC, are very conspicuous in the game world and determines a performance based on the totems they embody.

A player’s character design embodies the game world they belong to. The character acts as “a concentrated mirror of the whole world – in that size, too: a small mirror that reflects the whole world” (Eladhari, 2007, pg172), in that context, Eladhari is referring to the player character’s design and functionality to reveal dimensions of one’s identity through characterisation and true character (2007). I propose that by examining the construction of character and the symbols they embody to reflect the

world they belong to, one can study how one comes to join a world. The symbols of a character reveal their place in the context of the game, so the process of making a game character is to select the totems that shape their identity. A totem is an organisation of symbols that provides a language to use as a contextual point of reference. From there, an individual can assess how acceptable the performance is and whether a character appears logical for the context. The performance does not rely on elaborate knowledge of all individuals involved. Instead, the individuals assume characters that embody specific combinations of symbols to permit communication while remaining anonymous²¹. Totems distil contextual meanings to symbols then to relational categories that are used to talk about the world within that community, to establish performative boundaries and relationships of an individual's character (Levi-Strauss, 1962, pp11-12, 73). Totemism is a reminder of how meaning is to be interpreted, a way of reinforcing such defining boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable performances by organising symbols into categories of relationships.

The symbols embodied by a character establish their relationship to a context thus permitting the ability to remain anonymous by interpreting a character during a performance. The character's performance is a form of intersubjectivity; a term found in sociology, psychology and anthropology that generally focuses on social transactions rather than examining individual motives (Pearce, 2009, pg52). Levi-Strauss elaborated on such relationships, even if he never used the term, through totems. He explored the transactions and the interactions that occur in social situations as elaborate interconnected systems of exchange because "No relationship can be arbitrarily isolated from all other relationships" (1949, pg483).

²¹ Anonymous in the sense that the individual's private or intimate details do not need to be revealed in any way unless the individual chooses to reveal them.

The proceeding of one exchange influences a broader collection of relations within a social group. In this perspective, symbols can be understood as totems because they influence the interpretation of meaning in relation to a broader community. The collections of relationships exist in conjunction with symbolic thought or possessing the ability to embody symbols as well as to project and convey them to exchange complex meanings (Levi-Strauss, 1949, pp81-82, 496). Totems shift the focus of a performance away from hidden knowledge or personal motives.

Totemic relationships have proven useful from a structuralist perspective on how simple symbols or social rules interpret the acceptable behaviours for interacting to facilitate communication among communities (Levi-Strauss, 1962, pp11, 18-19). A structural understanding of totemism is that it characterises segments of social division based on an association with a natural species or an element of nature (Levi-Strauss, 1962, pg59). Levi-Strauss took his analysis of totems further than this interpretation by stating that “natural species are chosen not because they are ‘good to eat’ but because they are ‘good to think’” (1962, pg89). Animals became symbols to communities to provide a language, a shared way of interpreting from and speaking about their way of life. The resulting totems allow perspectives and meaning to “become objectively real only as they are so categorised” (Perinbanayagam, 1986, pg112). Individuals within a community could be characterised according to such symbols so others could interact appropriately and are able to be comprehended by the community. These symbols, while appearing deceptively uncomplicated, represent a complex set of behaviours and responses based on which totem or combinations of totems are present for the interaction. As a result, there can be many reactions to the same totems each time they are used to negotiate meaning. Uncertainty of meaning is sensitive to intersecting factors such

as which totems are used, what characters are present and how they interact with the context during the performance. Totems provide a way of thinking about interpreting meaning that is unique to a particular context which then influences the creation of characters and their performances within that context.²²

Theoretically, totemism is more aligned with macro interactions, a way of studying how large parts of society interact, whereas Symbolic Interactionism is focused on micro interactions and how individuals interact through the use of symbols. The scale difference is the reason for considering both simultaneously. Totemism can offer an explanation of organising symbols and meanings to align in a way that can be perceived as logical. The resulting totems allow structural influences to be present in micro interactions. To interpret symbols, an individual must know a way to interact with them. They learn this communally by creating a character based on those totems thus permitting a shared language of meanings. The individual then has a choice to act upon these totems depending on the circumstances of the context. It is a way of considering the presence of macro interactions within micro interactions. The totems are present reminders of societal structures that may influence the actions one takes during a performance. Totems can complement symbolic interactionism in four ways based on Levi-Strauss' statement regarding the application of totems in that "to understand beliefs and prohibitions of this order it is not enough to attribute a general function to them" (1962, pg73). It is the use of the totem that defines its meaning for that interaction demonstrating a way of speaking about social life that accommodates blind spots, primarily anonymity of the individual and the uncertainty of interpreting meaning. This is achieved through a form of

²² In light of this, I realise it is reasonable to assume that Totemism is purely structural with little relevance to Symbolic Interactionism. What needs to be emphasized here is that I am focusing on Totemism as a form of classification for symbols so communities can use them to communicate.

reductionism where a totem simultaneously acts a symbol, a tool to allow discussion about life, and an interaction, a way of navigating through life.

To list how totems connect to symbols, these five points need to be made. Firstly, totemic relationships defined by the symbols of various totems offer a process of organising symbols to embody a specific part of society (Levi-Strauss, 1962, pg74). Secondly, totems guide individuals to appear acceptable so the interpreted meaning and symbols can be regarded as valid for that situation while acknowledging that individuals can play multiple characters (Levi-Strauss, 1949, pg74). Thirdly, totems introduce a way of speaking about the world through a specific type of symbol that can be understood by that community (Levi-Strauss, 1949, pp73-74). Fourthly, totems permit an exchange of meaning through symbols which allows the negotiation of meaning (Levi-Strauss, 1949, pp496-497). Finally, these interpretations are possible because the ones who interpret Totems are *bricoleur* in that the individual, the *bricoleur*, can use an *intellectual bricolage*²³ to create meaning from whatever symbols are accessible at that time and place, “his universe of instruments is closed and the rules of his game are always to make do with ‘whatever is at hand’” (Levi-Strauss, 1966, pg17). The resulting interpretation by the *bricoleur* is projected throughout a network of relationships with the aid of totems to facilitate the creation and communication of meaning. The totemic symbols accompany the understanding it represents to convey broader networks of relationships within a group or collections of groups (Levi-Strauss, 1962, pg104).

WoW and Azeroth provide the context for symbolic thought, the meanings and the

²³ *Intellectual bricolage* is the process that defines a *bricoleur* in that the *bricoleur* is capable of using existing or prior knowledge to function within a certain context and recognise when certain symbols and meanings share a potential relationship. The *bricoleur* often works within their means to navigate through day-to-day life rather than challenge or break the boundaries of social life (Levi-Strauss, 1966, pp17-20). *Intellectual bricolage* is a way of regarding interaction or acting in a dramaturgical metaphor as it focuses on the immediacy and accessibility of symbols to the individual.

possibilities of the game. The players are the ones who construct characters to interact with the game's context. While this is not the concern of Levi-Strauss, collectively this demonstrates how the players construct their characters by the character's relationship to the broader game community and the symbols they invoke. This leads to the creation of totems for a character to establish how the player relates to Azeroth, WoW and other players. More importantly, totems allow a player to speak about and interact with the context to which they belong without intimate knowledge of the players around them.

Totemic relationships organise a plethora of meanings for a symbol, providing the criteria of how to negotiate what possible meaning is most relevant to that particular context (Cohen, 1985, pp26-27, 37). This means that a symbol does not necessarily need to be present in an interaction because a social performer can identify a deviated symbol from that totem and interpret similar meanings from it (Hewitt, 2003, pg210). Totems are also a product of the community that wields them to influence the individual. Totems associate a multitude of meanings to a particular symbol which embodies the acceptable meanings of the community and the contexts from which they came (Turner, 1976, pg235). For example in Azeroth, the totems of a character offer a way of placing that character within the game without having to know the player off-screen. Groups of players can form easily based on the build of their characters and how each character skill set complements one another. For a player to evaluate skilful playing, they must be familiar with the game, have experiences to compare, and be aware of how characters are performing in conjunction with the contexts. Even in a virtual world, social interactions and the relations they invoke do not exist in a vacuum because they are always connected to all the collective experiences of the player community (Levi-Strauss, 1949, pg483).

A language game also benefits from applying an interaction-orientated interpretation of totemism. Wittgenstein's argument for a language game centres on the context of its use (Winch, 1958, pg33), when an individual uses a language game they are using independent criteria as a point of relation to ensure they are interpreting meaning in an acceptable way for that context (Winch, 1958, pg37). The use of a language is a shared experience within a performance so "an important part of that context is the procedure of correcting mistakes when they occur and checking when a mistake is suspected" (Winch, 1958, pg37). Understanding totems as part of a context makes them part of the interactive process. Totems remain as an independent criterion for individuals to use when in doubt of the attribution of meaning. They act as a symbolic reminder of the broader structures in play that shape the context and resulting characters. From this perspective it enhances context to be understood as equally multifaceted and complex as the characters an individual assumes to navigate it. There are layers of information embedded in a context to act as a relationship between macro and micro interactions. Totems are crucial when interacting anonymously because when there is a lack of intimate knowledge of fellow performers, one looks to the context, the totems, to evaluate the validity of meaning.

Each totem in Azeroth represents a species of symbols and reduces the possible meanings that can be attributed to them during a social performance. Each totem also embodies an acceptable logic that connects the character to a broader community from the character's reaction to the context to which meanings they choose to focus on during the performance. In order to comprehend the acceptable logic of Azeroth, one must examine how these meanings are justified by the context and within the character as acceptable. For this thesis, I have been able to identify

four categories associated with the symbols all players can see about each other's characters. They include Race/Faction, Class/Level, Equipment and Achievements, which relate and influence the character created by the player. Anonymity is normalised by emphasising the totems embodied by one's character and whether they can acceptably perform with their totems. It should be noted that while these aspects may be crafted by the game and the programmers behind the scenes, the choice to don them, to become a certain type of character, is always the player's choice.

- **Race and Faction – the Character's Backstory**

The first totem of the WoW community and a vital decision all players make when creating a character is, who am I going to play as? For the most part it is a personal decision on what aesthetically interests the player, although this decision can be influenced by the faction associated with the player's friends. A player can possess a maximum of fifty characters on their game account²⁴; allowing players to create multiple characters for different roles. The race one chooses determines membership is of the Horde or the Alliance, outward appearance and class. The gender of the character influences aesthetics rather than statistical value or abilities. Each playable race of Azeroth is bound by the game to assume particular identities and these cannot be overridden or avoided by the player. For example, if a player creates an orc character then they are automatically a member of the Horde and can only become a warrior, hunter, rogue, shaman, mage, warlock, monk or death knight. These factors are relational to one another and define what groups of

²⁴ In 2018, with the introduction of Allied Races as playable characters, there is ongoing online debate and speculation over how this number will change with time.

interacting players will be permitted by the gameplay mechanics. This decision establishes what the character is capable of in Azeroth, their role within group situations such as dungeons and what loot will be relevant to the character.

Race/faction also influences who one can potentially befriend because the game registers members of the Horde and Alliance as natural enemies. This encourages players of opposing factions to kill one another when the chance presents itself which is the foundation of PvP (player vs player) where the game rewards players with high quality equipment for killing player characters. However, PvP players may choose not to kill other characters outside battlefields and arenas, while wandering around Azeroth. If a player wishes to fight a member of their own faction they must invite the other player to a duel. Both players must then agree to fight before they can proceed to kill each other. The death is symbolic to signify an end to the duel where one character has won and the other has lost; much like all the combat in game. A fallen character is not permanently removed from the game and can infinitely reincarnate or respawn from nearby cemeteries. Overall this encourages players to create and share biased opinions on what classes are better at slaughtering their opponents. Players can then take calculated risks on their likelihood of survival against a particular foe or they may find themselves preyed upon consistently due to their class.

The game makes it difficult to establish friendly contact between factions because players can only directly communicate with others when they are both members of the same faction. So while players may be limited in verbal or written communication they learn to read their opponents by their actions. The way a player learns this is by playing or engaging with the experience although it is difficult to ascertain a general consensus among communities and groups to suggest that all participants share the

same interpretations (Lynch, 2005, pg163). Ultimately how players interact is dependent upon the individuals who are present and how they have all understood the game.

- **Class and Level – the Character’s Place in Azeroth’s Hierarchy**

The class of a character controls the player’s methodology or playing style and what role they can take in a group situation. Level controls what abilities within that class the player can use and how strong the character is. Class comes with a title to be identified by, usually in conjunction with race, when players are unfamiliar with one another and the characters they pilot. For example, while playing I have been referred to as a drood (druid), a lock (warlock) and a holy cow (colloquialism of tauren paladin). Classes are defined by the roles they take in a controlled group situation such as a dungeon or raid. There are three roles in total: *tank*, a player who draws enemy attention; *healer*, a player who heals the party and keeps them alive; and *damage* or *DPS*²⁵, they are a player who attacks enemies while the tank distracts them. Even outside of a group situation each role has certain qualities such as the tank having extremely high stamina and armour to increase survivability. The healer is capable of mass recovery without the aid of items while DPS can inflict massive amounts of damage through melee, ranged or magic based attacks. Each class is structured so characters can potentially venture through Azeroth on their own but still find a role to fulfil while in a group.

²⁵ Damage characters are shorted to DPS which stands for ‘damage per second’ which is a unit of measurement for evaluating the damage output of a character through game modifications (programmed, designed, maintained by players and available online for players to use for free) such as Recount and Skada.

Class abilities are unlocked as the character levels up with 90 being the level cap in Mists of Pandaria.²⁶ Levelling up allows players to unlock more abilities and equip themselves with high level items. This is achieved by a character collecting numbers of experience points or XP from slaying monsters, completing tasks, collecting items and exploring the world in general. XP can be understood as the quantification of experience or personal development of a character. Amassing XP influences the migratory patterns of players through Azeroth as they often send their characters on long pilgrimages through the unknown space in order to gain experience points. There is a vast difference between a lower level character and higher level one of the same class because the higher level one will be more developed, far superior in raw power and have a larger arsenal of abilities to use. The ways in which a player utilises the abilities of their character depends on the player's knowledge of that particular class.

Each class can also be specialised according to the player's decisions of what abilities a character can access. The first specialisation occurs at level 10 where the player must choose a particular specialisation²⁷. At level 15, the player chooses a new talent for the character specific to that class and continues to do so every 15 levels until they reach level 100. If it is a true hybrid²⁸ class such as druids, paladins and monks, who can assume any role in the group then the decision of specialisation is quite crucial in the development of that character. There are lesser hybrids as well who can only assume two of the three roles, this includes warriors, death knights,

²⁶ With each expansion, the level cap increases to accommodate new content and encourage migration to the new areas. For example, the level cap is 120 in the Battle for Azeroth expansion to encourage players to travel to Kul Tiras and Zandalar rather than remain in existing regions (2018).

²⁷ For example, a druid (as of Battle for Azeroth) can choose either guardian (tank), feral (melee DPS), balance (ranged DPS) or restoration (healer) as a specialisation. The choice impacts what kinds of abilities they have access to. Alternatively this choice can play into the aesthetics of a character's ability such as warlocks who specialise in the following ways, destruction (fire/hell themed spells), demonology (conjuring demons) or affliction (unleashing various plagues and infestations).

²⁸ True hybrid can assume all three group roles. Hybrid can assume two different roles.

priests and shamans²⁹. Then there are pure DPS classes which are warlocks, hunters, rogues and mages. For the hybrid classes the choice to specialise in a particular role creates a divide in that class's population which shifts according to the needs of the community. The specialisation of a pure DPS class is usually motivated by the aesthetics the player wants to use in that class or whether they have been influenced by the DPS ratings generated by the community which is publically accessible on numerous websites³⁰. This influences the decision because it encourages the idea that a particular type of class excels at performing in specific circumstances.

The investment of time from the player is crucial to developing the skills of the character and contributes to the experiential knowledge that allows a player to decipher the game (Golub, 2010, pg23). Online relationships and the meanings they potentially invoke are central to playing such games (Golub, 2010, pg21). Realism or mimicry of socialisation is not pivotal to playing online games, "but the fact that it is a forum in which we give our lives meaning by entangling them in projects we undertake with others" (Golub, 2010, pg39). The process of levelling a character is critical to the attribution of meaning as it allows the player to gain experience as that character, where they belong in Azeroth and how they collaborate with other players to complete a collective goal; predominantly the focus for dungeons and raids. Collecting experience for the character and the player reveals possible meanings derived from the contexts they encounter, and collectively this contributes to the ability to perform with mastery and skill (Malaby, 2009a, pp22-23).

²⁹ WoW players, please note that I have omitted the inclusion of Demon Hunters as they only became playable in Legion and were not an option in Mists of Pandaria.

³⁰ DPS ratings are ways of collating and directly comparing the DPS potential of class specialisations. They tend to be collated using add-ons or mods such as Recount and Skada which record the damage output and the ability usage of a player's character in game. Such data is also shared through WoW related websites such as WoWhead and Icyveins.

The ability to perform a role is crucial in the WoW community because if the character cannot perform well, then they are of little use to the group as explored in a later chapter. The ability to judge a performance as inadequate is to invoke a language that hides the way such judgements are made. The game context gives a long list of potential roles to assume and it is up to the player to decide which class suits them. As a result many players spend their time researching how to perform a particular class in an acceptable manner. Previously, to aid players in their quest to find a way to contribute to the group or simply survive the challenges of Azeroth, characters could learn dual specialisations at level 30 to alternate between playing styles as necessary. In recent expansions this option has been available since level 10 and characters have access to all potential class specialisations (should they choose to play different roles). The ability to play as multiple specialisations within a class makes it easy to alternate between different performances. However, rotating among performances comes with additional challenges of learning more than one way to perform in a skilful manner. It should also be noted that it is possible to bend the boundaries of roles for certain classes, however this relates more to how well a player understands both the class and the game. The class is effectively the role a character performs in the game, with level demonstrating the strength of the character. Should the player's character fail to impress or comply with the game context in their performance, they will be booed off the stage.

- **Equipment – The Aesthetic Identity of the Character**

Equipment influences the specific symbols adorning a character's body. Items of equipment are the costumes of the actors that discreetly inform the audience of their

role the moment they appear on stage; the class of a character in WoW. These costumes are relational to class in appearance. Equipment also provides a defensive value to the character and boosts certain statistics such as spirit, stamina, agility, intellect and strength. The statistics are prioritised and valued according to how much of a boost they will provide and their usefulness to a particular class specialisation. Every character can equip two rings, two trinkets, a cloak, a necklace, a tabard and an undershirt; however, the type of armour they can use depends on their class. Cloth armour is used by mages, warlocks and priests, leather is for rogues, druids and monks³¹, mail is for hunters and shamans and plate is for paladins, warriors and death knights. It is a similar system for weapons, wherein particular classes can equip themselves with specific combinations. Structurally this means that there is less competition for particular items when looting a dungeon in a group as each class can potentially find something useful to them. Symbolically a character's equipment gives individuals the ability to create meaning for that character and their relationship to the context of Azeroth.

The item level is the criteria for evaluating the equipment quality. All equipment has an item level, indicated by the number below the item name, and a quality, denoted by the colour of the item's name. The higher the item level and quality, the better the statistical boost and the stronger the character can become. The item level allows other players to see how strong a character is, for example a character with an item level over 500 is regarded as stronger than an item level around 450.³² Item quality is divided by the following levels, from lowest to highest: poor (grey); common (white); uncommon (green); rare (blue); epic (purple), and legendary (orange). There

³¹ Demon Hunters in Legion also use leather armour.

³² These numbers are prone to changing with each statistical adjustment by Blizzard. Regardless, the higher number appears to be the more powerful and desirable one.

are also heirlooms (gold) which are special equipment that levels up with the character, usually given to alternate characters or *alts* to take out the process of equipment accumulation while levelling up. Heirloom gear provides a superior advantage to any gear one can receive by questing or dungeon runs, common activities for levelling characters. While item level indicates the potential boost in abilities, quality does not always indicate a better item. Rather, it appears to demonstrate the rarity of such an item and hint to the players that some major feat was accomplished to receive it. Also it seems that the rarer an item, the more visually impressive it appears so it is also a very quick way of judging another player merely by looking at them.

Item level becomes more important once a player's character reaches the level cap. This is when the character no longer gathers XP from their adventuring. There is no longer a concern that they may be barred from participation due to their level. The player's autonomy expands as they can do whatever they feel like within the game's context as they are free of the expectation of levelling up and have access to all open regions of Azeroth³³. When the level cap is reached, the item level and quality of the character's equipment tends to be scrutinised by other players as a way of judging their abilities in game, as explained in the previous chapter. The totem of equipment is responsible for the aesthetic of the character which usually follows the aesthetic rule of the more complex the outfit, the harder it is to acquire. Some activities such as heroic dungeons and raids can be off-limits until the character finds better equipment. The finer details of this symbolic species are better learnt when the player reaches this point of their character's development. The only path to bettering or developing their character further is to make grouping with them more

³³ The safety of the character is debatable, but they are able to travel with ease.

desirable for the sake of amassing treasure; symbolic trophies of their endeavours to support the performance of being skilled as a particular character. Generally an item that is glowing or defies the laws of physics in some way – for example, making one stop and question how a character is carrying a weapon that looks like it would break their arm under its weight – has most likely been gathered from completing a difficult feat.

Blizzard introduced transmogrification (transmog) in the *Cataclysm* (2010) expansion. Transmog is the ability for players to change the appearance of their character's armour. The process is that if your character can equip it, they can pay a small fee to an Ethereal Transmogrifier (using in game currency) to change the appearance of their equipped armour to resemble a different piece. Transmog allows players to customise their looks based on armour they may have liked visually but found useless after levelling up and finding a better item. It is a popular development as players are able to wear rare and unique armour they have acquired from years of play without compensating their current statistical benefits. An element of fashion has now been introduced to the WoW community as players can rate one another's transmog sets and compile extensive guides as to how to accumulate the necessary items to achieve particular outfits. This novelty has introduced the evaluation of equipment based on how fashionable or appealing it looks on a character³⁴. Roleplayers write extensive backstories and identities to their characters so transmog allows them to follow through with an aesthetic that matches the character's identity. In this context the character the player creates is not just a representative avatar but an ingrained piece of Azeroth as the player has established a non-official (released/published by Blizzard) interpretation of how Azeroth impacts

³⁴ The popularity of transmog introduced the Trial of Style in *Legion* (2016) which is an annual dungeon like scenario where players compete against one another using their fashion sense to create outfits belonging to particular themes.

those who dwell there. Transmog has also shifted how players understand the totem of equipment. Some items are now valued based on how they appear on the character as opposed to statistical value.

- **Achievements – the Character’s CV**

Achievements were added in the *Wrath of the Lich King* (2008) expansion, and form a system that recognises various self-achieved goals to be completed in each expansion of the game. Achievements are not as visually obvious as equipment but do hold meaning for more competitive players because like a CV, achievements indicate their progress and accomplishments throughout Azeroth. How these achievements were met is not specified aside from a date of completion³⁵. These can relate to any aspect of gameplay and there are achievements for quests, exploration, PvP, guilds, dungeons, raids, group reputation, professions and world events. There are also general achievements which are day-to-day things such as getting a haircut or acquiring a particular mount. Usually players accidentally perform a general achievement when they first start playing, and realise that the achievement system actually exists. There are some rewards for particular achievements such as mounts, unique tabards and titles that players can add to their character’s name.

The way achievements have social capital is that they can tell other players the experiences of the character. Achievements often reveal the types of dungeons characters have ventured through, how effective they are at PvP or even if they have run a raid. However, they are not always accurate indications about a player’s ability

³⁵ The date of completion only reveals whether the player received the achievement during the years that expansion was live or the most recent addition to the series.

to perform a class because some achievements are automatically handed out to a group of players. This can result in less skilled players possessing impressive lists of achievements, giving a good first impression when applying for a high ranking guild or talented player group. WoW permits Azeroth to be interactive with the player as it is a virtual world (Pearce, 2009, pg20). Therefore the symbol of an achievement is bestowed regardless of the performance employed so long as it meets the criteria of the achievement. For example, high level dungeon achievements for an older expansion could be completed by a powerful character instead of the intended group, such as a level 90 character running a level 70 raid designed for forty level 70 characters. The achievement requirement is only that the raid be completed; neither the type of character nor the number of players are specified.

The construction of a character is a complex process in virtual worlds. Malaby extensively reflected on the creation of his avatar in Second Life, another popular MMOG; “knowing all the while that this would be my presentation of self to others in Second Life, with whatever judgements of competence that might entail” (2009a, pg23). To relate to an earlier chapter, this involves the careful selection and awareness of the totems embodied by a character in order to be placed in the context of the game. It also includes the potentiality of meaning that accompanies a symbol as it represents various relationships to a broader context; it is up to the individual to interpret which relationship is the temporal focus while still performing in a way that is acceptable. The judgements Malaby alludes to relate to how other players perceive the character rather than the programming of the game emphasising the sociality of online gaming (2009a, pg23). There is performative and interactive element where players must collaborate within the game in order to

navigate through it. The specificities of such judgements are learned through experience, by playing the game, much like learning to perform in reality.

Collectively these totems create a character with which players communicate, thus allowing many players to perform alongside one another in game while remaining anonymous. As anonymity is still present, players will make quick judgements about other unencountered characters to facilitate the interpretation of meaning. This is important when dealing with pick up groups (PUGs) which comprise of players that have often never met in game at all and most likely will not cross paths again, yet must temporarily cooperate for a common goal. The tools necessary to read these symbols are available to all players, however, one must be familiar with Azeroth and its inhabitants to properly decipher them. Class, level, race and faction can all be revealed by moving the mouse cursor over a playable character, indicated by their name which is permanently hovering over their head and their erratic movements compared to the more docile NPC population. A player can also right-click on a character portrait and select the 'inspect' option which reveals the character's equipment and statistical profile. Armed with this knowledge a player can make an educated guess about which characters will be effective based on statistics. One's identity in a context is established by building a character that embodies totems, "the individual has committed himself to an identity and thus seemingly assumed the assets and liabilities of that role for the duration of the encounter" (Scott, 1968, pp59-60). However, one has no way of predicting if the player piloting the character knows how to perform skilfully for that character's role until they interact with them.

Performing Anonymously

The following descriptions of encounters focus on my experience of the game. These descriptions focus on interactions where the player's character is the focus rather than all aspects of their identity. The encounters are brief in nature so there is a likelihood of shallowness in personal meaning. This also removes the need to speculate about hidden player identities as these are not central to the game. These encounters are brief by nature as they occur in game abruptly when players cross paths. There are no formal introductions between players. There are no formal requests to collaborate. In the moment of playing, performances meld together from moments when you are interacting with NPCs to when one crosses paths with another player character. When interacting with NPCs, the game ensures that they follow specific patterns of behaviour whereas player characters do not. Player characters are difficult to predict in performances as totems are only a guideline for behaviour. Totems are influential in identifying a character, yet interaction is at the whim of the player off-screen who cannot be known unless they willingly reveal themselves. As a result, most interactions beyond guilds and friend groups are anonymous. Players can only know each other by character while the player's identity remains hidden off-screen.

These encounters are defined by their temporal nature as they usually lasted from five minutes to less than a minute. The characters that crossed paths very rarely encountered one another again beyond that log in. It should also be noted that as the gender, class and race of the characters are visible they will be identified and referred to using the character on-screen. The presence of characters in a context influences the way other nearby players navigate through the game as additional characters reshape the context to fit a different performance. To draw a comparison

from day to day life, this is the equivalent of finding one's way through a busy street and the encounters are those that occur with fellow pedestrians who are in the same area at the same time as you. There is not necessarily a deep meaning or emotional investment behind your relation to the street or anyone else in the area. Such interpretations rely on public performances and totemic symbols to convey communal meaning, usually complemented by underlying systemic knowledge of how to behave appropriately.

When I was preparing these descriptions of my experiences I noticed a pattern in my observations. My descriptions always focused on the actions of the player characters. Seldom was thought given to the NPCs present or a consideration of the region or area I found myself in. It felt sufficient enough to mention a region of Azeroth and a general indication of my intended actions within the game. I am describing the game as a player would. Given that the game world is known by either playing it directly or by reading a website dedicated to the game world, the need for a player to go into great detail of where they were or what monsters they faced is usually superfluous³⁶. As a result, my description of playing illuminated a distinct level of separation between player and researcher³⁷. When I was playing the game, details of location beyond a name or descriptions of the game's inhabitants were minimal. Given the game is visible and accessible to players, when recounting experiences a player may only mention a region or a dungeon as sufficient contextualisation. Extra details are added in hindsight or in the discussion of the description. However, general descriptions of player characters were the focus. Their

³⁶ Tales focused around certain loot may require more details of NPCs and locations.

³⁷ Identical parallels are noted by Shore through the emphasis of statistics in baseball. The player and the analyst regard the same game in very different ways, the analyst works with complex numbers and equations to calculate the skill of a baseball player while the player is more focused on the act of performing on the field. Both the analyst and the player are discussing the same game but have found different ways of engaging with it and making it understandable (1996, pp84-85).

race/faction, level and class were the most referred to as they are immediately visible. Descriptions of equipment only came into play when noticing unusual armour designs such as heirlooms. Achievements rarely come into play during chance encounters. It is intriguing to consider how much was left out of these descriptions, how many details were assumed to be known by the reader. These descriptions are how I would share my experiences in game with other players so it is assumed they would be familiar with the game world³⁸. The only focus point of the description is other player characters.

The following descriptions of experiences have been taken from my notes which have been rewritten and examined prior to this final piece. These particular encounters display how players can acknowledge the totem of race/faction. Race/faction was selected as it is the easiest of the totems to identify in a character. This is not just aesthetically for easy identification but this totem also draws the boundary between the Horde and Alliance. The altering italics are to symbolically change from experiencing the encounter to critically questioning it in hindsight. This pattern in formatting is carried throughout the thesis. The meanings I have interpreted are from observing the actions of the characters on-screen. To read the characters, I am utilising my knowledge of the totems they embody which were outlined earlier in the chapter. No attempt was made to query the identity of the player off-screen. The resulting descriptions are to demonstrate the presence of anonymity throughout a performance. In the absence of knowing the player off-screen, a performance relies on interacting with the symbols of the game to facilitate communication.

³⁸ For the convenience of my scholarly audience who are unfamiliar with WoW, I have included more detail when needed (compared to how I describe my experiences to other players).

A Peaceful Raptor Harvest

Ever since logging back in I was finding it unusual to see more players moving around in every area, a result of the cross-server interaction that had been introduced with the Mists of Pandaria. By the time I had reached the Arathi Highlands I was already tiring of the constant ganking (assassination by higher level players) and generally having to watch my back for any Alliance.

At the time I was riding my raptor mount from the Horde encampment of Hammerfall. For the quest "Raising Spirits" I had to collect ten raptor eyes and fortunately there was a raptor nest just beyond the encampment's walls. I strayed a bit from the area, noticing a circle of binding which related to another quest I was currently undertaking. By the time I got there I found myself face to face with a male Alliance Pandaren monk. As a mage and unfamiliar with all the ins and outs of this class, I knew I wouldn't survive if he attacked.

I immediately performed the usual behaviour to indicate I didn't want to fight such as keeping my distance and not posing to strike. He did the same and we parted ways momentarily. A few minutes after I had killed some raptors I noticed that he was still following me. However, he didn't seem to attack me. Instead he was knelt over the corpses, waving his hands to make them vanish. I knew this to be the animation for skinning the carcasses of the raptors (an ability I didn't possess with my current character). I assumed he was just farming leather for either a crafting profession or to sell at the auction house. So I waved to him to signify that I didn't want to fight to him. He bowed in return and for the duration of that quest he shadowed me so he could skin the raptors as I killed them.

However, when I had collected enough raptor eyes, I mounted my own raptor and headed back to Hammerfall. I did not cross paths with that monk again.

In the regions of Azeroth systematic quests influence player direction as they tell a story or instruct them to migrate to a new area. The activities that take place and who participates in them are influenced by all players present in the area at that moment. There is no guarantee that a Horde region is going to be completely free of Alliance characters. Neutral zones are often unstable, offering no guarantees that one will be safe from the opposing faction. Despite the obvious totem of race/faction and the PvP server rules in play, the performance between the characters involved took precedence. Given the interactions, there was no obvious animosity or antagonism based on the differences of being in the Horde or Alliance. Instead, two player characters decided to make the most of a situation to advance further in the

game. Totems may act as reminders of context yet they are only enforced when a performance calls for them. To focus on characters in Azeroth, during this encounter in the Arathi Highlands there was an interaction between a Pandaren Monk and a Troll Mage. They were trying to coexist despite the hatred between the Alliance and Horde. They decided not to act upon the totem of race/faction during their performance.

Players from opposing factions are limited in communicating directly as decreed by the totem of race/faction. However, they can still utilise pre-programmed animations of elaborate gestures to perform together. Attacking one another is easy enough, especially on a PvP server where players of opposing factions do not need to agree to a duel before they start killing one another. So attempting to perform that they are not an attacker or not going to attack is a challenge in itself. At times players may display the same message in similar ways, for example the monk and I kept a safe distance between each other when we first crossed paths then ran off. We directly avoided being within range of direct melee or ranged attacks so the other could not initiate a violent reaction or if one character did, then the other would have a chance to escape. When I caught sight of him again and saw his arms wave over the raptor's corpse, I could interpret that the monk did not pose an immediate threat as he was farming leather.

The recognition of profession animations permitted me to interpret the non-confrontational meaning of the monk's presence. Learning a profession is another activity a player can engage with in the game. It involves the character learning a basic profession then honing their skills in certain ways so that they are capable of crafting rare items to either equip or use in game. A character can learn up to two primary professions and there are no limitations by class on what one can learn. The

generic animation of all professions is usually the character rubbing their hands together. The only variations are mining which shows the character swinging a pick axe at a mineral node, and herbalism and skinning which have the character kneeling at either a plant or an animal corpse. The monk was kneeling at raptor corpses and then the bodies would vanish signalling that he was a skinner. Given that he appeared to be following me and only skinning corpses, I made my troll wave to him to attempt a friendly gesture. He replied with a bow, a way of confirming our temporary partnership.

When logging in, the player is willingly adhering to a different interpretation of reality. Methods of communication and the meanings of particular words or actions, even the nature of objects, take on new meanings from being altered by the fantasy of play (Fine, 1983, pg7). "Fantasy is constrained by the social expectations of players and of their world" (Fine, 1983, pg4), so there are social expectations and ensuing languages that streamline the interpretation of meaning to allow communication. Encountering the Alliance Pandaren Monk demonstrated a negotiation of resources produced by the game and challenged the relationships of the Horde/Alliance. If this description was written without the fantasy of play, it would be nothing more than two people piloting a mess of polygons around a coded world of graphics to then interact over another series of polygons. The resources themselves, the space and the types of people involved would have no meaning or sense of logic because no meaning has been imposed upon it. The symbols of a game are carefully designed to be logical within the context of play. The fantasy of a game is actually a valuable component of communication. The characters are pieces of the same language game which permits them to potentially communicate regardless of the boundaries set by the context.

This performance is focused around two anonymous players engaging with a language game through their characters. A language game is a social performance that exhibits the player's interpretation of the contextual rules that influence their character. This is done during the performance through negotiating meaning among other characters in order to reach an outcome that can be understood as acceptable for the context (Wittgenstein, 1953, pp37-38, para69-70). Meaning shifts according to the information provided and must be interpreted every time. That is because at the beginning of a performance, where uncertainty occurs, "we don't know the boundaries because none have been drawn. To repeat, we can draw a boundary – for a special purpose. Does it take that to make the concept usable? Not at all! Except perhaps for that special purpose" (Wittgenstein, 1953, pg37, para69). The creation of boundaries is aided through the use of symbols and totems to aid the process as detailed in previous chapters and a previous section. After the performance's conclusion, the resulting language game can be reflected on by the individual. They can contribute to their knowledge of potential meanings and impose an explanation on the performance through the logic of contextual rules (Wittgenstein, 1953, pg92, para221). Meaning allows the creation of characters so it is possible to navigate through a context in an acceptable and logical way (Edgley, 2003, pg143, Hewitt, 2003, pg310). In order for a character to be successful in the context, the actor "must invest their characters with meaning" (Fine, 1983, pg214). The character is an agent that actively performs and engages in the context as well as an embodiment of the potential meanings that correlates to a language game.

A character permits communication between random individuals while allowing all involved to remain anonymous. The performance is centred on the character in the context rather than the whole individual, similar to the way that symbols encourage

the creation and interconnection of meanings to formulate an acceptable logic for our reactions to a stimuli (Hewitt, 2003, pg210, Turner, 1974, pg25, Cohen, 1985, pg12). The connections occur because we can compare and identify overlapping similarities rather than identify a single universal feature found in all meanings; akin to the fibres of a rope, the strength does not lie in a single fibre but the large numbers of fibres that overlap (Wittgenstein, 1958, pg87). The concept of character alludes to a collection of potential definitions: an aspect of an individual's identity; the adaptation of a persona for a particular context; a single role that is performed; a piece of the repertoire for a social actor, and a translation of an individual to adhere to the symbolic code of context. In the field, the label of character takes the form of player to discuss differences in the inhabitants of Azeroth. All of these are abstract fibres of the same metaphorical rope.

A character is a fibre of the rope that is the individual as a whole; a character is a distillation of overlapping meanings into a specific sequence of stimuli embodied by the individual. The illusion of order employed through the use of characters specific to context can exist because "their apparent significance is due to a mistaken division of reality" (Levi-Strauss, 1962, pg18). That quote relates to Levi-Strauss' opening comments on totemism. It is still relevant to the dichotomy of character and individual where the individual is superfluous and the character, a single interpretation of their identity adorned by symbolic totems, is assumed to be the correct one based on context. Character, played by the individual, is made significant due to the division of reality instigated by context. It does not eradicate the individual; the context presents situations where the character is the dominant focus from which to interpret meaning.

Two Applicants for One Job

I was slaughtering members of the Venture Co. Mining company who had established an intrusive dig site in Sholazar Basin, perhaps the only region of Northrend where winter's grasp is absent. It was a welcoming change to see a green forest with no sight of ice or frozen wastes. At the time I was standing on a platform near a woman with an exclamation mark over her head. Given the surroundings this would most likely be an escort quest.

Before I could retrieve the quest, a female Draenei Paladin ran up the ramp towards me. Instantly my loyal Voidwalker attacked her, yet she didn't strike back and simply ran past. I immediately entered a passive command to stop my minion from attacking her. The paladin brought a conga line of unwelcome enemies, suggesting she sprinted through the area. I obliterated every one of them while she stood by the quest giver without saying or doing a thing. She then initiated the quest as the NPC began its routine of practiced speech and proceeded to walk a path it was programmed to do.

Still the paladin didn't budge, she edged nervously towards me and then took steps back. I remained standing on the platform, my Voidwalker still pacified, I had to wait for the quest giver to respawn. Realising she still wasn't moving I typed out "go ahead i'm not going to hurt you"

After a long pause, she merely shrugged in response and headed off.

The quest-giving NPC presented an opportunity to develop a character by directly interacting with the game environment. For the player logged in, such productivity within the game context is pivotal to their character's development. Players gather various commodities to improve the quality of their character so they can venture into more difficult areas of the game context. By doing so, they can challenge perceptions of meaning through the changes to their character's performances. As commodities are gathered from various activities that take place in the broader game world they must be shared with other players who are logged in at the same time. During some performances, fighting over commodities may be called for especially with PvP activities that pit Horde and Alliance players against one another in the name of their faction. Curiously, this was another performance where the antagonistic relationships of the race/faction totem were downplayed to better navigate through the area without conflict.

The response of the paladin draws to attention numerous gameplay mechanics that hinder communication. To speculate on why this hindrance happened, it could be a result of any of the following. Firstly, the player could not be bothered typing out a response so they performed an emotive gesture by typing /shrug in the chat box. Secondly, the player did not speak English and could not understand what I was saying. Finally, my character, a Troll, was not speaking in a language that a Draenei could understand. Is it crucial information to know in order to play the game? No, it was not, because both player characters resumed playing the game on-screen. Did the lack of explanation hinder our interaction? That depends on how one defines a success in that context. If success is defined as upholding the Horde and Alliance rivalry, then it was a failure. If success is defined by permitting players to remain focused on quest-related activities in their time in Azeroth then it was a success. I am capable of recognising performative patterns to form acceptable explanations of the paladin's behaviour. However, the game did not stop on the account of invalidated speculations of motive. The character on-screen or in play is the focus of the interaction, not trying to discern the identity and motive of a player.

A character presents a form of predictable and calculable risk through the totems they embody. The totems define a player's relationship within a context which permits the performance of playing a game. Play is characterised as an easily understandable, safe parody of reality (Malaby, 2007, pg96, 98). The parody of reality can be labelled as fantasy to establish a definitive pattern of meanings to emerge. There are clear boundaries that are reproduced by the rules of a game and the players' characters to define meanings of success and failure for the context (Sahlins, 1976, pg168). It is the character that bears the burden of performing adequately whereas the anonymous individual can remain that way. In the situation

of attempting to communicate with the Draenei, it is difficult to place fault on either performer for a lack of meaning³⁹. Despite race/faction being a defining totem for a character, the performance will only reflect that antagonism at the performer's discretion.

Another factor that could contribute to communication breakdown relates to player anonymity. World of Warcraft is an online game with international appeal and has been translated into numerous languages. It is highly likely that there will be players that only share the common language of playing the game and communicate through the performance of their characters. Actions and knowledge of Azeroth is crucial as the player can perform their understandings of the game to communicate. This encounter was triggered by waiting for a quest-giver to respawn or reappear. One player got to it first so the other had to wait if they wanted to accept it. The paladin was somewhat hindered from progressing because there was uncertainty of my warlock's reaction to her taking the quest while I was dealing with enemy NPCs. Typically this is more than enough reason for a player of the opposing faction to attack the offending player, yet the decision to attack is decided by the individual piloting the character.

According to design notes at some point characters could understand one another if they shared a common language. For example, Forsaken could speak with Humans because of their shared knowledge of Common (WoWwiki). This aspect was removed from the game because players were using it to be insulting and profane to players of the other faction (WoWwiki). WoW encourages antagonism among players as Azeroth is divided by the conflict between Horde and Alliance. Even the action of walking around Azeroth visually reminds the player of this dichotomy. The

³⁹ Aside from two players choosing to ignore the antagonism of the Horde and Alliance in favour of acquiring a quest.

characters of the opposing faction immediately present with a red title in any Azeroth environment on a PvP server. Many players, both Horde and Alliance, have actually told me their motto of “If it’s red, it’s dead” signifying that they do not consider players of the opposing faction as autonomous. A red health bar or title on a character indicates an aggressive NPC that must be culled every time the opportunity presents itself. As a result there is often an ‘attack first, think later’ reflex when players cross each other’s paths. Such gameplay factors and learned behaviours can make cross faction communication extremely difficult and potentially dangerous at times.

When playing a role, one comes to understand how to navigate social life in a way befitting their character, the details of the setting and their range of costumes and props. One has the power to assume whatever character they need in order to be regarded as acceptable to the audience. One has the power to impart a desired meaning through their performance. This can work to an individual’s advantage as they can transform their identity to fulfil certain stereotypes or ingrained roles and assumptions associated with class, culture and physical appearance. When individuals encounter each other, they take note of qualities in each other to then create assumptions based on their experiential knowledge of that context (Branaman, 2001, pp30-31). One’s experiential knowledge is connected to a broader social context, they “are not merely beliefs or attitudes that exist in a vacuum; they are reinforced by the behaviour of both prejudiced people and the targets of their prejudice” (Branaman, 2001, pg30). If an individual desired to perform a particular character, then they may employ various stereotypes to get the intended reaction. In games, players succeeding at a certain character in the group are then encouraged by other players and rewards from the game to be that role every time they play (Pearce, 2009, pp120-121).

Every time player characters interact, they demonstrate the ways they interpret meaning within the game context. Meaning arises in relation to a context, however meaning also relates to “the field of the relation between the gesture of a given human organism and the subsequent behaviour of this organism as indicated to another human organism by that gesture” (Mead, 1934, pp75-76). The exchange of language, the negotiation of meaning among player characters follows the same concepts of attributing meaning through social interaction in relation to objects they can react to (Mead, 1934, pg77). Azeroth’s context is encrypted with a variety of symbols for players to interact with. The encryption of symbols provides a sense of order to the way WoW functions and a guide on how characters should react to the context. For example, the colour of an enemy player and aggressive NPC (red), a player of the same faction (green) and a neutral NPC (yellow) health bar. A player learns to read these differences and learn to see the possibilities of what may happen should they interact with them by playing the game and performing in these contexts. They begin to learn what contexts share commonalities, “an explanation that another person will come to understand by looking for, and seeing, what is common to the pictures” (Wittgenstein, 1953, pg38-39, para72). The same can be observed while playing WoW, in this case, the Draenei Paladin presented to me with a red label and I am sure that my Troll Warlock presented with the same red label to indicate a foe that should be slain. These colours are symbols; they are open to interpretation as they are coexisting descriptions of exact and inexactness that are not bound as neat infallible ideas (Wittgenstein, 1953, pg37, para69). They are not guarantees of a preordained structure that all players will follow in the same way. The differences players exhibit are not wrong either as technically no formal

boundary fully controls a player's actions in game, to do so would compromise the game's quality (Fine, 1983, pp194-195, pg200).

A player's character can only interpret the symbols the character embodies which are categorised by the totems of faction/race, class/level, achievements and equipment as a point of relation. To create meaning, players backstage or off-screen interpret their personal understandings of the game and react to the systemic knowledge that permeates throughout the landscape and the inhabitants of Azeroth. When players encounter one another, they are not necessarily examining the entirety of the player population. They are instead evaluating and reacting to how that specific player interprets and performs their character within the game. From a dramaturgical perspective, the relationship of character and player is closer to a puppet and puppeteer as opposed to the classic imagery of an actor. The application of characters as puppets defines them as symbolic products of a particular context that the individual assumes in order to navigate through that context in a way that can be understood as acceptable (Wittgenstein, 1953, pp36-37, para70, Archer, 2003, pp80-81). Rather than attempting to read the actor as a fluid, dynamic entity within a performance (Goffman, 1974, pp125, 127), the puppet is the point of relation, the reduction of one's identity into something readable and the stimuli to react to. A puppet can still interact like a social actor in the same way that symbols can invoke a many meanings simultaneously. However, it is the ability to recognise the patterns of puppets for a context that streamlines performances in game. Chess enthusiasts and writers refer to this as pattern recognition, a learning process that encourages experience of a particular context. The individual learns multiple patterns of performance rather than specific details of the individual pieces involved (Desjarlais, 2011, pg95). A puppeteer would operate in a similar way because it is

the patterns of a puppet's performance that are the focus of an interaction rather than the puppeteer backstage.

The addition of the puppeteer to the dramaturgical metaphor does not render the description of actor inaccurate. I am suggesting that there should be an alternative label when the field deems it appropriate. An actor does not quite embody the division between on-screen and off-screen that one observes in the virtual realm. A puppeteer also highlights my interests in acknowledging the characters one crafts to navigate through a context, particularly in an online game where one witnesses a puppet show on screen⁴⁰. The metaphor of a puppet acknowledges the veil of anonymity that comes from being online. So I intend to describe an encounter from this game using the dramaturgy of a puppeteer as opposed to an actor to explore the divide between on-screen and off-screen performances. As it is experimental, it will not replace actor for the rest of the thesis.

The symbols of puppeteer and puppet rather than actor can offer a useful way to describe social performances in an online context. It acknowledges that there is a division between the performance of the character and the individual controlling it off stage. There is a clear definition of a character created to embody a context and a complex individual who has distilled their experiences to create such a character. It acknowledges a boundary between the performance on stage and the broader context the performance is grounded in to subliminally acknowledge that social performances are connected and influencing one another. The player is comprised of the character or puppet which is visible to the context and the individual or puppeteer who is invisible to the game but still controlling the character. This is part

⁴⁰ Although it should be noted that one can still criticise the customisation options available to a puppet in any virtual context as well as the process of creating and performing one's puppet.

of online games because the player can see their character perform on-screen while remaining separate and invisible to the stage. Uncertainty is part of this dynamic as players are limited to seeing the virtual realm through their screen and only what is presented on that screen.

Playing as a Puppet Master or a Skilled Actor?

There appeared to be more skeletons on the ground near Thrallmar of the Hellfire Peninsula. This particular region tended to attract players with characters between 58-90 as it is the entry point for the Outlands. So noticing that there are also a lot of Horde toons around 58-64 I suspected it was safe-ish to carry on questing. A few moments later the shadow of a drake appeared followed by my instant death at the hands of a level 90 Alliance Hunter. I couldn't tell race or gender because they had on a novelty enchantment that disguised them as a skeleton.

From my vantage point of being a corpse I watched the hunter murder practically all of the Horde characters in the area. They consistently did this, waiting for us to respawn then flying over and killing us again. Every time the hunter shouted "Y O U L O S E"

Well thankyou captain obvious, you totally won... seeing as you practically killed an opponent that had no chance whatsoever of even hurting you. Rather than waste my shamanistic magic to reincarnate where my corpse lay or release my spirit to the nearest graveyard to begin the trek to find my corporeal vessel, I decided to watch from the perspective of my shaman's dead body on the ground. Around that moment I could hear my dogs barking outside my window; I momentarily left my computer to settle them down while Bandicam was still running so I could watch it later.

Upon my return a few minutes later I saw the reaction to this hunter's ganking. Other level 90 Horde characters began to emerge and patrol the area on their flying mounts. After this the Alliance hunter appeared to stop ganking everyone. To be honest I can't specifically say how it was resolved, I was more pleased with the fact I could get on with my questing in peace after I resurrected.

The hunter performed according to the antagonistic relationship of the race/faction totem by reading Horde characters as enemy NPCs instead of anonymous players.

From the perspective of my character being a corpse on the ground, a puppet with severed strings, I was able to become an observer to this rather masterful

manipulation of the context through a character's performance and tend to matters

beyond the game with ease. The hunter in question was someone who was focused on PvP based activities. This was performed by the use of a disguise with a novelty spell to obscure players from quickly assessing them on a superficial level. This delays the process of evaluation and obscures the visual aesthetics of the character's totems. In PvP fights every second makes a difference between life or death in game, so to hinder the process of evaluation is a clever tactic. Then there is the hunter's determination to override the game's language barrier by typing each letter as its own word, making it impossible for the game to translate it into Common so Horde players cannot see it. This performance demonstrated knowledge of hindering opponents and tricking the game simultaneously without disrupting gameplay. It meant that this hunter was quite experienced in playing and drawing on their accumulated knowledge of PvP activities to perform.

Theoretically a performer and the audience are defined by their actions. In game, players are constantly reading one another to comprehend the symbols embodied by the characters and game. In turn other players and even the game reacts to one's presence and alters their actions to accommodate the additional player. The audience or bystanders⁴¹ also contribute by being present yet are more passive in that they contribute symbols to be interpreted rather than impose how the symbols are to be used. "During a performance, it is only fellow performers who respond to each other in the direct way as inhabitants of the same realm: the audience responds indirectly, glancing, following alongside, as it were, cheering on but not intercepting." (Goffman, 1974, pg127). In this encounter I was a performer and willingly alternated as part of the audience once my shaman was killed. I was not directly performing with the hunter; instead I was contributing to the context as a

⁴¹ Commonly NPCs in game.

prop, just a corpse on the ground to elicit a warning to anyone who saw me. The dramaturgical label of a puppeteer is suitable for this context because a character in Azeroth can literally be dropped or become lifeless like a puppet when the puppeteer is not holding onto its strings.

Ganking, the constant assassination of lower level characters, can be extremely frustrating for a player as it abruptly interrupts and halts one's journey through Azeroth. There is a shift in meanings based on the character level/class to create a food chain where the lower level characters are defenceless prey for the higher level characters. When the difference is great enough, a high level character can kill a low level character with a single hit. A character's class/level signals the abilities unlocked for that character and whether they are strong enough to face numerous challenges. The disparity between each decade is massive as the investment of time and accumulation of XP rewards the player with more power. For example, a level 50 character can easily butcher a swarm of level 25 monsters while wandering the wilds, so there is value in levelling up as trials that inhibited a character's journey cease to be a challenge. Therefore a level capped character can do as they please in lower level regions because they have a statistical advantage against the NPC population and possibly the players they encounter. A max level character has expanded the potentiality of meanings for a context which creates freedom in easy mobility through Azeroth. High level players often travel to whatever region they want to for farming resources, exploration, ganking/assassination of lower level players, patrolling for gankers or simply because they can. There is no aspect of WoW's mechanics or Azeroth lore that construes such actions as out of place or illogical. After all, conflict appears to be central to the founding of Azeroth through every design choice by Blizzard.

The result of this ganking possibly had some ulterior motive as the hunter ceased to perform it once more level 90 Horde players began to emerge in the area. Usually when players are being ganked they will warn other players about it by telling them the level, class and rough location of the ganker. This is done by submitting a message in the general chat channel which all players of that faction can see. Alternatively players can inform their guild and request protection or they can log out and log back in as a stronger character, go to the area and fight the offending player themselves. Totemic kinship in this circumstance prompted by the Horde/Alliance rivalry can present a dichotomy. By aligning a character with one faction they become a rival to the other faction. For this encounter, kinship provoked antagonism between characters based on the difference of embodied symbols. When questing through areas the space itself is shared between numerous players regardless of whether they confront one another. When an area has a lot of player traffic and most of the players are of the same faction then players of the opposing faction may avoid that area. This is a performance of survival by minimising the chance of being ambushed by numerous players and adds to a 'safety in numbers' mentality which is a powerful deterrent to players of the other faction. Of course, this can also have the opposite effect and act as a catalyst as players may group together and attack the area creating a miniature battle zone for control of the area.

The performance of this hunter, regardless of the negative connotations prompted by it, can be understood as masterful for this context. The activities of a game possess a level of organisation to achieve a relation between the player-character and the challenge they face (Fine, 1983, pg105, Juul, 2005, pp112-113). Players need to read the variations of characters they encounter and evaluate how that particular character will react to their presence. When players do not have a basic

understanding of the game they are limited in which meanings they can impart. As they receive more knowledge, a player learns the boundaries of what is acceptable or unacceptable. They may test these boundaries to create new types of unexpected performances (Consalvo, 2009, pg409). A way of emphasising this point is by examining the cheater, or people who bend the game's rules to their advantage, "the cheater wants you to think you are both playing the same game but in actuality you are not" (Consalvo, 2009, pg409). The only reason the player can achieve this advantage is if they understand how to manipulate a performance to directly benefit them while not compromising or breaking any existing rules that govern that context; this may potentially be understood as a masterful performance of character.

Players learn to assimilate with the existing population through a long process of experimental interactions and exposure to that particular context. Turner explained this as "we see only what we expect to see, what we expect to see is what we're conditioned to see when we learn the interpretations of culture" (1979, pg235). Within a game or when we are engaged with an activity that can be understood as play, the ways in which we understand various words and symbols are distorted by fantasy. This creates the magic affiliated with play by challenging the ways we interpret meaning in relation to the mundane. However, one is still subjected to a context that one needs to interpret, experience and study in order to gain acceptance into the community. Only by practising one's character through participation and observation can a player perform adequately and effectively invoke meanings in any activity related that that particular context. Armed with a profound knowledge of the game a player can then choose to exploit certain aspects of the game's context, as seen through the actions of the hunter. The success of the performance is a good indicator of a player's experience of the game as they perform such actions without

compromising the game's rules (Consalvo, 2009, pg409). Higher level characters are often playing with the meanings of the rules because they are travelling through lower levelled areas and slaying low level enemies to achieve their goals. This is nonetheless discouraged by gameplay mechanics that constantly encourage travel to more dangerous locations when one is strong enough. There are no rules that prohibit a player from going back to a low level area or any boundaries that prohibit a player from casual exploration in the open world.

Player characters require interaction with other players to evaluate their skill at playing the game, thus allowing them to define themselves as a certain role. To be a skilled player the character who represents them must fulfil certain qualities, propagated in a definite way through context (Sahlins, 1976, pg168). Thus meaning becomes introduced to various contexts in game as a point of relation, a thing to react to, permitting the meaning to survive in a cultural existence and evolve with the innovations of the descendants of the culture (Sahlins, 1976, pg168). A character in WoW is a result of surviving meanings that precede WoW as they align with the character creation gameplay mechanic central to the role-playing game genre. The superficial meanings of how the symbols relate to the game differ quite dramatically according to the relation of context and character within an interaction. The dynamic of a game's context and player characters are the product of a long standing system of meaning introduced at the inception of role-playing games that has been engaged with by generations of players.

Virtual reality builds further on the dichotomy of character and player, and a development of the dramaturgical perspective, as the character is a puppet performing and the player is a puppeteer who is pulling the strings. The metaphorical puppeteer is an alternative description of how to regard social interactions facilitated

by technology because there is a barrier between physical and virtual realities. The information a puppeteer can see is what the puppet performs with; the other puppeteers are invisible and can walk away during the performance (as noted in the encounter where I had to tend to my dogs beyond the game). The alternate label of actor is adept at metaphorically defining social performances in the physical reality; my suggestion here is not to remove it. The puppeteer is a descriptive term to be analysed in order to theoretically illustrate online socialisation. It is not meant to indicate that the identity of the puppeteer off-screen is pivotal to the interaction, it is meant to emphasise the focus on the puppet.

My concern of applying the terms puppet and puppeteer is that it falsely creates an assumption that the world off-screen is either central, important and mandatory knowledge for interactions on-screen. In some circumstances such as playing with a familiar group of characters or individuals who know one another beyond the game; knowledge of the world off-screen may be important. However, intimate knowledge of players is not mandatory knowledge for playing the game. This dynamic is analytically challenged most by the term 'player' which can entail the following meanings within a game. Firstly, a player can be an individual with an interest in playing games or who actively plays games. Secondly, a player can be the individual off-screen that is commonly characterised through speculation and assumptions by other players. Thirdly, a player can refer to a character that moves autonomously through the game instead of from a programmed algorithm. While playing an online game there is an alignment of puppet and puppeteer, as one identity, the 'player'; a label that can be applied to the individual behind the screen and a type of occupant of Azeroth that moves autonomously. A character or puppet replaces the possibility of needing to comprehend every aspect of a complex identity in order to interact.

Instead, a symbolic code (i.e. a character) is easy to interpret once an individual comprehends the pattern recognition prompted by the combination of character and context.

The puppeteer and actor possess numerous overlapping qualities through the complexities of performing an identity. These terms offer explanations to describe a performance, yet neither of them is superior or inferior to the other. To relate to the rope metaphor mentioned earlier, the puppeteer and the actor are fibres that weave together to create an understanding of social performances (Wittgenstein, 1958, pg87). The puppeteer differs because they highlight the divisions of self during an interaction whether it be performer/observer or character/individual. The actor is an individual on stage while the puppeteer controls a puppet before the audience. The puppet is a symbolic character to represent the puppeteer while they remain out of the audience's sight or backstage. The puppeteer will pull their puppet's strings to make them perform adequately yet the puppeteer remains out of the scene. From their vantage point, they can control the actions of their puppet and observe the overall scene like a member of the audience. The inclusion of technology while playing a RPG adds a distinct barrier between the player and the game. The player is off-screen while their character, their puppet, is visible to other players and the active participant of an interaction. The puppet cannot exist unless there is a puppeteer to control them.

To observe socialisation in an online world, it is important to acknowledge the level of division between what is observed on-screen and what is invisible beyond it. Knowledge about the identity of the puppeteer is not mandatory knowledge for such interactions. The puppet is pivotal to an online context because there is an expectation of anonymity; an uncertainty of who one is interacting with (Isabella,

2007, section 1.1, Nakamura, 2009, pp129-131, Besley, 2010, pp20-21). Creating this boundary can have issues as it may focus research on the speculation that the puppeteer's identity beyond the screen is central to the game. This is not the case and by speculating about what is happening around the game as opposed to in the game, can lead researchers to ignore the complex interpretation of meanings that playing the game entails. A character represents part of a community in that they share a commonality, whether it is through language, contexts, aesthetics or the method of attributing meaning because "we cannot be ourselves unless we are also members in whom there is a community of attitudes which control the attitudes of all" (Mead, 1934, pp163-164). The interpretation of meaning is strengthened by the relationships it has on an individual and communal level yet the relationships must be defined as they are sensitive to context.

Online games form a performance of play that is defined by players communicating with one another about both participation, how they play the game, and spectatorship or how they evaluate the ways others play the game (Gergen, 2015, pg57). Each player may have a different way of upholding the rules or shared knowledge of the game yet they share the experience of play by being part of the same context (Consalvo, 2007, pp84-86). Performances are negotiations among players as to which interpretation of the game's meanings are perceived as the most relevant to a context at that time. To learn meaning requires immersion into the perspective of the greater community, for example, the act of reading the instruction manual. If one receives a hard copy of it, the manual presents the structure and rules of the game to form a basic systemic knowledge. The manual also speaks of technical details for running the game and what aspects of the keyboard synchronise with particular acts on the screen. However, it does not inform a player of how to

progress through the game. That blank is filled by the player navigating their way through the game and learning the required knowledge to be perceived as effective in their role; an interactive process that requires the aid of the player population to guide them in the attribution of meaning.

Why do you think there are no more raves in Azeroth?

Even though the beautiful golden forests and mighty palaces of the Vale of Eternal Blossoms were truly breathtaking, the monotony of completing daily quests for various factions easily became a grind over the past few days. I was beginning to question whether the Golden Lotus were even capable of fighting off the impending Mogu invasion given how they seemed to rely heavily on passing travellers to do their dirty work. At that time I was heading back to the Golden Lotus encampment just outside the Ruins of Guo-Lai. I had report my success in killing spiders and breaking statues to Anji and Kun Autumnlight... like I said, daily quests are very much a grind until you build up enough of a reputation in a faction to get some kind of reward.

While I was receiving my pay for the work, an Orc Death Knight I had seen earlier approached on his fire drake. We hadn't talked but I had seen him in the ruins too so he was probably running dailies as well. I guess it was fortunate he was around, as Allies tend to stay away from areas if they see multiple Horde members there. In fact he had helped me kill off a swarm of monsters and I bestowed the Mark of the Wild on him to boost his stats for the next hour. I hadn't bothered shifting from my bat form because I was about to fly off when the orc said to me "lol ur a bat"

I answered "it's kinda fun being one".

"silly troll, bats are for caves! >.>"

"crap, better find one then, try to blend in"

He laughs out loud from this; his voice was somewhat demonic from being tainted by the scourge. I then received my next quests from Anji, these would take me deeper into the Chambers of Guo-Lai. I said to the orc "catch ya later"

His parting words to me were "green bear, red mohawk... well you won't blend in with normal bears haha, peace"

"I'll have you know us trolls are masters of disguise, why do you think there are no more raves in Azeroth?"

I could hear him laugh as I flew off.

When both players are members of the same faction they can potentially create a friendly relationship and a motivation for helping another player, even if they do not personally get any rewards for their efforts. In this situation I had passed on a beneficial spell or buff to a nearby Horde player to temporarily improve their character. In turn, he helped me repel a swarm of enemy NPCs. We knew nothing of one another, other than that we were both members of the Horde. We were both united against a common enemy in the Alliance through the symbols our characters embodied. The feud between the Horde and Alliance spans millennia in Azeroth and is a complex network of relations that shapes their societies. For the player, labelling a character as Horde or Alliance immediately constricts their ability to interpret varied potential meanings. The decision of how to react to them is already strongly reflected in the context of the game, as seen in the prior encounters.

When looking at its lore, Azeroth is a very grim and serious place torn by war and unending perils despite its colourful, almost playful, cartoon art style in game. The official concept art depicts a more serious world suitable for high fantasy. Prior to World of Warcraft, the Warcraft series was mainly focused around epic battles and commanding armies through them. There were elements of humour in earlier games of the Warcraft franchise as little treats for the player to discover while playing. Presently the game has taken a less serious tone courtesy of the players and their attribution of meaning while performing their characters. Whether breaking a performance is negative or positive is up to an individual. Theoretically Goffman explained this through the example of “the spy in his ‘real’ identity and the spy in his ‘assumed’ identity. The spy knows only those details about his ‘assumed’ self that he is told and cannot recall other ‘biographical facts’” (cited in Fine, 1983, pg195). For serious roleplayers, who are omitted from these accounts, there is an expectation of

awareness and dedication to performing their character accordingly (Fine, 1983, pg194-195). For PvE and PvP, severity is tied to one's actions rather than attempting to reflect on Azeroth's lore. There are many contextual opportunities to break the fourth wall and attempt to speak to the player behind the character. The most common way is being part of the same faction. Yet when players communicate, there is rarely any interest in ascertaining the identity of the one piloting the character. Instead, it is common for players to offer critiques of design aspects of the game, as seen in conversations among characters of the same faction, which can often add a touch of humour to an otherwise serious and war town world. The game is at the whim of a player's disposition as they shift the meanings of the encrypted reality around them. The challenge of rapidly fluctuating meanings is ensuring that the surrounding players are aware that there will be a shift in meanings and are willing to play along with the jests.

When players break a contextual and symbolic boundary to offer commentary about the game, the players, as individuals off-screen, are intruding in the game because they are not part of Azeroth; their character is. Moments like these are intriguing due to potentially being understood as intruding deviant meanings affiliated with the term player in game. While logged in, a player is predominantly a character that moves autonomously through Azeroth rather than being controlled by the programming.

When the individual off-screen imposes their commentary of the game, the meaning of player shifts and the interaction turns to the anonymous and the world beyond the game. This particular exchange between my druid and the death knight did not need a deeply convoluted relationship. It was an observation of a shared context that offered a humorous interpretation of Azeroth's aesthetics. Attempting to decipher the

anonymous player's identity was of no importance to the interaction whatsoever⁴². Our observations were still focused upon the game itself as well as aspects of pop culture, commonly of Western influence, to critique the context rather than understanding the player as a complex individual. The previous encounter displayed an antagonistic reaction based on faction; this encounter displays an amicable one. It could be that it manifested actively by helping another player receive rewards, complete a task or grant a boon. It can also manifest as jocular conversation and humorous commentary about the logic of the game context.

Players often break the context to jest about races in Azeroth, particular classes and even elements of the world that seem out of place when put in the context of understanding Azeroth as a game⁴³. In encounters such as these, the player off-screen is the source of reaction instead of the character on-screen. The reception of such jokes depends on the individuals and whether they can interpret the amusing qualities of the game. In this encounter the main joke was about the garish colour schemes of the animal forms for the Troll druid compared to the Night Elf, Tauren and Worgen druids whose animal forms are more 'naturally'⁴⁴ coloured in comparison. The mention of raves is definitely out of character as there are no such things in any Azeroth lore. Raves are an activity from our reality that both players were familiar with and were able to identify similarities through the use of bright, colourful pallets. This is a situation where knowledge from our reality spills into Azeroth to shape the overall atmosphere for that encounter. Instead of reacting to

⁴² In a sense, it is often unacceptable or uncomfortable to ask personal details of a random player's identity. Even in a guild there may be reservations about doing so and it may take months to years of being in that guild before more intimate knowledge is revealed. This is especially true for women who play the game as revealing their gender can make them a target for harassment and abuse from male players.

⁴³ By game, I mean an activity associated with play which overlooks the virtual world of Azeroth in all its complexities.

⁴⁴ As natural as one can get in a world of garish monsters and dramatic villains.

the immediacy of the encounter, the game context presented an opportunity to jest about the design choices of Blizzard.

In MMORPGs, individuals rely on symbols to identify the context of a situation and metacommunication to convey their meanings. Communication in games revolves partly around what is deemed possible by the gameplay mechanics and canonical lore so the game aesthetics are not compromised (Nardi, 2010, pg43-44, pg56, pg104). The other part is based on the disposition of the player, the identity of the character, the awareness of the context they are part of and their navigation through it (Fine, 1983, pg194). A player bases the interpretation of meaning for a game through “one’s primary framework, the world of game rules grounded in the game structure and the knowledge of the fantasy world” (Fine, 1983, pg194); or in my language, their character and their performance in the context to interpret meaning. Mobility between different potential interpretations offers players autonomy in the ways they perform in game. This can also create conflicts over differing interpretations and even the mismatched dispositions between players can shift how they interact with one another. The result of this is that one’s character and capacity to perform them is revealed by the way they play.

Conclusion

A player performs their character and uses whatever symbols they have on hand to navigate a game. Whether it is comprehended as an actor or an extension of the individual through the puppeteer does not alter its innate symbolic nature. A character serves as a symbolic translation of aspects of an individual’s identity into an easily understood format for a context. Just as symbols possess a fluid dynamism

in meanings, so do individuals and the characters they invoke during performances. In WoW, a player's character embodies Azeroth's totems that act as reminders to the game's structure. In the absence of intimate knowledge, the potential to read the characters and context allows one to construct a description. To interact with symbols fills in the gaps of incomplete knowledge; in order to do so there must be a blind spot to begin with. In this chapter, totems were used as a way to interact anonymously by shifting the focus of interaction onto a character that belonged to a specific community and context. As outlined earlier, characters embody the following categories of symbolic totems to contribute to the overall context; race/faction, class/level, equipment and achievements to have made them appear more significant to the context. Totems act as the bridge between the immediacy of player interactions and their place within the game world. They possess the power to divide or unite based on symbolic kinship; patterns of symbols that can invoke amicable or antagonistic relationships such as the totem of race/faction. However, the performance always decides whether or not these totems are acknowledged and interpreted according to the characters present.

The way one plays reflects one's comprehension of the game, one's ability to speak the language used by players and how one navigates through the game context (Aupers, 2015, pg89). The inclusion of technology for a performance has highlighted the presence of anonymity as characters present a detached variation of an individual's identity in the virtual realm. To accommodate this, I introduced a new dramaturgical image, describing the individual as a puppeteer rather than actor due to the boundary between virtual and physical realities for one of the accounts. It was not meant to replace actor completely but to open more ways of explaining online performances. However, there is caution in this change of symbol as it can mislead

researchers into speculating about the unknown off-screen as opposed to what is seen on-screen. The use of symbols, even in a scholarly explanation, allows interactions to progress in spite of uncertainty and incomplete knowledge because all reactions are based on the character in that context rather than the whole individual.

Chapter 4: Venturing into the Unknown Space

The unknown space is an effect in game contexts that presents unfamiliar performances in familiar locations. The source of unfamiliarity is mainly prompted in two ways, the use of the location and the time the performance takes place. The unknown space can be helpful in learning about social life as it allows individuals to learn and rehearse their characters with little risk of stigma should they make a mistake. By venturing into the unknown space, an individual can have their preconceived ideas of a context challenged which leads them to refine their character's performance. As the unknown space's strength lies in its ability to challenge one's interpretation of reality, it tends to manifest in contexts located in non-places. The open regions of Azeroth are non-places where the interpretation of meaning is not heavily dictated. A character can perform a variety of interactions such as farming resources, levelling, duelling, exploring or migrating, in an open region. However, these regions are designed to facilitate the actions of a particular calibre of player by the level of their character. That does not preclude higher or lower level characters from entering, just encourages appropriately levelled characters to migrate there. This then results in an unknown space because when a

player ventures through an open region, they never know who they will run into or whether the game's context will react kindly to their character's presence.

The previous chapter focused on the character and on anonymity. This chapter looks at the other half of the dichotomy, context and the unknown space. The chapter proceeds with a brief explanation of the rite of levelling, the most basic activity in game commonly exhibited in open regions, and the theory of non-places to complement the gameplay mechanics of Azeroth's environment. I accidentally learned of the unknown space from two separate logins with the same character, a level 40-44 troll mage, as it allowed me to observe the transformation of the same context over two days. The unknown space allows players to practise their characters as they can experiment with their use of symbols with minimal consequences. The unknown space may also be haunted by revenants that challenge one's perception of an area. By revenant, I am referring to players using performances that were more relevant to an older version of a present context. Most of the performances can be regarded as mundane or routine; a type of interaction that is crucial to learning how symbols are used in the game but seldom reflected upon. The unknown space is deceptive in Azeroth because it eventually dissipates as the player becomes familiar with the virtual world by playing the game. Yet the unknown space then takes on a new form through the presence of other players in an area; one never knows what performances one will take part in when venturing through Azeroth. As a result of my experience, the nature of 'war' in this world becomes undermined as the 'war' is an elaborate performance of play-fighting.

Levelling – Learning how to perform as a Character

When an individual is part of a community, they⁴⁵ learn both to speak the language of meanings that relate to that community, and the potentiality of meanings prompted by symbols. The individual learns to assume various characters to reflect the meanings of the individual in the context (Mead, 1934, pg329). The process of character formation builds an individual into the community by how they interact with other communal members. These members are familiar with the language and in turn teach the individual to reorganise their interpretation of meaning to align with the broader language of the community (Mead, 1934, pg283). The interactive process of learning this language is not based on a perfect formula as it requires practice and experimentation. Ideally the end result is for an individual to be capable of performing an interpretation of meaning that has similar implications for the other individual as well as themselves (Mead, 1934, pg327).

Learning to perform a particular character is not a matter of perfect replication, instead it focuses on the ability to apply meaning (Winch, 1958, pg55-56). To learn the application of meaning is to follow Wittgenstein's notion of "going on in the *same way*" or to do "something *different* from what one was originally shown; but *in relation to the rule* that is being followed" (cited in Winch, 1958, pg56). To speak a language displays the comprehension of those symbols as part of a systemic code (Parmentier, 2016, pg9). The symbol itself is a representation or the externalisation of an idea which is interpreted by interacting with it (Parmentier, 2016, pg43). Given that it is impossible to view the internal workings of a mind (hidden knowledge), symbols manifest in ways that can be externally observed, sensed and studied (Parmentier, 2016, pg42). The ability to interact with others, to perform, is a way of

⁴⁵ Please refer to footnote 1

learning and testing an individual's understanding of a language. When the language is applied throughout a performance and interacted with, the individual can experience the use of symbols. Playing any form of RPG is an excellent context because the game world is usually very detailed and characterised by lore so the players are learning a new language the moment they start playing. As they perform in acceptable ways while playing, their character 'levels up' or strengthens allowing them to progress further in the game. The lines of winning and losing blur to make the game a network of complex social systems that need to be interacted with and interpreted (Rettberg, 2008, pg25). A player is actively rewarded by the game for learning to speak the language of the game's context.

The game context is embedded with boundaries leading to a complex network of meanings that evolve in complexity as the game progresses (Fine, 1983, pp185-187). The ability to interpret within a game is evident in role-playing games and can be understood on three levels of organised meanings; they provide a reference point on which to base all interpreted meanings. Fine understood these as frameworks and keying, I regard them as contexts and characters. First is a primary context which is the common-sense and understandings we learn from the real world, second is the game context which alters what information can be used and what structure the game holds, and finally there are characters which allow players to adopt various personas to navigate through a game's context (Fine, 1983, pg186). A player can choose whichever character they desire so long as it fits the context of the game. Games are contexts of calculable risks as certain acts will lead to guaranteed consequences that do not deviate from the game's structure, rules or logic (Malaby, 2007, 2006). Part of the fantasy in Azeroth and core part of the game mechanics is the fact that if one invests time, develops a character and goes on

various adventures one will be rewarded for one's efforts. In reality this is not a guarantee, which only makes MMORPGs more alluring as players can log in, develop their character(s) further and know they will progress in game by performing a particular way.

While a character is a symbolic relation to a context, the developments of a character reflect an individual's ability to interpret meaning. Azeroth on the surface may appear to be alien and unique from reality due to its fantasy themes. However, this world is populated and designed by people from our physical reality so the ways in which they interact will often mirror what occurs on a daily basis. The ability to play the game well is prized in Azeroth but so is the ability to decode the reality of WoW in clever or spontaneous ways (Pearce, 2009, pg147). This permits self-governance among players because while the technology provides aesthetics to use, the players shape the game collectively through complex networks of relations and interactions (Malaby, 2009, pp56-57). In Azeroth, players are capable of reading one another and passing judgement by looking at a character's totems, as outlined in the previous chapter. This establishes a ritual relation between the player and the type of character they have created, because it entails a "collection of attitudes and obligatory ways of behaving" (Levi-Strauss, 1962, pg59). The character they shape by playing becomes a way of representing them in the game as well as an embodiment of a totemic combination for other players to read and understand. However conflict can potentially arise if players rely on reading totems as opposed to using them in performances.

Regardless of which performances a player chooses to take part in while playing, a character will level up. This is because almost anything a character does in Azeroth can be quantified into XP (experience points). Most actions accumulate XP and once

the correct amount is collected the character levels up. This is accompanied by the visual effect on-screen where an aura of glowing golden light surrounds the character, a whooshing sound and a list of new places and abilities. Levelling is the backbone of gameplay mechanics and a character totem because by levelling, the character becomes stronger and can therefore go to more places without fear of being killed by the local wildlife, equip themselves with more extravagant equipment and unlock end game content for the expansion through raids⁴⁶. The types of activities a player focuses on and how well they perform in these activities also influences how much XP is generated, with more difficult feats generating more XP.

Levelling can be theoretically understood as a rite or ritual in playing WoW to learn to perform a character for the context of Azeroth. Rites establish a development of roles an individual can take, such as the transition between child to adult, promotions at work, moving to next grade at school, to create a shift in how that individual relates to the society around them (Gluckman cited in Hannerz, 1980, pp231-232). Contexts are prone to shifting and evolving so if a character undergoes a ritual it means “a threshold of discontinuity in their form has been marked”, they have adapted to such changes so they can remain relevant to the context (Hannerz, 1980, pg239). Ritual plays into the creation of character: “through rituals, whole persons can to some degree be fragmented into roles, so that what happens in one kind of involvement need not affect all other facets of a relationship” (Hannerz, 1980, pg239). While Hannerz and Gluckman were discussing different perspectives of urban life, they still acknowledged the need to create an identity to manage certain roles or relationships within a social situation. I refer to this end result as character. While levelling is a rite in developing a character for WoW, the specifics of *rites de*

⁴⁶ Elite dungeon runs ranging in groups of ten to forty players

passage will follow in the next chapter elucidate a more notable rite of passage by considering the example of an Azeroth dungeon.

A rite establishes the segmentation of an identity as it develops because the individual is learning new ways of interacting while still maintaining the identities they already have (Hannerz, 1980, pg232). There is a complexity in how a player can perform in game just as an individual learns to behave in daily life; “we may say that under the circumstances, the difference between what is made known about the self in a particular situation and what could be known involves the parts which the individual plays in all other situations” (Hannerz, 1980, pg232). Performing in the unknown space reveals how there is variety in the manifestation of performances, how the same role can be played differently according to character. A character evolves through rites that are facilitated by the unknown space, which allows them to take on new roles or responsibilities. The character is still part of the individual so they perform according to the autonomy of the individual, which is the sum of prior experiences and knowledge they possess.

Levelling is an accumulative process as expansions keep increasing the level cap or maximum level a character can be. A player can only level up and they cannot level down as once XP is acquired, it cannot decrease or be stolen and one’s character cannot become worse than their current level. This is a suspension of temporary fantasy compared to reality where skills must be constantly practised and it is possible to become worse at a particular activity. This gameplay mechanic and accompanying fantasy also encourages log ins and subscriptions as players technically do not lose their progress when not present in game. MMORPGs usually have certain expectations of time investment to create and develop a character; the more arduous the task at hand the more competent that character must be

(Snodgrass, 2014, pg481). The promise of progress and guaranteed rewards encourages an investment of time as online games demand a commitment from the player in order to unlock new areas and activities (Snodgrass, 2014, pp481-482). Beyond the boundaries of the game this can potentially have a negative effect on the individual when they “feel pulled to approximate belief and behaviour in the *same* domain situated in competing and even *conflicting* normative worlds” (Snodgrass, 2014, pg496). This conflict manifests when a player must decide whether to invest their time in playing the game or logging off to tend to their life outside Azeroth. Even though a player may spend time crafting their character, the game allows them to log off for any amount of time and resume their character’s development from the point they left. The game world may have changed between log ins, yet the character remains the same.

At times playing as their main character can feel tedious and repetitive to the player. To alleviate the tediousness, they may choose to rotate between alternative characters (*alts*) and their main character (henceforth, *main*) thus repeating the process of levelling all over again. I learned this quickly as I started playing the game and grew curious of how other classes navigated through Azeroth; how did their experiences in the same game differ? Casual discussions with players outside the game also confirmed that creating alts is a normal practice in game as they use different characters for various activities in Azeroth or simply because they are bored of their main and want to play as something else for a while. If you regard the game as building a character to fit the world, the main is the best the player can do and the one the player uses most while the alt is a side project for varying motives such as farming materials, seeing the game through a new perspective, exploring the game’s lore or being groomed to take on a specific role (Fine, 1983, pg174). It is common for

players to define their characters by PvP and PvE or the group roles of healer, tank and DPS. This allows the player to create more opportunities to participate in activities and interact with others as they can slot into a group according to its needs. However, the act of levelling can become a grind and lose its appeal. When players focus on essentially doing the same acts repetitively, they can become bored and are no longer playing for leisure or fun (Pargman, 2008, pp230-231).

The acknowledgement of the levelling grind demonstrates a player beginning to adapt to a 'no boundary' state of mind. From this perspective the sense of adventure is replaced by feelings of mundane familiarity based on the routines and structure of the game (Pargman, 2008, p 234-235). This is something that I felt severely during the described log in, where my routine was to get a quest, go to an area, be murdered by an alliance player, resurrect, finish the quest, turn it in, repair my gear, repeat. At the time, all I wanted to do was explore the Eastern Plaguelands and follow the quest line through because it had interesting lore to it. I was not looking for a fight with other players. This disenchantment is connected with learning to understand the particular language game that takes focus in that particular context. In PvE circumstances one migrates to areas and accepts quests until one has levelled up enough to move onto the next region. The first visit may be taken seriously or in character with the world, but soon the activity of questing and exploration adopts a 'what do you want and what do I get for it?' mentality in regard to quest givers. This signals a shift in the meaning of questing as it becomes mundane labour within the game and characters are actively selling their labour to various NPCs that hand out quests. The vivid world around you becomes mediocre when one treks from quest to quest in search of rewards rather than engaging with

the game. To combat this feeling, players may create many characters for differing purposes to expand their knowledge of meanings for the game.

Levelling rites symbolically represent the acquisition of knowledge for the character and how to survive the dangers of Azeroth; a visible representation of the knowledge the player has acquired. Levelling is a public performance within the game that is discernible to other players through observation or interaction; therefore the method one chooses to develop their character influences their performative abilities. The fact that a character has levelled means that they have completed enough tasks to amass the necessary XP. By extension the player has acquired knowledge about the game's design which establishes common, overlapping similarities such as knowledge of gameplay mechanics which can possibly be applied to other games of the same genre (Pargman, 2008, pp234-235). A quote from a gamer from Pargman's research states "You know what you are like after a couple of years when you sort of see the game mechanics after a few minutes and you understand what sort of genre of games [this is] and you just grasp everything" (2008, pg234). By playing a game the player comes to understand the ways in which a virtual world creates a sense of order and logic which can be carried over to other games of a similar genre. On-screen, levelling appears to only visibly affect the character yet it actually impacts the player beyond the game and backstage to the performance. When a player learns to perform as a character they are also learning how they perceive the broader game genre and attribute meaning to its symbols. Their character's identity and their identity as a player emerge through their autonomy in the experience of playing; of actively engaging with the unknown space.

The activity of questing is the backbone of World of Warcraft and is a staple in the MMORPG genre. Questing refers to the activity of completing a specific task for an

NPC in exchange for in game rewards to help build your character, representing the exchange of the character's labour for in game commodities or profit. This activity establishes a goal for players to work towards while logged in and as mentioned earlier, allows them to develop organisational skills in how to best complete the tasks of varying difficulties for compensation (Snodgrass, 2014, pg482). There is a definite system of labour and compensation that "bestows power and ability on a character, allowing it to complete more difficult game challenges, which, in turn, allows them to advance even further" (Snodgrass, 2014, pg482). Most commonly this takes the form of quests which influence the migration patterns of the character within the game context. Once a player has accepted a quest, they then travel to a designated marker on their map to complete it or find whatever the NPC requests. Specific places for questing are allocated by quest giving NPCs who are found scattered throughout the regions of Azeroth and within dungeons. The NPCs are static in meaning and always hand out the same quest for the same reward as long as the character has not previously completed the quest.

The Meaning of Space

When a player is questing they are part of the broader environment of Azeroth and not contained within a designated section within the game like dungeons, battlefields or arenas. In this broadly shared space of Azeroth, usually an open region of Azeroth's geography, the possibilities of meaning are open to interpretation. Performances within these regions possess randomness in their manifestation as each player approaches and interprets them differently (Snodgrass, 2014, pg482). The significance of interpreting meaning is highlighted in Azeroth because of "the

constituting skill of actors to recognise that its ‘meaningfulness’ is actively and continually negotiated, not merely the programmed communication of already established meanings” (Giddens, 1993, pg111). How a player navigates through an open region of Azeroth reveals the kind of character they are. In an open region, questing is perhaps the most linear activity; however, there are no time limits for completion or nor instructions on how the act is to be completed. There is a task at hand, a reward for completing it and a marker to direct the player’s migration. The journey itself, the meaningfulness of the act, is performed by the player and this is mainly possible in open regions or non-places of Azeroth.

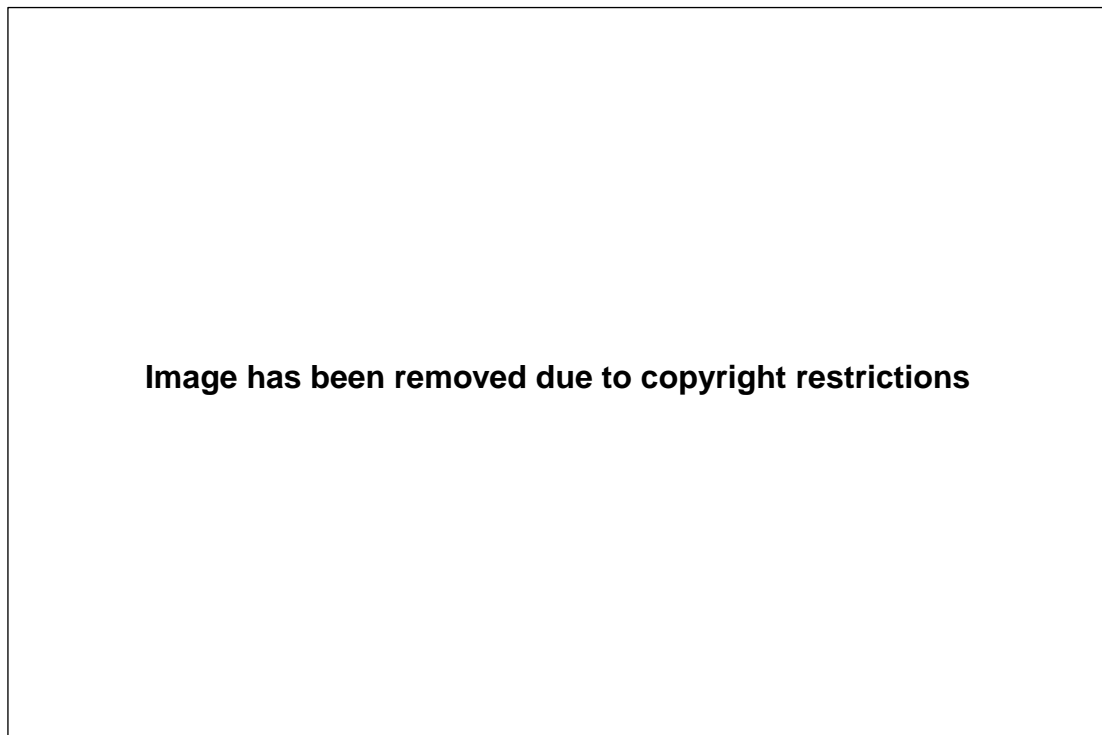


Figure 7: *Map of Eastern Plaguelands – a region of the Eastern Kingdoms continent*

The majority of open regions (such as figure 7) which are dedicated to activities that help a character level up are non-places. Maps such as that shown in figure 7 do not become detailed until the player has actively explored the unknown space. The game rewards the player for interacting with it, for performing in Azeroth as a character of its context. Open regions have fewer formal constraints of identity and

associated meanings which can limit the negotiation of possible meanings for a situation (Auge, 1995, pg76). Non-spaces can achieve this as “one of their key characteristics is the omnipresence of signs” (Gottschalk, 2015, pg7), such signs or symbols offer suggested instructions of how the space can be used. The open regions or non-places of Azeroth facilitate different levelling activities for a player to use to strengthen their character. The choices a player makes in how they level up often reflects their playing style, their interpretation and understanding of the game as well as their character in the game for the time they are logged in. The theory of non-places defines the nature of Azeroth’s regions as the key quality of these spaces is that they “mediate a whole mass of relations, with the self and with others, which are only indirectly connected with their purposes” (Auge, 1995, pg76). This is an accurate description of virtual environments in games, which often consist of broad open areas. These areas are decorated to the aesthetic tone of the game which all players must traverse in order to interact with that world. While these areas may be programmed with possible activities for the players to engage with, it is still the player who decides what to do and how to do it in these regions.

Some analysts have suggestions of referring to game worlds as third places (Timmermans, 2015, pg289). Third spaces are either characterised by playfulness, wit and frivolity or categorised as mediating organised play and free play, in order to establish virtual worlds as a contemporary public forum to facilitate interactions outside the home or work (Rao cited in Timmermans, 2015, pg289). I prefer to utilise the label of non-place as it invokes a meaning of potentiality for a virtual world, without merely relegating it to frivolity. The superficial, playful and inviting aesthetic of virtual worlds, like MMORPGs, remains contingent on the serious social processes that permit it to exist in a way that can be understood as logical

(Timmermans, 2015, pg290). The recognition of “play and reality are really one” is crucial to social life given the ways in which we attribute meaning to societal structures (Timmermans, 2015, pg290). Within this thesis I am using a virtual world to explore the ways in which games and their players interpret meaning in order to allow further reflection on the way one processes and wields meaning in social life as a whole.

The places and non-places one performs in provide an encrypted reality to reinforce the altered interpretations of reality. An encrypted reality can emerge when an individual learns the underlying details of a context and reacts to them to the best of their ability. The reaction is influenced by a communal knowledge through the negotiation of meaning in their interactions to present a definition of the context (Goffman, 1959, pg231, Wittgenstein, 1953, pg6, para3, Cohen, 1985, pg12).

Encrypted reality encompasses the unspoken codes, appropriate behaviours and expected practices that we must decode as individuals in order to socialise within the space (Soja, 1996, pp56-57, 65-67). Encryption can relate to Symbolic

Interactionism as encryption allows one to interact with collections of similar symbols to mediate the process of identifying when appropriate social practices need to be performed. Encrypted reality deals with the way symbols are placed throughout a reality in how they are laid out to become focal points of spaces. There are places and non-places that influence the ability to interact, yet these places have an encrypted reality throughout that affects which symbols an individual can utilise to create meanings.

Encrypted reality can be literal in an online game or virtual reality environment because the player is aware that they are participating in a constructed realm (Fine, 1983, pg194-195). There is a physical boundary of technology that separates the

player from their character which creates the surreal experience of watching yourself perform, rather than seeing the world only through a first-person view. It is an out of body experience like you are watching yourself from above. When looking at the screen you can see your character and you can see everything around them, as far as your screen allows. This level of technological division adds to the encryption of the game's reality because you are allowed to physically leave your character's perspective to see the world with them in it. Encrypted realities can also manifest in our reality, albeit in a less jarring fashion. We rely on such encryption, the placing of symbols throughout our reality, to negotiate between the types of decorum, totems and systemic knowledge that influence our activities. The concept of non-place builds further on the notion of encrypted reality by making the encryption of reality the main focus. Non-place can refer to a non-existent place in reality or a place that can only exist within specific social boundaries rather than a formal ever-present structure (Auge, 1995, pg76). Such a place may be defined by the understanding and interpretation of symbols to create an encrypted reality (Cohen, 1985, pg12). As a result, non-places can take the form of a behaviour or activity which allows an individual to regard themselves differently from the circumstances in reality (Auge, 1995, pp76, 91).

With the openness of interpretation allowed by non-places, there exists the opportunity to learn social life. The unfamiliarity of a location or its encryption creates the unknown space. In this space, individuals may rehearse their characters with minimal consequences for any mistakes and greater range of criteria for a successful performance. The performances are mundane, in the sense that they have no long lasting detrimental effect on the character. One may become more familiar with the unknown space over time if they practice their character however the space evolves

in complexity. The individual starts seeing revenants of the past in the unknown space in a way that challenges one's place in it. One may try to learn all secrets of the unknown space, yet the space perpetually rises to challenge one's perception of a context and their characters. The power of the unknown space is that it can turn familiar performances into unfamiliar interactions. In a sense, it can be quite intimate and only unveiled as the unknown space when acknowledged by the individual venturing into it. However, one is not immune from the consequences of ignorance and the performance proceeds regardless.

I just want to level up in peace!

My expectation for this log in was that I would be describing a typical, routine performance of levelling solo in an open region. What I came to realise is I had wandered into the unknown space as all of my expectations were challenged and broken over those two days through the performances of the player characters around me in how we all used the same space. Upon reflection of how I chose to describe my experiences over the two days that are the focus of this chapter, I realised that I was taking various aspects of the game for granted in relation to my character. I was able to realise this by acknowledging that my symbolic knowledge of the game had grown exponentially by engaging with it, so I was able to understand what was deemed noteworthy by the player and which meanings take precedence over others (Maines, 1977, pg239). In my quest for XP and loot I did not specifically reflect on every monstrous encounter with an enemy NPC or even take any notice of the details for the numerous quests I embarked on in the name of levelling.

Generally, such actions are regarded as a monotonous grind in Azeroth, whereas in

our reality the very sight of such monstrous creatures is enough to disrupt our perception of normalcy (Pargman, 2008, pp232, 234-235). Quests can be simplified as the evaluation of a commodity's value based on time and labour. The types of quests requested by NPCs typically come in the following variations; killing a certain number of a specific beast; killing a single opponent that is deemed stronger than the others prowling nearby; collecting a certain quest-related resource otherwise invisible to the player; escorting a friendly NPC to their destination, or travelling to a specific area. While the setting of the scene shifts, the basic performance of questing remains unchanged as the performance of completing a quest guarantees a reward.

My intrigue has come not from the insight of complex meanings in Azeroth I have gained through playing this game, but of how quickly I have to come to adjust to a sense of normalcy. As an individual, I had adjusted my views to fit with the "generalised other" of the player community (Mead, 1934, pg154). My character's performance was a dynamic of taking in and reacting to the overall meanings of the community as well as conveying such meanings throughout every context I engaged with (Mead, 1934, pg154). Killing monsters in the broader world of Azeroth (as opposed to a dungeon or raid) and completing quests can commonly be regarded as a basic, benign and generally boring aspect of gameplay by players. However, it is a necessary part of playing MMORPGs as a character needs to be built and developed with time to ensure that the player can pilot them in a way that can be interpreted as skilful. These tasks are used by players to actively perform as that character according to all the totemic symbols they embody. This cycle of learning and growth is one that is not actively noted by players; most do not question why, as levelling is the guaranteed path to advancement within the game. The learning also never stops

because the open regions, the non-places, of Azeroth encourage the unknown space by appearing familiar yet being prone to deviations in meaning.

To return to the initial point, I have noticed this removal of the mundane from my retelling of the events and the way it reflects my experience. However, such a retelling would be many pages longer if I specified every beast I had slain and the details of every quest I undertook and completed. I might even reach the point where perhaps I could not identify the performances of navigating through the world due to there being simply too many contextual specifics and reactions to note. Instead I have realised that by attaining knowledge of Azeroth and WoW, I have learnt the fundamental basic meanings of its symbols, therefore I am able to promptly categorise what I observe on-screen. Levelling is programmed to be an easy challenge, as any player no matter how their character is built, can complete it. So to the player, the activity is repetitive, mundane and a grind that goes relatively unnoticed when they discuss their experiences of the game among players (Ducheneaut, 2007, pg839). It is an activity of little chance or risk because the resources needed to level will spawn in a specific area, a reward will be given for completing a quest and by decree of the gameplay mechanics, NPCs cannot deviate from such rules. The risks associated with levelling often emerge from the appearance and inclusion of nearby players. Therefore the encounters I have provided are focused around player interactions and the manner in which players use the totemic symbols of race/faction, level and equipment to assess one another in game. These three totems are particularly visible, allowing quick evaluation which suits the instantaneous nature of reading other players in open regions.

My general plan for navigating the Eastern Plaguelands was to focus on quests and collecting herbs. I had no intention of engaging in player combat so I would not

actively pursue or target enemy players⁴⁷. In this circumstance, I was playing as a frost mage. Due to their reliance on casting spells, the majority of my attacks required time to manifest in game as an energy blast to harm my opponent. Any attempt to move, even to evade an oncoming attack, would interrupt and cancel the casting of my spell which gave me a disadvantage against characters of melee classes who could attack instantaneously. There were abilities I could use to deter opponents but they had not yet been unlocked as I was not at a high enough level for my mage to wield them. Also I was unfamiliar with the nuances of playing as a mage, compared to a druid, warlock or monk, so I was venturing into the unknown space with an underdeveloped character⁴⁸. Even before interacting with other players, I could already see the risks of playing with an unfamiliar class which made me want to avoid any player that wished to attack me... well, more so than usual.

I felt like taking a break from playing as my main now I had run the quest lines in Pandaria dry and was left with the choices of dailies or dungeons. So I decided to level up one of my alts, my mage who was around level 40 at the start of this.

The zone in question, the Eastern Plaguelands, is known for being a volatile and unsafe place. Firstly, it has been corrupted beyond salvation by the Scourge to the point where the plants are decomposing and the dead walk the earth. Secondly it is one of the main outposts for the Scarlet Crusade, a deranged religious empire dedicated to the eradication of anything undead. Thirdly, Amani forest trolls are striking from the north in a risky move to reclaim their ancestral land. The only ally in this damned wasteland is the Argent Crusade who are trying to repair the damage by eradicating these three foes.

And the danger doesn't stop there. Given it is a contested area filled with challenges, it is also known socially as a heavy PvP area where players from opposing factions cross paths. This at times can be met with temporary yet uneasy alliance but for the most part it creates an infuriating cycle of players being ganked⁴⁹. To make matters worse, the recent patch has allowed players from different servers to cross paths in the big wide world instead of just

⁴⁷ During a performance, you can see a player running towards you for melee combat, or a spell caster will position themselves within range and begin a casting animation. It is a visible action on-screen to indicate that they want to fight you. The only class or specialisations that can sneak up on unsuspecting players are all types of Rogues and Feral Druids as they have the ability to stealth/prowl. This ability turns the character invisible to other players and NPCs until they reveal themselves, are detected by an enemy NPC or receive damage from area of effect (AoE) or damage over time (DoT) abilities. They tend to use this sneak attack as part of their combat performance.

⁴⁸ Underdeveloped because I was new to playing the class.

⁴⁹ The actual meaning of ganking varies depending on play style. PvE players understand it to be high level players assassinating low level players (strong hunting the weak) whereas PvP players see the act of ganking as a staple of being on a PvP server. In a PvP sense, any time you attack another player character, you are ganking. Given I am a PvE player, I will work with ganking as the assassination of weaker characters.

through the dungeon finder. In the past, low level areas were pretty empty meaning deaths by player encounters were kept to a minimum. Maybe you'd run into an enemy player, but it was also so far and few between that it never really was a hindrance for me. You get the odd corpse camper⁵⁰, but a simple log out and log in tends to do the trick in making them move on. It's nothing to cry about, definitely nothing to make you quit playing completely.

But I didn't like my chances that this would remain the same now...

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Figure 8: *First sighting of the Alliance Pandaren Monk*

So onwards I trek through the unforgiving and decaying wilderness with no one but my water elemental for company. I encounter some other players during this time, the first was a Pandaren Monk who helped me defeat a large plaguebat (Figure 8) and second was a level 90 Troll Hunter who seemed to be... patrolling? He wasn't farming resources or anything like that, he was just standing around surveying the landscape. I passed him and went on my way. There weren't any major conflicts, most Alliance players I passed just walked by as well so perhaps they wanted to just quest and not engage in a fight. This was fine by me.

However, I was just minding my own business and gathering herbs at the time, but I came out from behind a tree to see a Dwarf Warlock targeting me. He quickly killed me as I was unprepared and not used to fighting other players. After I had died I noticed how the dwarf had a friend, a Human Paladin, both were two levels ahead of me. Frustratingly they seemed to be camping out my corpse because neither was moving too far from where it had fallen.

A few moments later the level 90 Troll Hunter from earlier descended on the general area. The dwarf fled instantly while the human remained still and backed away from the hunter. The troll then stood around waiting for me to get back to my body, then proceeded to mount his drake and fly off.

I was able to complete a few more quests before my next interruption when a level 90 Night Elf Hunter descended from the sky, ganked me and flew off never to be seen again. To put things in perspective, a level 90 character can instantly kill anyone lower than level 85 by farting in their general direction; yes they are really that powerful. I still don't see why ganking is necessary and actually it's a pain the arse when you're just questing and not

⁵⁰ PvP players who remain by your character's corpse, waits for you to respawn and attacks while you still have half health – making you an easy kill.

looking for trouble. From then I travelled past a Gnome Warlock, a Human Warrior and an Undead Warrior, no one made any contact with the other, no one wanted to fight.

When I reached Corin's Crossing to gather cultist regalia and decomposing flesh, I crossed paths with the helpful Pandaren Monk again (Figure 9). Even though we didn't directly make contact or speak, we cooperated for a short time. We fought side by side and vanquished a mob, however I had to banish my water elemental servant because it was blindly attacking my ally and I did not want to provoke him. Once again we parted ways without saying a word. The programming doesn't really allow you to talk to the opposing faction other than through emotes or attacking them outright.



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Figure 9: Second sighting of the Alliance Pandaren Monk

Things seemed to be going alright. Obviously the number of Alliance players I was encountering was worrying given I was alone and part of the Horde... but so far I had only been killed by them twice. I had made it to Light's Hope Chapel (Figure 10), the main outpost for the Argent Crusade. Going through the small area I could see four Alliance players idle, possibly afk or waiting for something, and one Horde player fleeing the town on their undead steed. To be honest you're safer from player attacks within a town or outpost like this because the NPC guards are high level and do not tolerate attacks, so anyone stepping out of line is killed quickly.

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Figure 10: *Stopover at Light's Hope Chapel*

Given the number of Alliance players heading north, I decided to go south, to Tyr's Hand to face the Scarlet Crusade. As I was a mage I had to be more strategic in my attacks so it took me longer than usual to complete the quests. At last I was at the final quest in the chain and had just cleared out the boss chamber of his minions, meaning I could face him one on one... until a Human Warrior, five levels above me, came along and cut me to pieces from behind (Figure 11)... he seemed to run off so at least he wasn't corpse camping.

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Figure 11: *First attack from behind by Alliance Human Warrior while fighting Crusader Lord Valdelmar*

I returned to Light's Hope Chapel to turn in the last quest for the Tyr's Hand chain. Got a nice XP boost for my trouble. So I took in a few more quests and headed off in the opposite direction, towards Browman Mill to complete the next lot of quests in that area. Plenty of undead as usual, the Eastern Plaguelands are pretty monotonous like that. It's all just dying

plants, weird mushrooms and zombies as far as the eye can see. However, that was not the last time I saw that particular jackass from Tyr's hand. He was heading up the northern path while I was minding my own business and then he charged me while I was fighting a mob. He just swooped like an opportunistic dick and ambushed me (Figures 12-13).

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Figure 12: *Trying to run away from same Alliance Human Warrior while fighting Death Singer*

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Figure 13: *Cornered and about to die at hands of Alliance Human Warrior*

Well, of course I fucking died! He's a higher level. He's a warrior covered in plate armour with a big axe while I'm a mage wearing a dressing gown with a sentient puddle friend! No recovery spells like priests or warlocks who have actual demon friends who do useful things like fight instead of splashing my opponents. Who do you think won? It sure as hell wasn't me.

*Any time he was even remotely near me he would drop what he was doing, run over and butcher me. Total fucking dickhead. Bloody piece of shit! This always happened at a time when I was fighting other monsters or somehow incapacitated. Between Browman Mill and the fungi infested path leading to the Noxious Glade, I was killed five times by this guy... he just... wouldn't **fuck off**.*

In fact, once I got a better look at him which tends to happen when you're running back to your corpse and he's just standing nearby... waiting for you, ready to fucking kill you again. I realised that he was in heirloom gear... I'm just in the gear you find while questing... so this is not a fair fight in the slightest. We are not equal opponents in any way.

This absolute c[expletive deleted]⁵¹, this fucking cockwomble of the highest pedigree would NOT FUCK OFF!

After this happened another three times I logged off because I wasn't making any progress with this c[expletive deleted] camping my corpse⁵².

I had a general idea of what types of performances I wanted to interact with, questing and collecting herbs, but the players around me had other plans for my interactions with the game. Here was a difference between player characters reacting to the immediate performance and those who only saw the totems my character embodied. To the first Alliance character, the monk I encountered (figures 8-9), I was another player attempting to navigate through the dangers of the Eastern Plaguelands and become stronger in the process. The second Alliance character, the warrior (figures 11-13), interacted with the totems I represented. I was a Horde enemy, I needed to be killed as I was an offence to the Alliance. The frustration I felt while playing was because the warrior did not want to interact with me as a character with an anonymous player, they performed like I was an enemy NPC. Given I was not permitted to perform in the way I chose, I logged off. I had no more patience by the end of it because the warrior would not move on and kept forcing me to perform with him. When the player solely relies on identifying totems rather than being able to

⁵¹ This language had been included to an extent because it was how I felt at the time and this word was quite helpful in conveying my anger. The pronunciation alone feels more like a strong jab of anger compared to other expletives. I am not offended by swearing (as you can tell by reading my descriptions), you as the reader may not be offended either. However, I still acknowledge that this particular word, which starts with 'c' and rhymes with 'punt', can be regarded as highly offensive at the time of writing to some readers. For that reason I have chosen to censor that expletive so I can be mindful of the readers who don't care for that word.

⁵² I am aware that grammatically 'camping on my corpse' would be correct, however in game the term is 'corpse camping' and 'you camp a corpse'.

read a performance, it creates conflict even when it is unknown to the other performers.

Communication is limited between the Horde and Alliance (as shown in the previous chapter) so the performance within the game is crucial. One could equally argue that the warrior was acting within the lore of the game while I was performing incorrectly. That equally neglects that players creatively exert their interpretations within the game allowing them choices in how they perform and navigate the game world. Even with Azeroth in mind, there appears to be a divide between players who want to fight other players and players who want to engage with the world of Azeroth. This is why there were PvE and PvP servers⁵³. However, I was on a PvP server so how could I get so emotional over being attacked constantly by Alliance players? As a player I understand that it will happen, especially on a PvP server. But when it is constant and by the same character who is being relentless in their monotonous performance, my patience reaches a limit and I no longer want to partake in the experience. I chose to leave the game.⁵⁴ It is not a matter of wanting to give up playing, complaining loudly or questioning the mental state of the Alliance player. After all, it is a game and the circumstances allowed them to perform that way and deem it acceptable. In turn, I saw a way to stop the perpetual deaths and took it.

The relationship between the anonymous player and the identified character on-screen is rife with difficult relationships. The character can almost be occupied by the player rather than an independent entity (Rowlands, 2012, pg159), whereas others suggest that the character is the mediator between the individual and the broader

⁵³ Even though at the time of Mists of Pandaria there were only American and European servers. The other regions did not come into play until the next expansion, Warlords of Draenor. Therefore, servers were overcrowded leading to players having to join servers that accommodated styles of play they may not be interested in such as PvE players on PvP servers. This was also unavoidable because you need to choose a server before you can create a character.

⁵⁴ World PvP is optional in Battle for Azeroth (2018) with the creation of normal servers rather than PvE and PvP. After all, Azeroth is a game world that can be edited by its programmers and designers, allowing it to evolve over time.

community (Taylor, 2006, pg110). Oddly this comes into question while playing as a character because the level of abstraction becomes clouded by emotive responses. For example, when the character succumbs to a trauma “the player behind the digital mask is the one who experiences this breach” (Rowlands, 2012, pg159). While I was playing the game, it was not the fact that my character died that angered me. Death within an MMORPG is not final, but more a nuisance or an obstacle that has to be overcome when your character’s HP (health points) reaches zero (Klastrup, 2008, pg144-145). For PvE, a death during a performance can tell the player that they were either not prepared for the encounter or that they need to adjust their strategy. The encounter also resets and does not persist unless the player initiates it. PvP encounters tend to be more frustrating to players as there is no clear indication of when or **if** it will end (Klastrup, 2008, pg157). So upon reflection, my distress was elicited by the fact that the warrior refused to entertain that the performance could go differently or even end the performance altogether. My mage and that warrior crossing paths did not have to end in bloodshed. He did not have to divert his path in the same general area to then attack me. I was forced to participate in that performance despite my disinterest. Therefore, the only aspect of the performance I had any control over and which would end that forced performance was the ability to log out.

The act of logging out can elicit negative connotations of being a difficult player to perform with, simultaneously it can be seen as a demonstration of a player’s power and agency in a game. Game developers have the power to change the game world, the design of characters and the rules of play while players have the power to choose whether they even play the game (Smith, 2007, pp27-28). All players “are fully free not to enter a specific game and fully free in principle to leave whenever

they chose (although certain conditions may compel them to stay)” (Smith, 2007, pg30). The ‘conditions’ that may compel one to stay depends on the performance. In this situation I was in a general region, not in a group with any of my friends or family, I was not partaking in any guild related events at the time and I had no idea who this warrior was so I did not care what they thought of me⁵⁵. There were no outlying conditions at that time that would compel me to stay in the game. When direct communication is not possible and one performer insists there is only one way for the performance to proceed, I find that it is better to leave the performance than remain. There are many ways to perform as a character, yet the validity of that character depends on whether they fit into the performance in a context. Technically neither myself or the warrior were acting inappropriately for the game; my problem arose from a clash of playing styles and our use of symbols.

The symbols a character embodies can influence how they are perceived and interacted with by a community. The relationships of totemic symbols can possess stigmas or elicit negative reactions by the presence of that symbol which potentially override an individual’s actions. The performance is focused on what the symbol **is** as opposed to how the symbol is **used**. In Azeroth, the only apparent stimuli for PvP attacks were the symbols my character embodied. After all, I had no prior experience with these players and made no gestures to indicate that I would attack them. This in particular was demonstrated by the warrior in heirloom gear that first started hunting me at Tyr’s Hand. I could see he was wearing the plate heirloom set which offers a far superior ability boost than any items available in the region or dungeon appropriate for our levels. So how did the symbols embodied by my character play

⁵⁵ Whether someone cares about their identity in game is a personal choice so I can understand if some players disagree with my remark. I know there are players who would remain and valiantly fight back to restore their honour if they were being ganked by a member of the opposing faction, but I am not one of them.

against me? Firstly, my race or faction was Horde, while most of the players I encountered during this log in were from the Alliance. Secondly, my level did not increase as quickly because of my interrupted journey meaning some of my mage's abilities making me easy prey. Thirdly, I was playing as a mage which is a class that is a glass cannon, extremely powerful but very delicate. Finally, my equipment was the uncommon quality gear you receive from questing in the area which equates to the bare minimum of statistical amplification. Collectively these totems prompted others to attack me as I posed little danger to them. So while I was attempting to learn how to perform as a mage, I learned instead how totemic symbols can initiate reactions from PvP players regardless of my performance or actions in game.

The unknown space manifested by permitting such performances to occur in a region of the game affiliated more with PvE rather than PvP. By venturing in the space, I could learn more of the combat layered throughout the game. Combat is highly visible through WoW's design; however, this danger is structured and adheres to specific rules through the gameplay mechanics (Malaby, 2009a, pp48-49). An enemy NPC, while potentially life threatening, will only attack if the player aggroes them or gets their attention. If the player flees combat the NPC enemy will eventually stop pursuing them and return to their pre-programmed routine like nothing had happened. They also do not level up as they must reflect not only the aesthetics of the region, but the level of the region. A player will not encounter a level 90 monster in a level 60 zone and the enemy NPCs do not migrate as they remain confined to their designated areas. The game's rules and design limitations are often jested about by players as it seems out of place in a game that boasts utter freedom to adventure and spontaneously experiment. However, if monsters could roam as freely

as players it would alienate many potential players, as the game would then be regarded as too difficult to play (Juul, 2005, pp112-113).

Unlike NPCs, a player can choose to make their presence known to others by interacting with them from a direct attack to simply crossing paths. A player can only see what is on their screen and they cannot look beyond the horizon as the game does not allow it. One can alter their perspectives by manipulating the camera angle of the game that is constantly focused on their character and their immediate surroundings. Through the acquisition of knowledge from playing, a player can manipulate this factor to their own needs whether it is to hide from others or ambush them without the aid of a stealth move unique to rogues, hunters and druids (Fine, 1983, pg212). By venturing into the unknown space, players can be experimentally creative because while the gameplay mechanics may encourage attacks on the opposing faction, it is up to the player to actually perform the kill if they choose to do so while questing (Pearce, 2009, pg154). This choice is highly encouraged as numerous quests throughout the game have players killing NPCs that resemble the playable races of the game, blurring the lines between NPC enemy which attacks every time and a player who can have a range of reactions. There is nothing to control the migratory patterns of players, especially at higher levels when they acquire flying mounts, thus breaking down any limit as to where a player can venture in the programmed world. Players have little knowledge of who they will encounter when they log in, outside their guild or friend list, and it is likely that they will not meet who they encounter again once they log off. This creates many short interactions where the knowledge of the game is imperative and the primary reason for actually attempting to communicate. Even if it is just to brutally murder your opponent, spit on

their corpse and sit on their head to teabag them or rub your genitals on their face, all are perfectly acceptable reactions to the symbols of Azeroth.

During my log in I noticed that the level of the players who attacked me had coloured levels on their character portraits. They were red, orange and yellow. Given the numbers they highlighted, I can interpret that red meant the player was much stronger than me while yellow meant they were of a similar level as me. I noticed the level of the warrior who kept stalking me went from yellow to orange to red as he levelled up, making him a more fearsome target. Enemy NPCs follow the same colour pattern to indicate whether an enemy can be slain at your current level. There are two additional categories to indicate low levels. Green means that the NPC is weaker than one's character and rewards loot and a smaller portion of XP upon death. Grey means that the NPC gives loot or coin and no XP. So while the warrior rose in ranks to become red, I know given the programming that my level in relation to his would have gone from yellow to green. This indicated an easier kill and he would have continued killing me until my level appeared as grey which means no reward.

This colour system and the totemic symbols can result in opportunistic stalking behaviour and corpse-camping. The ability to do so and be understood as acceptable is established by opposing totemic symbols embodied by the character; such as the Horde and Alliance rivalry. When a player who does not want to PvP is consistently attacked by enemy characters, the game quickly shifts from playing to persisting or putting up with it. By logging in, especially on a PvP server, you expect to be attacked at some point and you accept that risk when you agree to play. All players have a subjective tolerance level and eventually they no longer feel engaged with the game due to the constant interruptions from dying and respawning. This

does take time as the process entails your character's ghost reuniting with their corpse after travelling from a graveyard to the point of death. The interpretation process becomes linear as the context, including the predatory player, denies the potential to deviate from performing the role of prey. The advantage of playing a game like this is that if you do not like what you are encountering or are no longer enjoying yourself, you can leave Azeroth at any time by logging off.

At the end of this log in, I was actively being hunted by a Human Warrior and thus unable to progress with levelling as I was dying too frequently. Symbolically the warrior was upholding the natural order of Azeroth where Alliance and Horde are sworn enemies. However, it could be countered that this order was also upheld by the Alliance Pandaren Monk helping me earlier as this game is meant to be multiplayer and collaborative in nature. There is an element of chance to the interpretation of meaning among characters and contexts because "chance is not merely sought out but carved out" (Goffman, 1967, pg200). While Goffman came to this conclusion from observing gamblers, the same could be said of the act of interpreting meaning. There is uncertainty of which potential meaning is dominant at that time. The characters present may actively perform in a way that ensures their desired meaning is dominant or they may seek out performances where that meaning has the highest chance of happening. Open regions such as the Eastern Plaguelands are non-places with a high potentiality of meanings. This also results in a higher level of uncertainty over which meaning will be dominant for that time as meanings that appear acceptable in that context are exponentially possible. So among the characters present, the interpretation of meaning through interacting with other players and Azeroth is a game of chance in non-places.

A region's identity can be explored by players so they are familiar with the design. These regions encourage sharing space within a confined non-place of the game world. While players are making their decisions about their movements they are sharing that region with whoever else is logged in at the same time. The game accommodates all players through rapid respawning of monsters and resources. Questing marks the use of the region's commodities by the player until they reach the level cap of the region and then migrate to the next region. There are players who do not belong as their characters are far stronger than the recommended level of the region. They are often present for other activities such as farming resources, ganking, performing older quests due to an interest in lore and at times because the player has a certain favouritism for that region. Even knowing these details, there is still a sense of the unknown space. This unfamiliarity with a place or non-place occurs when one finds oneself learning or challenged by the range of performances facilitated by a location. One may learn other boundaries of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour and how the context justifies it. One may be challenged by the performances one is dragged into. All is possible because the location in question is a non-place and the unknown space manifests easier in a place with fewer constraints on meaning.

Is that unimaginative c[expletive deleted] ⁵⁶gone?

The following day was recorded and read similarly to the previous day. I was still playing as my mage with the intent of questing through the Eastern Plaguelands. I also constructed these accounts based on player interaction as opposed to NPC

⁵⁶ Please refer to footnote 48

interactions as they presented a greater range of performative responses to my presence. Each encounter represents the use of symbols to create meaning and would not be possible without the understandings of Azeroth presented in earlier chapters. On a theoretical level, there is a constant play in the powers of meanings that permit certain actions to be performed in game. These meanings are attributed to organisations of symbols that present elaborate relationships in how players relate to the game world and to other players. These relationships are constantly negotiated and read during performances leading to the temporal dynamic of symbol and meaning. Even the difference of a day can drastically alter what kind of experience one encounters in Azeroth.

When I logged in again the next day I didn't see the Human Warrior who had followed me earlier. Yet there was still an abundance of Alliance players, a few more Horde players in the mix (so at least it was balanced now) and the trade chat was going crazy with sightings of level 90 players ganking anyone in sight. Great... just what I fucking needed... I was further motivated to leave when an Argent Sentry shouted "Your actions will not be tolerated!" before a swarm of guards slaughtered a player near the griffons, so I'm guessing it was Alliance.

So I got the hell out of town, riding my skeletal raptor through the wilds to get to my next quest. You know, this area has a lot of towers... was this area originally designed for PvP as it would be great for a game of capture the tower. It's possible, I mean, I wasn't around for the earlier expansions so it could've been a whole different area for all I know. If so, shit, I had enough of this nonsense after going through Stranglethorn.

As I'm picking herbs I receive a whisper from an Orc Hunter saying "let me know if u run into any alliance trouble" followed by an invitation into a group. I accept and reply "thanks" as I see him fly overhead on his wyvern. He waved back to me. I look at the group and see it consists of three people (including me), an Orc Hunter and a Blood Elf Paladin, both at level 90 and from a different server to mine. Obviously they enlisted me into the group to keep an eye out given the vast level differences and the fact I had never seen them before.

He answers "np bro"

I then remark "it's like the plaguelands makes the makes the alliance go crazy"

The Orc Hunter laughs and says "yeah everywhere" while the Blood Elf Paladin mentions the number 10 to which the Hunter answers "i'm with you"

The Paladin then says "k back ot where our bodies are" and "imma check there"

At this point I realise they were definitely caught up with something else but I could still hear them through the party chat channel. A few seconds pass when I see their conversation pop up again.

The Hunter said “nothing is picking up on my tracking”

To which the Paladin replies “hmmm dang” followed by “brb bathroom”

“ok” says the Hunter. I then notice the logo by their character portraits to indicate they’re on another server. It seems the game has chosen this moment to misalign our servers and shared territory leaving me out of contact with them. However, it wasn’t worrying because there were a few Alliance and Horde players around my level and we were questing. No one was trying to kill each other and we were all here for the same thing.

I can still hear their conversation though as the Paladin asks “back anything?”

“nope”

I still don’t get how this cross server interaction is supposed to work... but it seems to have a few kinks in it.

He then says “imma camp my pally here” then “so if we get attacked”

“ok” was the last thing I heard before they were disconnected. I’m not entirely sure why as you can’t know what’s happening on the other end.

I was then shot down by a level 90 Night Elf Hunter, a different one from my previous log in but nonetheless still an annoying fucktrumpet (Figure 14). So I get on the party channel with a message “lvl 90 hunter just passed through lx’lar’s domain”

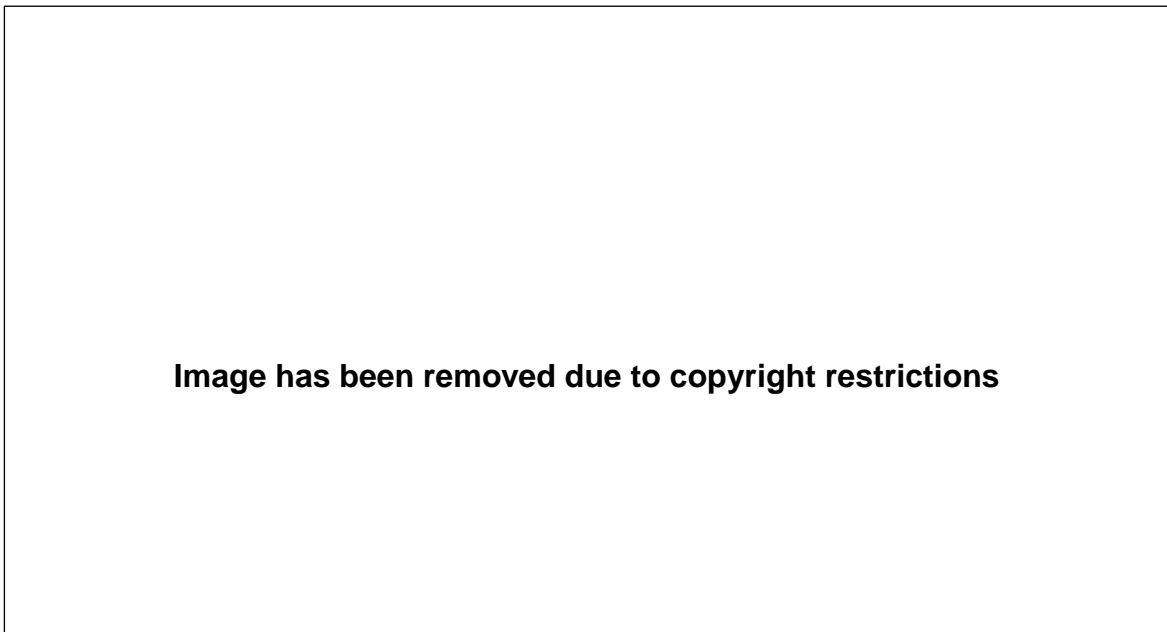


Figure 14: Killed by Alliance Night Elf Hunter while fighting Scourge Guards

To which the programming responded “No player named ***** is currently playing” a sign that I was completely out of contact with them. So I left the group because we were separated by technical difficulties.

When I made it to Zul’Mashar to face the Amani trolls I encountered another lvl 90 Blood Elf Paladin who was working on her Archaeology skill given the animations of the character. She helped me with a mob of enemies so I thanked her. She replied “any thing i can do to help”

I continue questing and make it to Light's Shield Tower and line of quests. I became suspicious as I see not only a Night Elf Druid around my level, but a Troll Druid at level 90 and a Human Hunter also at level 90. The Hunter flies up and changes his mounts a few times, as the Troll Druid flies around. It's almost like they're taunting one another. They suddenly attack one another but are attacked by the guards of the tower. The Troll Druid prevailed as the Hunter laid dead on the ground and the mass of guards backed off. Unfortunately the Night Elf Druid was also caught in the mess and perished.

Given the rather bizarre circumstances I head off again. I cross paths with the Night Elf Druid I saw at the tower but don't engage her in combat. Instead I decide to help her, but she quickly flees after the monsters were slain.

More quests pass and I venture further down the road to Northpass Tower, a relief to see I was getting to the end of this zone. Yet as I headed towards the Queu'Lithien Lodge to the north I saw a Goblin Rogue duelling with a different Night Elf Druid (Figure 15). I'm not entirely sure why, but at this point... I had fucking had enough of this shit. This is not fun and I hate the orchestra of Alliance fucktrumpets in the Eastern Plaguelands for now... I'm sure I'll forgive you fuckers once I calm down, but for now, I feel no inclination to be civil to you.

I decided to help the Rogue so I ambushed the Druid with my ice magic. After she was killed the Rogue approached me and bowed before me in thanks before he vanished into the shadows again.

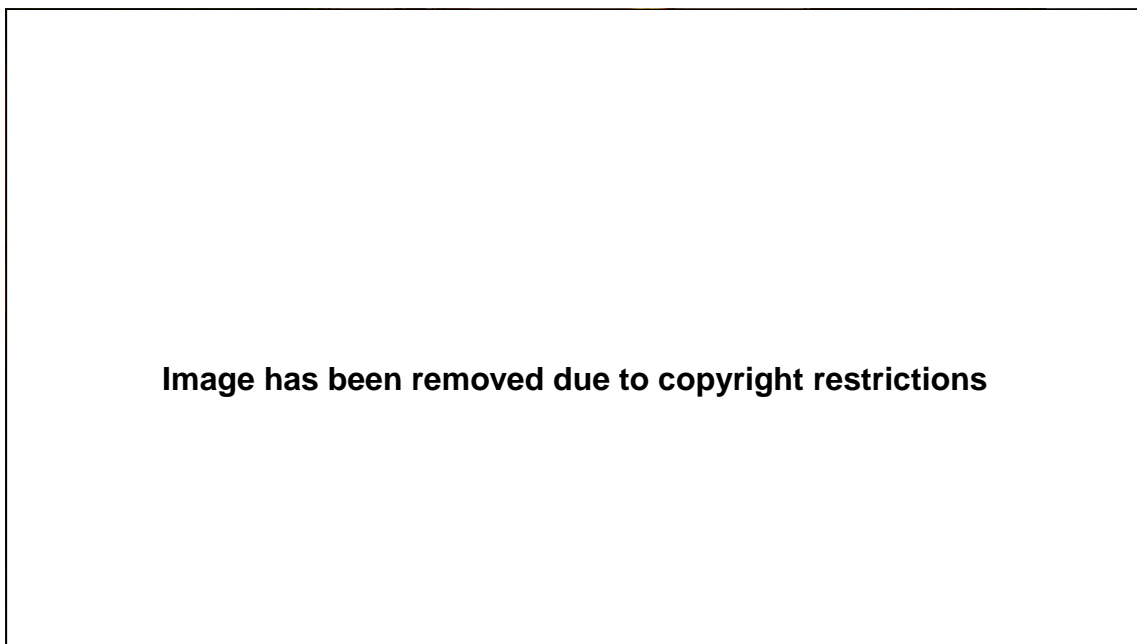


Figure 15: *Coming across duel between Alliance Night Elf Druid and Horde Goblin Rogue*

Funnily enough I did see him again; he flanked a mob that was chasing me and helped me defeat them. I thanked him and we parted ways again. I finally reached the level cap of the area shortly after so I rode as fast as my raptor could take me, back to Light's Hope Chapel and got on a rocket to Fuselight in the Badlands. Hopefully I would be able to level in peace there.

I don't really play into this Alliance/Horde nonsense... but I get antsy when players stop me from doing what I want to do in game.

Overall, this log in session sparked my curiosity because I had not seen this much PvP interaction in the Eastern Plaguelands before. I had run through the area previously on other characters for the sake of levelling but experienced nothing out of the ordinary questing routine. I doubted it was the direct result of the server merges because even with a higher number of players in a nearby area it does not automatically mean there would be more PvP. Contextually, the Eastern Plaguelands had no designated areas for PvP during *Mists of Pandaria*. There were no arenas or circles and no clear objectives to capture at the time of the log in. So the question had to be asked as to how this area encouraged such behaviour? There had to be something about the symbols of this non-place to encourage PvP in a PvE area as “while signage is an important characteristic of the spatial design of non-places, it seems that – although rarely addressed – temporal organization also contributes to their distinctive effects” (Gottschalk, 2015, pg116). This suggested that the catalyst for PvP performances could be found in the built environment of the Eastern Plaguelands. After observing and noting the number of towers in that region (a total of five, as seen on the in-game map in figure 1), I searched old online forums to find out the past of the Eastern Plaguelands beyond what the game showed. This region was at one time host to a large PvP event, *A Game of Towers*. This involved Horde and Alliance players fighting over four towers located around the area (WoWwiki). When *Cataclysm* went live⁵⁷, Blizzard modified the region so the NPC faction, the Argent Crusade, had control of all of them, which changed the area to fit more PvE activities.

This discovery revealed an experiential history embedded in this region. There was a time when it was more affiliated with PvP activities so the players who were

⁵⁷ When an expansion or patch is officially released and playable it ‘goes live’

present then may want to continue acting in the same way as before, ignoring the present manifestation of the Eastern Plaguelands and encouraging or forcing other players to perform in the older way. Such an observation shows that a place or non-place can have an unknown history that permeates these locations via revenants through performances. Revenants exist because these experiences linger subtly in places in performances in that they have no overtly obvious presence, being more subdued than a totemic symbol. If an individual has experienced a revenant in that context, they may choose to continue to perform that way because it was deemed acceptable by the context in the past. A place or non-place possesses an embodiment of living history or a sense of the present with revenants of the past. The actions of the past can haunt the present interpretation of that place or non-place through the performance of the characters who either occupy or use it. I suspect that this exists given the running theme of PvP encounters throughout a log in that was meant to be focused on questing. I found myself actively hunted and corpse-camped. I was enlisted to help other Horde players hunt Alliance players. I participated in a PvP fight because I was fed up of being forced into such a performance. I am not a PvP player and yet here I was, acting like a PvP player due to the performances of the players around me. With each performance, I was attempting to negotiate between the past and present of the Eastern Plaguelands. My ignorance of the region's PvP activities did not omit me from experiencing them and performing in reaction to them.

For PvP, the game contexts are shifted to create a more realistic experience by allowing rival armies to openly kill one another. The activity of attacking one another in the broader regions of Azeroth holds no formal rules other than it is the player's decision to start a fight and that one loses when one's hit points or health reaches

zero. In a battleground or arena, however, there are often specific objectives that are followed in order to best your foe. The act of ambushing in the open regions can strike at any time by any kind of player, so long as their opponent is of the opposing faction. Interaction is utilised at a player's discretion and which meanings they prioritise for the context. During this context, by being forced to perform as prey through the symbols my character embodied, I resented interacting with other players and actively attempted to avoid them so I could hold autonomy over my character's performance. While the game itself provides basic symbols to evaluate whether you are skilled at playing and encourages collaboration through the passive allure of compensative loot, it does not actively force players to interact. There are certain activities that encourage interaction, such as dungeons, raids and group quests, but they are not mandatory parts of the game. A player can choose to travel alone and still engage with an experience of adventure in Azeroth to make their character stronger. Yet even when one has a clear perception of their character and context, the unknown space can manifest and completely shift one's behaviour.

Player interactions in open regions consist of activities that are passively limited by the game yet susceptible to interpreting potential meanings from the contexts. Player interaction is encouraged with various tools embedded in the game, however, Azeroth does not directly force a player to interact. Instead player interaction is encouraged symbolically by the Horde and Alliance feud in an effort to dehumanise the opposing faction's characters into NPCs. This is achieved by the totem of race/faction that allows players to group together for survival or to actively hunt their enemies. Such an activity is driven by the player's autonomy within a context of the game and is categorised, using the game context, according to character level and class. A criteria, derived from experience, is being employed to create what can be

understood as a logical or a socially acceptable reaction for that particular context (Hacker, 2012, pg32). A higher level is always desired as the character is strong enough to impose meanings on a context. The class of a character also impacts the way a player interacts because the class determines the repertoire of actions. After experiencing how these class mechanics clash with one another, a player can evaluate any character they pass and take a calculated risk on whether or not to interact with them (Fine, 1983, pg215).

There are opportunists who attack weaker foes or classes that may have a disadvantage against the character's particular skill set. Particular classes are designed by the game to complement one another which was demonstrated by my mage aiding the rogue in his fight with the druid (Nardi, 2006, section 2). Tactically speaking it was extremely unfair to gang up on one person but it was also advantageous for my mage that the druid remained distracted by the rogue. A magic wielder must cast a spell in order to do a significant amount of damage and they cannot move while casting a spell. This means more melee focused characters can kill them easily by interrupting their spell-casting. The distraction was more than enough for me to obliterate the druid's health and after the past day or so of constant attacks where I was denied autonomy to perform as anything other than prey, I will admit that my patience was indeed worn thin by other players.

Players choose to use one another in various ways from helping to gather resources to overcoming a challenging foe. From this experience, there were situations of antagonism from the Alliance, protection from the higher levelled Horde players, observing combat between high level players and temporary cooperation between the two factions. The game provides the players with criteria but it is up to the player to learn the symbols and their meanings so they can wield the appropriate language

game. This is seen prominently on the second day of my travels through the Eastern Plaguelands where level 90 players group with lower level characters to be their scouts for any level 90 Alliance players. Whether this was chivalrous protection or advantageous employment is unknown; the act was thwarted by the facilitating technology which kept us from communicating, specifically when a possible target was sighted.

PvP symbols, such as Horde and Alliance, encourage the competitive side of players as they research character classes outside the game so they know how to exploit them. Such knowledge is easily accessible online in various forums and sites dedicated to the game like WoWhead, WoWwiki and IcyVeins. Due to this, the ways in which a PvP player performs in a public area differ greatly from a PvE player, as PvE players are more focused on fighting the monsters dwelling in the world around them. PvP could be understood as a highly reactive contest among players while PvE is more predictable as the game maintains control over possible player performances. At the same time it can also change the disposition and interactions of the player. As seen in my descriptions, even when one aims to act a certain way the performance can easily turn into an opportunistic PvP slaughter if the context presents itself or if the player is agitated by their previous performances. They can impulsively perform in ways that are out of place with their initial performance when faced with conflicting contexts that override autonomy (Goffman, 1974, pp206-207, 445).

On a PvP server there is the permanent risk of being slaughtered when your back is turned, yet there is player autonomy in the game. It is possible for PvE players to be on PvP servers due to population distribution or if their friends also play on that server. The type of player is revealed by how one performs in the open world and

negotiates meaning from the context of a region. Even PvP players may find the act of battlegrounds boring and may retire to a temporary routine of questing to combat the shift in fantasy to the mundane. The act of levelling without interruption is prized on a PvP server and there are times where players share a space and choose to not attack one another to progress onwards. This does not always go according to plan as weaker players of the opposing faction may be singled out and forced by stronger players to perform PvP. When players observe that there is a high traffic of differently levelled characters in the area, the experience of levelling feels more balanced as the higher levelled characters keep to themselves and leave the lower levelled ones to their business.

Upon reflection of my experience, when I was not being murdered, there was something empowering about being part of a greater organisation via the Horde or Alliance. Players of the same faction are anticipated to be friendlier to one another through faction kinship. The challenge, which in this case is simply exploring the world, are designed to encourage players to team up for the sake of survival (Nardi, 2006, section 2). The totemic symbol of class represents cooperative relationships among players as every type of character specialises in a different type of performance and skill set that complements other class combinations. On a PvE server the threat of NPC monsters can be enough for players to team up temporarily for safe passage. Overall, while the game does encourage the slaughter of the opposing faction through its lore and gameplay mechanics, it is possible to bend these expectations via the player's autonomy. At the same time, totemic symbols can contradict one another in their relationships of meaning as observed through race/faction and class which prompts antagonism and cooperation simultaneously.

This greatly influences potential interpretations of meaning before the player even begins to perform in the game.

The majority of Azeroth consists of non-places that can be accessed, explored and used by any player so long as the character can travel to the location. Azeroth is a world that must be shared among all players. There are times in PvE where exclusion of the general player population occurs. However, this is limited to dungeons, raids and specific quests that mimic patterns of either a mini-game, a game within the game, or instances where the player has been tasked to care for a small patch of land. In *Mists of Pandaria* there is limited ownership of place in Azeroth, the only place to own is Sunsong Ranch in the Valley of the Four Winds (a region for level 86-90 characters) which then led to the player commanding a Garrison in the *Warlords of Draenor* expansion. *Legion* then introduced Class Halls which are not owned individually by players, instead they are owned by types of characters determined by the totem of class. Such space is, however, a miniscule sliver in to the vast domain of Azeroth.

Gameplay for most MMORPGs revolves around rapid migration of a character so staying in one particular location is not overly practical should the player want the character to develop. Players must learn to negotiate space effectively so they can achieve the desired performances while sharing the game world with other players. As seen throughout the account, a player who is questing and under the maximum level must be vigilant in reading the game world and the various players they cross paths with. They must learn that players regard space differently depending on their playing style while taking into account their ability to communicate their intended meanings through the performance of their character. It also teaches that at times symbols can be used to instigate particular reactions before the performance even

occurs. In this process of levelling, my character's meanings changed through levelling up to acquire new skills and receiving better equipment for some of the completed quests. My mage was also prey for Alliance players, a lookout on behalf of Horde players, a predator, a wanderer, a bystander, an adventurer in need and an ally of the Argent Crusade. My playing style shifted erratically due to my performance and engagement with the game. Yet my playing style also shifted by how other players read the symbols of my character and reacted accordingly. A character is established by both their performance with a context and the symbols they embody. The meanings that came to light in reaction to my character's presence in game fluctuated wildly on the whims of the contexts and players present. However, all these meanings affiliated with my identity are simultaneously true because they are all related to my place, as a player, in the community of Azeroth. By subjecting myself to the unknown space, I learned the fragility of my expectations and how sensitive they are to the performances of other player characters. I also find myself questioning whether this experience can be labelled as play as it was not overly enjoyable for me.

Fighting with Play

The act of engaging with the World of Warcraft can be referred to as play,⁵⁸ thus play has become symbolic in invoking meanings of Azeroth as a leisurely and fun experience. By attempting to understand it sociologically, play loses its fantasy lustre that it becomes a symbol unto itself; a form of imposing meaning on the uncertainties of what play can potentially become during an interaction. For example, the World of

⁵⁸ For further analysis on 'play' in social analysis see chapter 6

Warcraft is designed around combat as that is a staple of the RPG designs. Many players tend to be from areas not ravaged by war or civil conflict, and so the idea of being in combat is appealing as entertainment between work, no matter how unrealistic and cartoon-styled the combat in question is. Simulated acts of fighting are not uncommon in games as they are regarded as powerful contests or feats of strength to defeat an opponent (Huizinga, 1950, pp65, 91, 144). Within Azeroth the level of a player's character is power over the meanings of other players and their autonomy while logged in. High level players often display their strength with combat between both friends and foes in any game location. These fighters often have little regard for any bystanders who may accidentally perish in the fray, regardless of whether they are players or NPCs. The act of killing one's opponent is deemed a worthy feat of strength, no matter how unbalanced the odds are as it is the result of the act that has meaning rather than the performance. The specific details of the interaction tend to be superfluous until they are called into scrutiny in hindsight.

To label such behaviour as proper combat seems inappropriate given that the vanquished opponent is not physically dead. In the case of an MMORPG like WoW, the opponent can simply respawn or resurrect their character and keep going. In the context of playing a game "fighting acts are simulated and exaggerated but fighting outcomes are inhibited" (Sutton-Smith, 1997, pg23). Within Azeroth the acts of combat are animated with movements reminiscent of a theatre where characters perform elaborate swordplay, spell casting, and brawling against a backdrop of unrealistic sound effects. Off-screen, the player is doing nothing more than targeting a foe and pressing a button to perform a particular action. The armour adorning characters are a costume with more focus on looking aesthetically pleasing rather than wearing a practical outfit that would protect the character from a life ending

blow. A weapon in a character's hand is also ornate and embellished so it appears cumbersome and awkward in shape compared to the real-world equivalent⁵⁹. Even the outcome is a clean animation of the character falling down and gasping for air like an overacting ham with no visible trace of blood or wounds. Once these details have been noticed the meaning associated with the act is challenged because it seems comedic to label such a performance as fighting when defined by the meaning of fighting beyond the game. The language game of Azeroth has distorted the meaning of the word 'fighting' to allow this pantomime to be understood as life threatening to the player's character.

The outcome of a fight under these contexts and symbols is indeed inhibited as players cannot physically end the life of their opponent. There is no true death from being vanquished in combat, only a long winded journey for your character's ghost to find their corpse before they can respawn. Even in the circumstances of a duel the defeated opponent merely kneels down to the winner. In light of this, perhaps it is more accurate to define combat in Azeroth as at least 'play-fighting' because it is "displaying the meaning of fighting than rehearsing for real combat" (Sutton-Smith, 1997, pg23). The elaborate acting, the strange sound effects and costumes all contribute to merely a rose-tinted view of hand-to-hand combat which elicits fantasy imagery of chivalry and honour. These are common values embodied by protagonists in high fantasy fiction which have shaped the aesthetic of Azeroth. This design choice encourages players to regard their character as some form of hero and the opposing faction is the faceless evil destroying Azeroth; a reality which is

⁵⁹ The armour and weapon designs adorning most video game characters would be laughably impractical, ineffective or possibly life threatening in combat situations beyond the game they are featured. Upon reflection, to associate these costumes with the term 'weapon' or 'armour' feels inaccurate unless the fantasy of the game is in play.

strongly enforced by the game context through the conflict between the Alliance and Horde.

Another prominent observation from this experience is how the interactions between players can potentially kill any meaning of 'fun'⁶⁰ while engaged with the game. I found that I was not having 'fun' when the autonomy to experiment with meaning was hindered by the interaction present on-screen. The player is both empowered and limited by how they use the symbols of the game to create meaning, and then they must perform this meaning in interactions with other players. Levelling up is regarded as productive in game; a direct contradiction given that Roger Caillois once stated "play is an occasion of pure waste" (cited in Malaby, 2009b, pg206). From outside the game, of course levelling a character would seem a waste of time as the ways in which a character develops holds little meaning outside of Azeroth and at times are openly mocked by mainstream media (Snodgrass, 2014, pg481). To the players of the game it is the opposite, as levelling or strengthening one's character is crucial to their place in the broader community and to the meanings a character invokes. From observing a game from the outside without engaging, one could regard play as a wasteful occasion. To those who invest their time and effort into playing that particular game the response may be quite different. They have deemed the game as worthy of their time and therefore not a waste because it holds value to them through the process of learning the meanings of the game context.

Levelling and undertaking quests are a constant for playing WoW and the most basic activity that can be done while logged in. Questing can be monotonous and predictable unless the unknown space comes into effect. Perhaps it is more likely to

⁶⁰ Although, like attempting to define what it means to be 'real', 'fun' is equally elusive and subject to the whims of the individual.

occur when one has a definitive idea of how a performance should proceed. The stronger the expectation of a specific event happening, the easier it is to defy. As questing is a basic activity it can be regarded as work or tedious when it becomes repetitive and boring until the player's character unlocks other activities in game. Dispositions of play, the interest a player derives from engaging with the game, varies in intensity through performing a player's character and the context they are part of. The ways in which players interact is decided by their ability to perform according to the meanings given off by others (Malaby, 2009, pp17-18). Observing how players behave, whether they uphold the game lore by killing the opposing faction characters or rebel against it by helping their foes, contributes to the idea that play is not always about fantasy or escapism.

To comprehend play as a language game, one may consider dispositions of play to form the foundation. Malaby explains the disposition of play as "an attitude characterised by a readiness to improvise in the face of an ever-changing world that admits of no transcendently ordered account" (2009b, pg206). This can be interpreted as play being the ability to slip into the fantasy and perform in a variety of diverse unexpected circumstances brought to life by the fantasy. Playing is then complemented by the ability to read either the symbols of the game or understand the broader criteria affiliated with the game to interpret its meaning. Play is characterised by flexibility in meanings while reflecting on the context of the game. The game in turn provides a series of totemic symbols and rules to follow while playing. The player must then use such symbols to interact in a way that complies with the rules. At the same time the player is aware that the fantasy will stop once they leave the game or log off. On a theoretical level it may be better to regard the 'play' of MMORPGs as a combination of playful behaviours and informal social play

which are loose categorisations of play from Sutton-Smith (1997, pp21-23). Playful behaviours are more focused on the ideas of play disposition or being in the frame of mind to be playful which participating in an activity, it remains hidden unless the player admits to having 'fun'. Informal social play can be understood as moments of playful behaviours woven in between activities with a more serious tone (Sutton-Smith, 1997, pp4-5). An example from the case is the brief jests I had between the level 90 Horde players when I joined their group to scout for Alliance players, it was a serious activity yet we also remained casual in our performance. From this perspective, play can be regarded as a performative process that is reliant upon a criteria or symbols to permit its meaning to be relevant to a context, akin to a language game. Players that log in regularly see their character's activities, while decorated in fantasy, as mundane (Pargman, 2008, pp229-231). The activities become routine and expected as they familiarise themselves with Azeroth's language game. Yet as play is a language game, there is a degree of flexibility in how one uses it. New meanings or performances of interpreting meaning are permitted. This flexibility comes alive because one can venture into the unknown space while exploring Azeroth. If play was constrained and inflexible, this would not be possible.

Conclusion

When my experience took a sudden turn from levelling a character to finding myself in the middle of a PvP melee, the possible meanings of play have been teased out slightly by using combat as an example. The word 'war' is actually part of the game's title so ferocity and melee are vital to the aesthetics of the game. Yet the types of

activities, while labelled as fighting by the game, hardly count as proper combat because game combat is more reminiscent of an elaborate pantomime to which the characters adapt. Most aspects of this game are open to interpretation so the ability to negotiate meaning alters the ways in which players engage with the game.

Players do not necessarily play the game the same way despite the action being labelled as play. Instead, players have the ability to perform as they please in game as long as they abide by the game's context of what is acceptable or logical.

Therefore it is beneficial to regard play as a language game, a collection of symbols from which to derive possible meanings. In this light, play is more than just an activity, it is a performative disposition that is open to challenging one's perception of a context through the manifestation of the unknown space. This mainly occurs in the non-places of the game world like an open region where performances can vary drastically without the risk of receiving a stigma. However, for more linear places such as dungeons, which are places as opposed to non-places, stigmas can be temporarily attached through performances. The result of this can lead to conflict among players of the same faction, which will be the focus of the next chapter.

The unknown space is perhaps the more complex blind spot of the four I have identified as it feels personal or subjective to the individual experiencing it. There is a likelihood of encountering the unknown space when experiencing new places or non-places. Yet it deceptively dissipates with experience, as one acquires more knowledge of acceptable/unacceptable behaviour and comes to understand the symbols that form such boundaries. The unknown space is haunted by revenants of the past overlapping with the present creating a conflict of how the place or non-place was understood and how it is understood in the present. The unknown space then becomes subtle in its presence, usually revealed when a performance takes an

unexpected turn (for the individual) but that may still be regarded as acceptable in the overall context. A performance within that space will proceed regardless of one's knowledge or ignorance. This was observed when players altered their performances to become active hunters of other players in the Eastern Plaguelands. This was unusual given the Eastern Plaguelands is a non-place for mostly PvE activities. It was not designated as a PvP arena or battleground during *Mists of Pandaria*⁶¹. The act of corpse-camping and remaining near enemy players spoke beyond the totem of race/faction. The sense of the game permeated the interaction as there was nothing to stop a player from performing this way. To an extent, it was encouraged through the unseen rewarding of honour points to the winning player. All of this is not obvious or interpreted neatly from the game's symbols. The unknown space takes on a more complex form the more your knowledge of an area grows, as it continually challenges one's understanding of a context.

⁶¹ There are regions in game that are more likely to see PvP combat due to the arenas or battlefields positioned within them or nearby. Two examples would be the Arathi Highlands and Stranglethorn Vale (now divided into Northern Stranglethorn and Cape of Stranglethorn).

Chapter 5: To Perform with Uncertainty

The commonality among each game experience I have described so far is uncertainty. Each encounter was rife with uncertainty of which meaning is applicable for that moment where “the meanings are not yet ‘in mind’” (Mead, 1934, pgxxix). However each interaction progressed in order to define the meanings for that performance. The moment prior to the interaction is uncertainty as all potential meanings are still possible and it is only through a performance or interaction that a single meaning can be interpreted (Perinbanayagam, 1986, Maines, 2000). Yet uncertainty can manifest in hindsight, especially when a performance fails. In this chapter, I intend to show circumstances where a performance is scrutinised by the characters in it because of the resulting meaning. This is prone to happening in places where meaning is constricted and the unknown space has less of an impact, such as dungeons. A dungeon is designed to be linear, leading the players through a series of chambers to reach the final boss in order to receive rare loot. For a group to be successful, they must perform skilful interpretation of the totem of class. As dungeons possess limited meanings, they present a static context. There is only one acceptable result for a performance which is the boss’ defeat. As a result, uncertainty is diverted to the character as opposed to the reactions of both character

and context. A result of this is being able to observe sabotaging performances where the uncertainty of whether a player knows how to read the game is scrutinised directly.

Due to the uncertainty of a character's awareness of game knowledge, dungeons are intricately linked to *rites de passage* where an identity or the meaning elicited by an individual has the potential to change drastically should they succeed in the performance (Turner, 1979). This chapter will begin with an explanation of dungeons and their relation to *rites de passage*. Then there will be two tales of dungeon encounters, one is from the heroic level Deadmines from the Cataclysm expansion and the other is a normal dungeon run of the Temple of the Jade Serpent from the Mists of Pandaria expansion. These encounters demonstrate the actions of players in game to perform their character as a functional member of the group. However such performances are also susceptible to sabotage because there are limited ways to acceptably perform in a dungeon, thus making it easier to identify a failed performance. Sabotage and sacrifices can be read as imposing control over the uncertainty that surrounds a performer. In that, the sacrifice of the mistake is facilitated by the performance of sabotage. A dungeon run fails when the group of players cannot defeat the bosses or elite monsters that dwell within it. In such circumstances, players can easily turn on one another and blame an action for their failure regardless of whether it is a genuine error or an attempt to cover up their own failings.

To Win in a Dungeon

Dungeons are contexts that allow players to strengthen their characters and fortify their identities within a group. Variables of randomness, such as disruptive players passing through, are removed in a dungeon environment. Dungeons, also known as instances, are temporal areas in Azeroth that follow a specific enemy pattern with limited space to explore. Unlike the non-places of the open regions, they hold a specific identity and purpose within the game that is barred off from the rest of Azeroth. No other characters from beyond the group of players can access that particular run until it has either been completed or the group has disbanded.

Dungeons often have identities of their own with a strong narrative element and aesthetic design that attempts to immerse the player further into Azeroth's lore. They often provide a conclusion or further elaboration to narratives taking place in the game world (Johnson, 2015, pg145, 147, 148). This is not always successful as WoW is constantly evolving, thus forcing narratives of Azeroth lore to fluctuate erratically between expansions. The quick temporality of adventuring and mass migration through Azeroth challenges a player's ability to settle into a steady empathetic routine for the denizens of this realm (Johnson, 2015, pg146, 148).

Dungeons are an overly controlled aspect of Azeroth as they attempt to make players face the consequences of their actions in game or add closure to a narrative unfolding through questing in open areas (Johnson, 2015, pg148). This presents a context for limited interpretation as the context of the dungeon is locked in place, and characters in turn must adapt to it in order to succeed and reap the material rewards of the experience.

Dungeon runs are strongly encouraged by the gameplay mechanics because they present opportunities to amass rare commodities as compensation for difficult

labours. However it is still up to the player's discretion, their character's level and their knowledge of the game as to whether they partake in them (Williams, 2014, pg123). The rewards for participating can include the acquisition of elite items that can only be found in these areas, unlocking end game content to observe the ending of the expansion's story and bragging rights to add to a character's list of achievements. A dungeon presents a context where there are clear winners and losers based on whether the player receives their desired reward. Usually for games, winning is decided among competing teams to earn points or simply reaching the end of the game's narrative (Rowlands, 2012, pg93). As MMORPGs lack a clear ending, and as participation in competition among teams is a choice, it is challenging to define a performance as 'winning' (Rowlands, 2012, pg93). The performance of a dungeon is unique in an MMORPG because it is a performance with criteria for 'winning' in the game that commonly lacks such definition. Players can only win or overcome a dungeon by defeating the bosses who lurk within. The performance that leads to the boss' defeat⁶² can vary greatly depending on the player group. Depending on what character classes are present, the ways the performance unfolds can occur from many possibilities. The only thing that matters is that the performance ends the same way; the performance itself or the process is open to variation and experimentation by the characters.

The context of the dungeon always decrees that if the boss is not defeated, no one is rewarded. Most commonly this happens in the form of a wipe where all the players in the group are killed thus resetting the particular fight. There is logic to the performance which means "an illogical act presumably involves a *mistake* in logic"

⁶² With most boss fights, the aim is to deplete the boss' health points to zero through rotations or combinations of move sets performed by each character present. The particular rotations of abilities and spells a character exhibits depends on their class.

(Winch, 1958, pg94). When a mistake is made during a performance and the boss does not die, uncertainty occurs. This is not necessarily a starting point to interpreting meaning, instead uncertainty forms out of trying to decipher what possible mistake was made. There are many ways to perform in a boss fight and the only acceptable response is for the boss to die. Therefore, when the boss does not die, uncertainty exists in examining how the performance unfolded to create this mistake. Players may throw accusations and query how symbols were used during the performance with great degree of scrutiny. This is because all players involved in that dungeon are openly denied rewards from failing to defeat a boss. Trying to identify the mistake often turns players of the same faction against one another. The constriction of meanings of the context and critical focus on a player's characters allow dungeons to be regarded as a performance that can potentially change a character's identity in game. Theoretically this connects to *rites de passage* within the game.

To better understand how a dungeon holds power over a character, one must consider how they function in game. Dungeons can be conceptualised as temporary social activities formed by either groups of friends or randomly collected players seeking a common goal within a linear context of specific game symbols. They are not compulsory or mandatory in game as players choose to enter them. They are accessible in Azeroth as the entrances lie in open regions often marked by a meeting stone and a doorway with a swirling vortex (figures 16 and 17). The NPCs within a dungeon context are elite and designed to be fought by multiple players. The goal of a dungeon is to defeat multiple elite monsters or bosses amongst the trash

mobs⁶³. There are levels of difficulty for dungeons; the two mentioned in this thesis are normal and heroic⁶⁴. Each difficulty level presents a different form of challenge and rewards, with the more difficult feats of strength receiving more unique loot (Williams, 2014, pg122-123). Players are rewarded with elite equipment, intriguing items and justice or valour points⁶⁵ whenever they defeat a boss. The dungeon is validated by the game as 'conquered' when the final boss is slain. As players perfect their performances and receive better equipment they receive permission from the game to try heroics and raids.

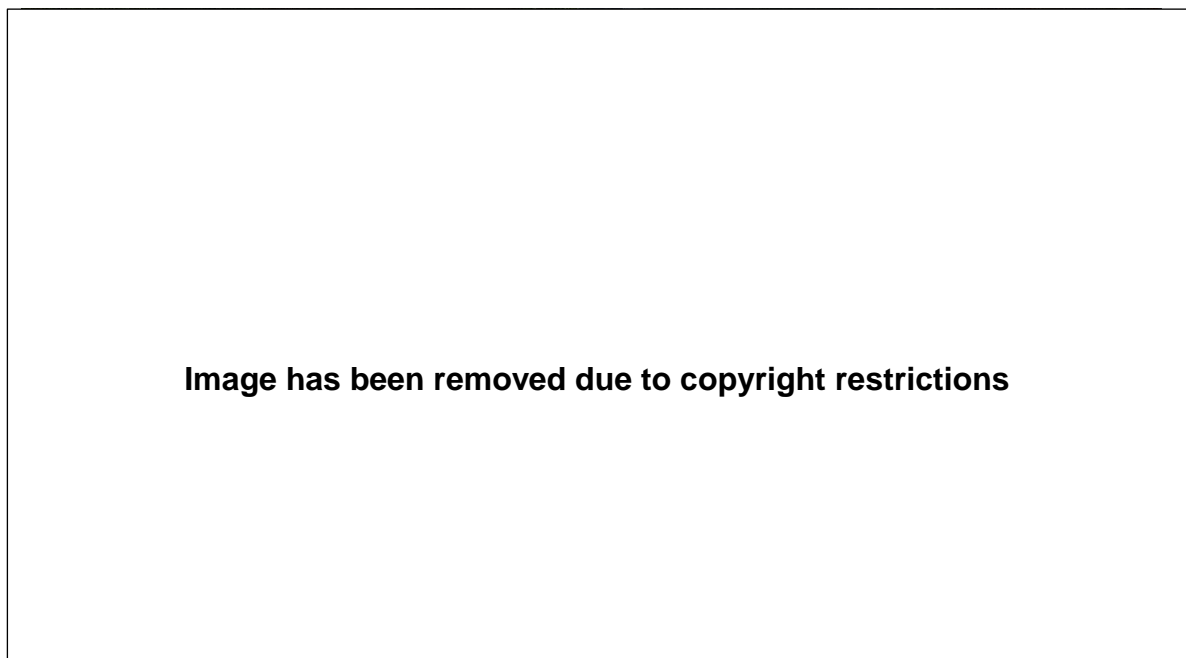


Figure 16: *Example of a meeting stone that indicates a dungeon entrance is nearby*

⁶³ Trash mobs are clusters of weaker enemies in the dungeon that are killed off to reach the lair of the boss. These types of enemies are referred to by players as 'trash'.

⁶⁴ Mythic level was introduced in the Warlords of Draenor expansion.

⁶⁵ The currency of justice/valour points to purchase elite equipment was in use during Cataclysm and Mists of Pandaria, they were removed in later expansions.

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Figure 17: *Example of an entrance to a Dungeon*

Using the Dungeon Finder for PUGs isolates a group of random players to a highly controlled environment. Players count on certain events taking place or monsters appearing, revealing the wild variable in gameplay which is the player. A dungeon is a great experiment in gauging how you and others interpret the game and whether or not they complement one another (Williams, 2014, pg124-125). From this reaction the player then adjusts their interpretations of meanings to apply new performances for the contexts. In a group situation this affects their ability to perform in a variety of player character combinations. However this is not to say that all players can magically work in any team combination possible. Instead the act of undertaking dungeon runs merely allows players to experiment with their character identity further and to decide what they deem an appropriate performance for those specific circumstances (Williams, 2014, pg128). Should they prove successful in impressing their peers and completing the trials of the dungeon then they are rewarded by the game which encourages the change and alters the way the player functions in the game's world.

Dungeons can be overcome by coordinated groups of players who are from the same guild and have a shared history of experiences. They are familiar with each character's performance, thus minimising the uncertainty of cooperating with a random character. However, players can also be grouped together by the Dungeon Finder (figure 18) or from whispers/shouts in the main chat channels from random players with offers of payment for help. The coordination of player activity can be difficult once factors beyond the game come into play such as work, study, family commitments, etc., so pick-up groups (PUGs) and the finder programs are popular among players regardless of their guild status. In the Cataclysm expansion the game features of Raid Finder and additional options in Dungeon Finder now allow PUGs to form in heroic dungeon runs and raids. The finder programs allow random players to form groups, undertake challenges and easily disband once the task is complete. In order to join the queue, a player character must be above a specific item level, as well as needed by a group. For a dungeon, regardless of difficulty, the PUG consists of five players; a tank, a healer and three DPS of the same faction⁶⁶.

⁶⁶ Details of which were outlined in chapter 3, specifically when looking at the totem of level/class.



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Figure 18: *Dungeon Finder window circa 2012*

Failure to cooperate or perform acceptably often results in potentially volatile interactions despite all players being members of the same faction. Characters are expected by the game's player community to perform in certain ways that optimise the skill set of the character's class. There is limited flexibility in how to interpret meaning as dungeons, NPC enemies and bosses never change their routine nor deviate from their programmed behaviour. When the expected outcome does not occur, the uncertainty of whether players are aware of their character roles and how to adequately perform them comes under scrutiny. This is central to the experiences I would like to reflect on as it brings to light how imperative the performance of the player is to defeating a boss. By doing so, they can validate their performance of a skilful character for their role in a group and receive loot to symbolise their accomplishments (Williams, 2014, pg124). Dungeons and their elite counterpart category, raids, demonstrate a performative transcendence within the game for

players to leave Azeroth temporarily and challenge themselves in a linear context.⁶⁷ In order to yield the ideal result, performers may control what kinds of audience they act before or teams they perform in⁶⁸, to improve their chances of success or manipulate the situation to make another performer look inadequate (Goffman, 1959, pg212-213, 1974, pg87-88). This process of constant evaluation allows players to find their identity within Azeroth regardless of whether they focus on a single character or many.

A Character as a Learned and Shared Identity

A character's development and acceptance from a context or community is a shared experience. Mead summarises this idea with "we can only experience ourselves as objects *indirectly* from the perspective of others" (cited in Archer, 2003, pg80). The individual's character is an embodiment of the context with which they interact (Scott, 1968, pg58). They can react with a sense of autonomy, yet the character will be defining them in relation to the context that has influenced their development. The reactions one has to surrounding symbols invoke an internal dialogue that attributes personalised concepts of meaning to symbols (Archer, 2003, pp80-81). The variation of characters in an individual's repertoire depends upon the influence of other characters in their presence and the context they find themselves in. Goffman explains social encounters or interactions as "the reciprocal influence of individuals upon one another's actions when in one another's immediate physical presence" (1959, pg26). This narrows what activities can be interpreted as an interaction and

⁶⁷ The PvP equivalents are battlegrounds and arenas, so the theoretical understandings brought to light in this chapter could be utilised to elaborate on these activities as well.

⁶⁸ This in turn may encourage guild dungeon runs over PUGs. It is assumed that in a guild, players know one another beyond the characters on-screen so they are privy to more intimate knowledge. With this knowledge they can read their team mates better and work out a more effective strategy.

has set a boundary between the performers or actors and the audience; in keeping with the dramatic metaphor of social life regarding interaction which “transforms an individual into a stage performer” (Goffman, 1974, pg124). The level of information and context about a social interaction is limited or enhanced by one’s level of participation and one’s past knowledge of the performances. When an individual is familiar with the actors, they are aware of the range of roles they can play whereas if they do not know them, they will take the role they see as their main identity. This can potentially constrict the fluidity of alternating roles within an interaction as the individual’s character is influencing the reactions around them through their performance and is in turn shaped by the other actors around (Branaman, 2001, pg169).

While engaged with playing a game, particularly role-playing games, the player is expected to assume a character that belongs to a world of familiar differences. The familiarity stems from the presence of symbols that are mundane despite being differentiated through the application of fantasy that contorts the potentialities of meanings. The challenge in play is focused upon awareness of the context because depending on what context is active, this changes the information to which the character has access (Fine, 1983, pp194-198). Aspects of context such as the setting and rules of the game are stable and give the fantasy a way to organise meanings. The players’ characters are those who alternate between engaging with play, discussing matters outside the game and leaving the game temporarily. The entire time players are aware of both themselves and the character. They cannot allow a crossover of information associated with these two roles without disrupting the fantasy of the game (Fine, 1983, pp194-195). For example, in a medieval setting, the character in the game cannot possibly know anything of advanced technology as

this would be inaccurate given the context. At the same time the player would have no idea how to slay a dragon or transmute rock to gold using alchemy (Fine, 1983, pg195).

A player performs their character, reads the feedback from their peers, considers their self-presentation and then alters their own interpretation of a role in relation to context (Goffman, 1974, pg127). Whether they personally understand all knowledge of the context is irrelevant, one can only see the performance of that character at that time. The resulting illusion of a masterful portrayal of character for that context is done upon reflection from the reactions of others when “we can mean that he has taken more than usual care and employed more than usual design and continuity in the presentation of what is ostensibly not a performance at all” (Goffman, 1974, pg127). Changes in costume, scenery and props may also be employed in order to create a more convincing act, thus altering the process of negotiation for the same meaning (Goffman, 1974, pg125). As a character, one is so carefully considering how to perform certain roles that one may no longer question whether or not their characters are real or stage identities (Goffman, 1974, pp125-128). To the main audience of society it makes no difference so long as one is performing according to one’s character’s role in an acceptable way.

In the context of a dungeon, particularly for PUGs, a player will possibly be rejected for not performing their character adequately. As anonymity is maintained through character, it can be easy to overlook the emotional responses of the player off-screen allowing rather curt and blunt judgements. When creating a character for a context an individual must decide “between playing his own self in the guise of that character or playing the self of that character” (Fine, 1983, pg4). Regardless of the decision the individual must create their character to comply with the limitations of

the context or what can be considered acceptable or logical for that context. The shared fantasy context which is placed upon players when entering the game also gives others the ability to identify how invested a character is to the game through their knowledge of the game's rules and their playing skill (Pearce, 2009, pg147-148, Nardi, 2006, section 2). Within a game "mastery takes the form of performance as players exhibit their skills to each other" (Pearce, 2009, pg148), so to create a character is not enough as the individual must be capable of performing as that character. I have experimented with this first hand when deciding which class of character I can perform. I quickly learned that I excelled at playing as a druid and warlock but failed as a rogue and paladin. The creation of characters in a social acceptable manner within the game is shaped by playing and knowing the game well while performing.

A dungeon can be the forefront of reinforcing the performance of character. It is a context that permits scrutiny of a performance given that every performance must end the same way. As I am a player that focuses on open world exploration rather than raiding, I can regard dungeons as liminal periods as they feel like an optional activity to me. They are there to progress the narratives that unfold in regions through questing. They are not mandatory aspects of progressing through the game for me as I am happy to keep migrating through Azeroth without engaging with dungeons until I feel like doing so. When I run a PUG, I do end up feeling anxious or fearful of the other players rather than the bosses. It was not until I reflected on my triggered anxiety that I came to regard dungeons as a way of validating a character's identity. Dungeons are performances that are judged and read critically by the players present in the group. There is a clear line between a performance that is acceptable and a failure through the boss' reaction. While the dungeon run

performance is underway, there is a transformation of a player's identity based on whether they are capable of using the class of their character or whether they are inadequate at performing. There is a euphoria that comes from completing a dungeon and receiving the loot as you are successful, you are a skilled player!

Yet the failure and collapse of a group can be viciously volatile. Despite being united by the totemic symbols of the Horde and Alliance, this unity appears irrelevant in a dungeon run. The character is read as their class instead, so that while in the dungeon you are a druid, a warlock, a death knight. With each title come expectations of what a 'good' version of this character does. This can be something simple, like a warlock conjuring a soulwell so the group can have access to healthstones before the run begins. A 'good' version of a character also means they perform specific rotations of moves and abilities, like feral druids knowing when to spend their combo points on rip instead of ferocious bite. There is a performative pattern that indicates when a player understands the complexities of their character's class. It is in this perspective that I regard dungeons as liminal periods, because they are performances with many judgements attached to them in order for players to demonstrate that they are skilled at the game. However, other players who are dedicated raiders may disagree with this perspective. They could see dungeons and raids as central to performing identity while the open world is the liminal period between each dungeon run. For a raider, a dungeon is chance to rehearse and master their character to tackle a raid while raids are the defining act of their character's identity. Their use of the game world is dissimilar to mine so the way they identify and use places within the game would reflect this. Both of these are logical interpretations that shift according to how the player uses the game; this observation actually reinforces how important the use or performance of interpretation by an

individual is in defining meaning. My interpretations are the result of my presence in the game. Another researcher may see completely different meanings by engaging with the game. Neither of the resulting research would be incorrect as they display different ways of deriving meaning from the symbols of the game.

A Dungeon as a Rite of Passage

Dungeons form a liminal period for a performative *rites de passage* within the game to reinforce a player's character. *Rites de passage* were mainly influenced by Van Gennep who noticed the patterns of rituals present in all societies (cited in Turner, 1974, pg195-198). Van Gennep noted the transformation of individual and group identities to different states or statuses and that this was usually accompanied by "the correlation between status movement and change of *spatial* position" (Turner, 1974, pg196). This was observed through the seclusion of the novices awaiting transformation then the imparting of symbolic instructions. Each symbolic instruction is unique to particular cultures and contexts to inform the novices about the task that they must complete to change their status (Turner, 1974, pg196). If the novices completed the task their new status would be acknowledged. The individual or group would undergo a transition in their relationship with a particular context or culture. This is reflected by being capable of understanding the symbolic instruction and then performing in the indicated way to complete the task at hand.

For playing an MMORPG like WoW, a dungeon shifts the meanings of various symbols by removing a group of players from Azeroth to place them in a confined and temporary domain. During this time they are invisible to the rest of Azeroth and they then cannot leave until they complete the dungeon or choose to either log off or

leave the group altogether. Players are then given symbolic instruction through the structure of the game environment and the design of the creatures that dwell within to kill all the bosses. The abrupt shift between the open regions of Azeroth to a dungeon presents an uncertainty of how to perform with the group effectively to defeat the boss. The ability to use this uncertainty and interpret it as meaning is critical in a dungeon performance. There are clear distinctions between a good and bad performance decreed by the dungeon's repetitive nature. This is similar to the *rites de passage* as the players firstly undergo a phase of separation or preliminal, where they detach from the society they know (Turner, 1979, pg235). Secondly there is a phase of margin or limen, a liminal period, a period of time where the individual becomes ambiguous possessing neither traits of their old or new state (Turner, 1979, pg235). This is ended by a phase of reaggregation or postliminal phase, when the new state is consummated and the individual is adorned with a new structural understanding by the society (Turner, 1979, pg235). The process is performative in nature to check if the individual reacts accordingly to the distorted meanings of the limen phase. In the dungeon, the player is firstly separated, then the group members have become ambiguous uncertainties, to wander the dungeon and prove that they are capable of overcoming the dangers through cooperation. Should they complete the dungeon and kill the boss they can receive a piece of desired loot and earn an achievement from the game, thus marking a new understanding of the players in the group.

Dungeons can be understood as the context for *rites de passage* because they are separate domains within Azeroth that remain unchanged between expansions unlike the open regions. Therefore they can be studied by players in great detail allowing a better understanding of all the contextual details and symbols unique to each

dungeon. The repetition and familiarity almost replicates a ritual that must be completed each time a player or a group of players enters. Instances such as dungeons remain unique due to a “sense that a basic generic bond is recognised beneath all its hierarchical and segmentary differences and oppositions” (Turner, 1974, pg56). Every instance appears different aesthetically, the performances vary depending on the nature of the boss, certain precautions must be taken to avoid dying mid fight. Yet the basic bond that makes dungeons similar yet dissimilar is that the performance must always end in the same way and this performance is contained in a separate area within the game. On completion of the dungeon run one is awarded symbols of one’s endeavours through the acquisition of equipment. Through completing a dungeon, a player can reinforce their character’s relationship to their class and acquire new symbols to be recognised by.

The ways in which dungeons are studied by players can be likened to a form of prosumption. The term is originally defined by the blurring of the acts of production and consumption, usually in a marketplace (Davis, 2012, pg597). However, in the context of online Internet-based activities, the “users have become responsible for producing that which they consume” (Davis, 2012, pg598). In MMORPGs the players on an individual level, as a group and as a broader community produce knowledge of how to interpret the game’s symbols and the relationships they prompt. Players can then impart such knowledge to their fellow players from experience, online forum discussions, accounts on content sharing based websites such as Youtube and through websites dedicated to the game. The ways in which a player learns to interpret MMORPGs are determined by the way they accumulate knowledge and maintain that knowledge of the game world while playing. Prosumption can relate to the creation of meaning which emphasises the importance of dominating a

performance with a desired meaning as it might become an expectation if enough characters perform in similar ways. Therefore, it is easy to locate a translation of the symbolic instruction of a dungeon if a player searches for that knowledge.

Within Azeroth, the *rites de passage* is not always successful even if the performance within the liminal period is deemed so. Other forms of culture choose to perform such rites at various points in an individual's life at a particular time of the year or season and it can be regarded as a pivotal moment of development in the individual and their place in that community (Turner, 1979, pg234-235). In this game world, just as players decide what kinds of activities they engage with, they decide what rites they wish to undertake in their character's development. Participation is encouraged by the game through promising material rewards, bragging rights over completing a particular feat and, in more competitive guilds and circles of players, to elevate their rank within the group and prove themselves skilled players. As the game is constantly evolving a player may undergo multiple *rites de passage* so the identity of their character and their ability to perform can evolve to use the new symbols and meanings introduced by the changes.

Within a PUG, at times players may be attempting to prove superiority over interpreted meanings by trying to force their interpretation of the game as the only correct one. The dungeon presents symbolic instructions but it still needs to be interacted with to create meaning that can be comprehended. This behavioural reaction within a performance can be understood as social sabotage by altering the information available to the audience and other performers whether it is through using secrets or collusion (Goffman, 1959, pg175, 142-143). Secrets pertain to performers utilising their complete knowledge of a context and inside information about fellow performers. They can bring to light other meanings of the situation that

may not have arisen in their current performance thus obscuring how it will proceed (Goffman, 1959, pg142). Collusion is more challenging to display in WoW but worthy of acknowledgement because it refers to a dynamic between the stage and back stage. A performer appears in a way that can be interpreted as acceptable to the audience while also presenting secret information to another performer or even someone back stage, much like an actor regulating the volume of their voice (Goffman, 1959, pg174-175). In game, collusion could pertain to players running the dungeon while communicating with their guild, none of whom are present for the dungeon, about the experience and possibly seeking input on how to regard the other players present in the instance.

The following descriptions have been chosen as they showcase variations of disagreements in interpreted meanings exacerbated by the uncertainty of the players present. This occurs within a dungeon scenario when characters remain uncertain over which meaning is most suitable for the performance despite being in a context with limited possibilities. The first description exhibits how a group disintegrates at the first boss encounter, if the group cannot proceed past the first challenge then it can be deemed too faulty to continue onwards by the group. It has also been written in a script format to account for the various rotations of character abilities that are visible to the group throughout the performance. The second description demonstrates that while there is discourse within the group and clashing performances of the characters, the conflict itself never escalates to the point where the group disbands. The dungeon is still completed as each member of the group upholds some commonality in the language of meaning they attribute to the game. Both of these tales are related as they are reactions to the symbolic context of a

dungeon; however, they transpire differently in accordance to the performances of the characters and their ability to communicate their interpretation of the game.

Dancing Fire, Dead Adventurers

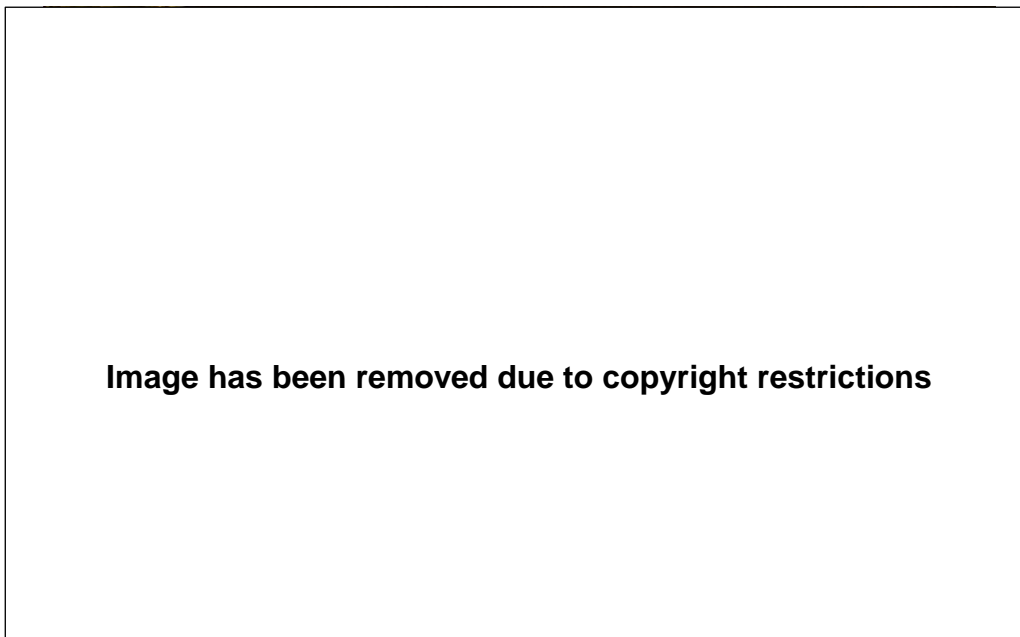


Figure 19: *In game map of the First Floor of the Deadmines*

This encounter occurred in the mineshaft leading to the chamber of Glubtok the foreman who is the first boss of the instance and includes the first attempt by the PUG to fight him (layout of first wing of the dungeon in figure 19). The Deadmines is a classic dungeon from the original or 'vanilla' WoW but had been upgraded to a Heroic level dungeon in the Cataclysm expansion for level 85 characters. This is the first 4-5 minutes of their encounter which exhibits a change in leader within the group. For this description a script-like format has been adopted to demonstrate how every player has their routine of actions to perform for the group and their character. Cast members will be referred to by their character race and class. Script has been written from the perspective of DPS3, a Troll Feral Druid so not all actions of the characters have been noted as I wanted to highlight the invisible aspects of

performance and how I can only assume the performance of other characters based on what I can observe on stage. This was done to better highlight the way players can only read and react to the symbols and performance on-screen. The details included were interpreted from the animations of the characters, two more DPS (DPS1 and DPS2), a healer and a tank. No one has any ties to each other through guild or server and no one has met one another before this grouping by the Dungeon Finder.

Troll Druid emerges in the dungeon to see Tauren Shaman, Orc Rogue, Undead Warlock and Blood Elf Warrior running ahead towards the first mob of Kobold Diggers. Blood Elf Warrior is leading the charge followed by others. Group falls into formation of Tank, melee based characters, then magic based characters.

Troll Druid shifts to cat form, casts Mark of Wild buff on party then goes into Prowl mode.

Orc Rogue goes into Stealth mode.

At this point Troll Druid and Orc Rogue are only transparent figures on-screen – invisible to enemy.

Undead Warlock summons Imp minion, activates Fel Armour on self.

Blood Elf Warrior activates Defensive Stance on self and uses Battle Shout on party.

Tauren Shaman casts Earth Shield on Blood Elf Warrior.

Blood Elf Warrior charges head on into the mob, casts Charge and Taunt on enemies.

Troll Druid and Orc Rogue move to the rear of the mob to attack, begin their respective melee based attacks.

Undead Warlock stays a safe distance from the combat and commences casting spells and inflicting curses.

Tauren Shaman also remains a safe distance from combat, not as far as Undead Warlock, summons Strength of Earth, Healing Stream, Spirit Link and Flametongue Totems, commences healing rotation. First mob defeated, group progresses down corridor to second mob. Blood Elf Warrior is always in the lead and ahead of the group.

Blood Elf Warrior initiates combat first, Troll Druid and Orc Rogue cast Prowl and Stealth on selves respectively, follow to flank the rear of the mob while Undead Warlock continues to cast spells.

Tauren Shaman resummons totems to buff party.

Process repeats for a third and fourth mob. At this point no one has said anything openly to each other.

Group enters the chamber of the first boss, Glubtok.

Blood Elf Warrior charges ahead without consulting party and engages boss.

Orc Rogue and Troll Druid follow to flank the boss from behind.

Undead Warlock and Tauren Shaman remain a safe distance from the main combat, commence spell rotations.

Glubtok's health decreases by a third – summons wall of fire.

Blood Elf Warrior and Troll Druid are instantly killed by not dodging the flames when they begin to move.

Glubtok then goes into rage timeout and proceeds to kill rest of party.

Upon respawning, Undead Warlock leaves party, rest of group heads back into the dungeon.

Dungeon Finder program initiates to replace the open position.

Troll Druid writes "Sorry, didn't realise fire moved. First time here."

Orc Rogue leaves party. Dungeon Finder restarts. Remaining party members continue travelling down the mineshaft.

Tauren Shaman replies "Np"

Blood Elf Warrior replies "Im not doing a heroic with a n00b"

Tauren Shaman informs "You died in that fire too."

Blood Elf Warrior leaves party.

Troll Druid and Tauren Shaman stand at the edge of Glubtok's chamber.

Troll Druid writes "Bail or stay?"
Tauren Shaman answers "Stay, the queue isn't that long atm"
The three vacant positions are replaced by a Blood Elf Paladin, Blood Elf Mage and Orc Warrior.
Three players spawn in the dungeon beside Tauren Shaman and Troll Druid. Dungeon Finder has allocated the Orc Warrior as the leader. The group is still standing at the entrance to the boss chamber.
Tauren Shaman writes "First boss atm, watch out for the fire. Three have bailed because we wiped."
Troll Druid "First time here, so pls let me know the boss cues"
Blood Elf Paladin answers "Np, I need the VP"
Blood Elf Mage says "Fine with me."
Orc Warrior mentions "Np"
Blood Elf Paladin casts Blessing of Kings buff on party, activates Retribution Aura on self.
Troll Druid re-casts Mark of Wild buff on party, shifts to cat form again.
Blood Elf Mage casts Mage Armour on self.
Tauren Shaman casts Earth Armour on Orc Warrior.
Orc Warrior says "ready?"
Blood Elf Mage answers "yes"
Orc Warrior assumes Defensive Stance then charges towards the boss, Troll Druid flanks the rear while Blood Elf Paladin attacks the boss's side. Blood Elf Mage and Tauren Shaman remain a safe distance from the melee.

In a dungeon, a character's performance entails attacking enemies or healing their comrades and involves spells that temporarily improve a character's statistical qualities to perform better (such as buffs, stances, armour, forms, auras, etc.). Some of these spells can be applied to the group while others can only be applied to the player and the time varies from anywhere between ten seconds to one hour. Players can often recognise particular animations associated with specific actions and clicking on a character allows the player to see what spells are active at that moment. When combined with the prosumption available through the extensive collection of forums and websites combined to a library on how to play World of Warcraft, it makes it easy to share interpretations of the game and establish an idea of expected behaviours as well as the opportune moments to trigger their spells.

The first boss battle in a dungeon is used as the test for evaluating the predicted success of the group. The outcome of this determines a character's ability to perform effectively as the bosses tend to have extremely powerful moves that can cause instant death. In this encounter, it took the form of the fire wall summoned by Glubtok which affects multiple characters. When one is unfamiliar with the dungeon, it can be

easy to accidentally perish in the attack. Once a player has experienced the boss fight they usually pick up on the strategy to overcome that boss. The rigid and linear nature of a dungeon guarantees that the bosses will not change their strategies, no matter how many times they are butchered by wandering players. Bosses can also have a mechanism called a rage timeout⁶⁹. This was introduced by Blizzard to avoid boss fights taking days to complete. Players also use this reset as a chance to evaluate whether they are among skilled players or surrounded by fools. It is a calculated reading of the group's performance to guess whether the group is capable of completing the dungeon. The Undead Warlock made their evaluation and left immediately after the group died. The performance of conflict was avoided, yet the action of leaving suggests "that something is surely suspicious about a performance when those who know it best do not agree" (Goffman, 1959, pg205). While I cannot assume any motives for the Undead Warlock, the lack of interaction is also poignant because to leave a group is often jarring and breaks the performance. It means the dungeon finder needs to locate a replacement while the group waits in the dungeon. The break in the dungeon's performance permits reflection among those who remain. While waiting for a replacement, the group cannot proceed far if they need to replace a tank or healer (unless there is a character among them who can assume those roles and if the player off-screen is willing to swap to another role). There is a jolting pause in the performance as the expectations, the logic or symbolic instruction of what should happen in the dungeon have been disobeyed. Any attempt to interpret meaning beforehand has been abruptly restarted. The waiting period is accompanied by reflection of the failed performance as players rationalise what went

⁶⁹ A gameplay mechanism that occurs when the battle goes for too long in heroic or mythic dungeons. In raids this is present at the normal level difficulty as raids are designed to be more challenging. A rage timeout is when the boss unleashes an attack that kills all the players present. The reaction is designed to start the boss encounter all over again.

wrong in order to amend the upcoming performance. The wait is also accompanied by uncertainty of the skill of the players present and whether they are aware of the knowledge associated with their role or the dungeon boss strategies. This leads to a performance of conflict and antagonism in search of identifying the mistake.⁷⁰

Unfortunately most of PUG interactions have the potential to be volatile and aggressive as some players seek to wilfully impose their interpretation of the situation upon others. This is common when a performance fails and players attempt to reveal one of the group as a defective performer or to have violated the dungeon's logic. Such unveiling is performed through the exchange of insults or accusations. This makes it difficult to discern whether a player is actually aware of what they are doing in the performance of fighting a boss. One of the most common insults flung by players, such as the Blood Elf Warrior in this encounter, is relating to inexperience, a lack of skill or 'n00b' (newbie). The game is built around a community that values experience and knowledge of a skilful performance so to be read as unskilled is a great insult in this context. Unlike an open region where player interactions are less constricted, in a dungeon there is a clear line between success and failure. If the players defeat a boss, they receive rewards for their achievement. If the boss defeats the players, then no one is rewarded. Players who are deemed unskilled often succumb to a variation of stigma, specifically when "one deals with the plight of being *discredited*" (Goffman, 1963, pg14). Failure to adhere to communal expectations can result in the discrediting label of being unskilled or inexperienced and therefore not part of the communal majority. In Azeroth this is determined by a character's performance, commonly in limen phases such as dungeons, raids,

⁷⁰ As noted by Garfinkel, rituals and ceremonies can result in the degradation of status. Such degradation usually begins with moral indignation from the accuser expressed in a public place or at the very least in the presence of an audience to witness it (1956, pg421).

battlegrounds and arenas, where there is a clear goal and reward for achieving it; a constriction of potential meanings. When context is made linear by the game or the constriction of the potentiality of meanings, the uncertainty that influences performative success mainly arises from the characters present and inherent criticisms of each other's performances.

Alternatively, the label of 'n00b' could be sacrificial in nature for a dungeon context. The performance of a dungeon is focused on the transition or affirmation of identity as a skilled player. To openly label someone a 'n00b' is symbolic that they do not belong in the limen, that they have no place in undergoing this *rites de passage*. A sacrifice takes both a victim and a sacrificer as "we are always dealing not with solitary individuals but with systems of social relations" (Turner, 1974, pg69). The act of sacrifice involves a symbolic logic that relates to a society or context greater than the immediate situation. In this case, to identify an unskilled player in a dungeon is to sacrifice their worthiness of taking part in the rite. The sacrificer takes the form of the accuser who attaches the stigma of 'n00b' to the player in question. The moment of uncertainty passes as the source of the mistake in the dungeon's logic has been identified and will most likely be dealt with during the sacrifice's performance.

In this dungeon I must provide a disclaimer, I saw an opportunity in the performance to trigger reactions by openly admitting my inexperience. To be inexperienced or a 'n00b' is detrimental to one's place in the group as the player is admitting they do not fully understand the complexities of the character and thus creates uncertainty in the game context. In this performance, I saw an opportunity to admit that I did not know about the boss mechanics which ties to unfamiliarity with game context. Suddenly, there was uncertainty of the potential meanings my character could bring to the performance. Could I perform in a way that complied with the dungeon's logic? I was

purposely directing the interaction by mentioning my inexperience to bring about a deliberate reaction (Mead, 1934, pg147). By admitting my lack of knowledge I purposely performed “an undesired differentness from what we had anticipated” (Goffman, 1963, pg15). In a dungeon there is an expectation that the players present know how to perform their role in the group, they understand the abilities of their class for that role and that they know the behavioural patterns of the boss. To collectively perform in these ways is to present one’s character as skilful and allows the group to defeat the boss. From my admittance, I received the most expected responses in reaction to such an admission; one player left while another immediately flung insults. Surprisingly, the third came to my defence which tends to be rarer in PUGs. I will omit the player who vanished from the group immediately as speculating about that particular performance would lead to assumptions of the hidden.

Instead, the actions of sacrifice through sabotage exhibited by the Blood Elf Warrior will be the first part to consider. The immediate jump to insulting other players can be interpreted as a diversion of blame to another member of the group; a method of social sabotage through destructive information (Goffman, 1959, pg141-142). Destructive information is not limited to knowing personal details of the group participants but rather the management of information throughout a performance (Goffman, 1959, pg143). Conflict and its potential to become volatile occurs in dungeons when “team-mates can no longer countenance each other’s inept performance and blurt out immediate public criticism of the very individuals with whom they ought to be in dramaturgical cooperation” (Goffman, 1959, pg205). When a player immediately jumps to accusations and insults, they are determining which information comes into focus and positioning themselves as the sacrificer. Such a

display can backfire as it prompts the identity of the outspoken player to equally come under scrutiny. If the opportunity presents itself, players will query them which can invoke a quick exit by the outspoken player as they too have been revealed as part of the mistake.

The third response from the other PUG member was to defend the inexperienced player, which possibly is connected with the totem of race/faction or playing on the same team. However, from personal experience and general discussion among fellow players, this kind of PUG member tends to be rare unless they are amongst fellow friends and guild members. There is always a chance that the randomly collated players may be friendly and willing to impart their knowledge to others so the dungeon performance is successful and the rite can be completed. Playing the game is actively engaging with an experience that has the potential to alter an individual's perceptions and interpretations. The players are attempting to negotiate rather than dictate which meaning is the focus for that performance. Differentiation in whether players choose either to help with or sacrifice the mistake can cripple the ability for players to cooperate in a dungeon. Fortunately, this can be countered as players who differ too greatly in their interpretations can just as easily leave the group with the aid of the Dungeon Finder program.

The ability to assume other identities to maintain that fantasy is crucial (Huizinga, 1950, pg2, 28). Playing the game well is central to one's identity as a character in the game and should you perform adequately others will wish to play with you.

Performances can lead to a pack mentality and group identity as players learn to complement one another's skills in order to succeed and win (Pearce, 2009, pg23, 120-121). For example, it is common in competitive groups of players of MMORPGs to quickly dislike or ban a player for not upholding a certain quality of play. They can

also choose to pressure a player into remaining in a particular niche in order to win and succeed (Pearce, 2009, pg120-121). It is not just about socialising, the activity of a game calls for certain standards of play which are upheld by groups within the game. The identity of the individual player is dictated by their skill in playing and should they be successful, eventually leads players to adopt a group identity or to become part of a team that they then regularly play with.

This can lead to an uncertainty of whether the player really knows what they are doing, which when revealed as such can trigger a special type of performance, sacrifice through confrontation or social sabotage. A direct confrontation is seen as an attempt to restore order by one individual assuming open authority over the social situation which tends to lead to an argument between two or more individuals within a group (Goffman, 1974, pg426-427, 1958, pg166-167). Social sabotage is usually more subtle as an individual or group may choose to pressure an individual to reveal their fallacy and openly admit it. For the most part confrontations are not spontaneous as they need a history or a foundation to formulate the false pretence and point of disagreement (Goffman, 1974, pg437). This foundation may be officially recorded in history texts or ingrained in the memory of individuals and triggered by certain symbols they encounter in a social situation (Goffman, 1974, pg 428-434). Despite the fact interactions are mainly focused upon the present, performances such as confrontation have a more ingrained history on a personal level which provides multiple layers of meanings to a single encounter. However, this knowledge is often hidden during a dungeon run as there is little time to reveal all motives and reasons.

Panic in the Temple of the Jade Serpent

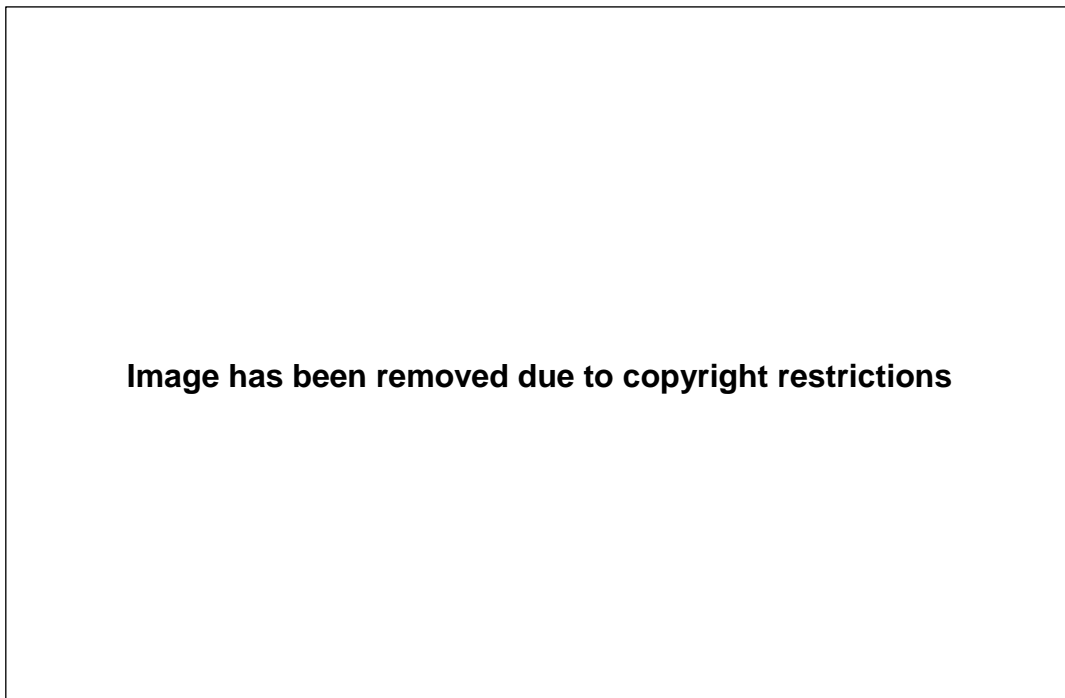


Figure 20: *In game map of the dungeon*

This description is set in a normal difficulty level 85-90 dungeon introduced in the Mists of Pandaria expansion (layout in figure 20). It is written to demonstrate both what occurred throughout the performance of my character and how I was reacting off-screen, backstage, as I piloted my character through the dungeon, on stage. This particular dungeon was my first attempt as a tank rather than a DPS in the group meaning that I willingly changed my role. Now I was attempting to mark my change in status by undergoing the *rites de passage*. I practiced the expected behaviours of a Tank while questing in Azeroth prior to this performance. However, whether or not this performative change would be accepted depended on my performance in the dungeon.

Prior to this dungeon run, I had sought out information about the game so I could impart the desired meanings of a tank to my fellow players. I consulted guides on how to effectively tank using the druid class on IcyVeins, a database of WoW guides,

and the Elitist Jerks forum, a public forum that is run by a guild of the same name that offers advice on how to play a class or complete dungeons. To familiarise myself with this particular dungeon I also watched videos of the Temple of the Jade Serpent, filmed and publically posted on YouTube by players, to learn the positions of the enemy mobs and the strategies for the bosses. All this information is readily available on the internet and accessible to anyone with a computer which reinforces the expectations of the player community. The requirement of being online or having access to the Internet provides any genre of Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOG) with a wealth of player knowledge. Even while logged in or playing, a player can simply 'alt, tab' out, a sequence that when pressed on a keyboard allows players to access other programs without closing any of them, to review game forums or even engage with other online activities while playing a MMOG. This creates multiple back stages and stages to Goffman's stage metaphor for social performances (1958, pg20, 28-29, 34-35, 1974, pg125-127), as players can alternate between the game, their computers and finally their lives around their computers while logged in. The performances of characters in MMOGs can be one of multiple activities the player may be engaged with at that time. Therefore it is difficult to fully decipher who is performing the other character unless they willingly offer such information via the game's various communication channels or beyond the game context. Even then, there is no guarantee that such information is truthful.

A small mistake during performances in dungeons often results in at least an argument over the attributed meanings for that encounter. As dungeon runs can be understood as *rites de passage*, players are often very critical about their team mates and are quick to make judgements, as observed in the previous encounter. However, these activities within the game can also act a vital step in players learning

to properly perform the role of their character. By choosing to engage with the *rites de passage*, the player must be willing to adopt the collective attitude of everyone else performing so that the different roles of the game follow a particular relationship to one another (Mead, 1934, pg151). The ways in which the other players react to one another is dependent on how the individual comprehends the game. This suggests that liminal places, like dungeons, are not limited to learning the performances of a game or receiving elite equipment. They are arenas dedicated to the sharing of interpreted meanings and learning how to best apply them to a context to achieve a certain reaction.

This particular run has been written similar to the rest of my auto-ethnography, from a first-person perspective. I was summoned to the dungeon while it was in the process of being completed; the first boss had been defeated yet the tank had disappeared from the group. I have no details of what transpired in the group before I arrived and I will not be making any assumptions about what occurred. The following account provides a description of what was visible on-screen by focusing on the players performing and my personal reactions off-screen. The specific moves and abilities wielded during the fights and combat with lesser monsters prowling the dungeon have been omitted. It is predominantly the boss fights where players display their ability to perform, and success is obvious. However, in this particular run, even though we completed the dungeon, our success was rather questionable in hindsight given the performance of the group's healer.

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Figure 21: *Waiting at the Lazy Turnip for a warp after locating a group via Dungeon Finder*

The green eye blinked and chimed to herald the end of its search. I had been waiting in that tavern for a while and had finally received a PUG summons to the dungeon I wanted (Figure 21). I immediately ripped from the Lazy Turnip to be teleported to the Temple of the Jade Serpent. The loading screen faded and I found myself in what appeared to be a library. Only the sheer size of it towered overhead with elaborate bridges connecting every section like an elaborate tapestry. The walls housed thousands of scrolls and tomes. There was no telling how much knowledge and history one could find here. I realised that we were in the Scrollkeeper's Sanctum, the location of the second boss, Loremaster Stonestep (Figure 22). Obviously the group had already slain Wise Mari in the Fountain of the Everseeing.

A voice ahead shouts "LOCK ANIMAL!"

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Figure 22: *Sprinting through the Scrollkeeper's Sanctum to find the rest of the group after being warped in*

By then I realised that this once peaceful temple of knowledge was now under siege by twisted apparitions of history. The influence of the Sha had indeed grown since I last ventured to the temple and I was awe-struck that they could bring the very bones of folklore and stories to life. I saw an undead a few bridges ahead of me, descending to the lower levels of the sanctum. After quickly casting Mark of the Wild, I shifted to my bear form and pursued him. Another voice said the healer's name. As I reached the bottom I surveyed my party as an undead priest bestowed her various enchantments to increase my fortitude. I also saw I was in the company of a blood elf warlock, an orc shaman and an undead rogue.

I stood before the twisted ghosts of Strife and Peril who blocked our way to the main courtyard. The undead rogue stood beside me and readied himself. I took this as the cue to start and immediately drew the attention of one of the bosses. Launching into the fray I focused my attacks firstly on Strife, recalling that this battle required the tank to juggle the two bosses and never allow either of them to stack their abilities to 10 (Figure 23). Despite my efforts to remain alive and no matter how much stamina I had stacked, my health was rapidly decreasing at an alarming rate. In a panic I activated all my abilities to increase my chances of survival. To be honest the cooldown of them meant it would take a while before I could use them so I wanted to save them for the next boss fight... but what can you do? You have to change your strategy some times.

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Figure 23: Boss encounter - Peril and Strife

As far as I could tell, no one knew the strategy for this boss of juggling between them. This was good for me because it meant I wasn't the only one who had never been here before... the bad news is that it would be challenging to defeat them. To put it simply... things got crazy, when attacked the bosses stacked their abilities to a max of 10 and with them being attacked at the same time it meant that we had two overpowered phantoms to fight instead of one. Oh shit... I really fucked up here. My first fucking fight as a tank and I fucked it. This group is definitely going to kick me. They're going to lose their shit at me once we wipe.

This started to look bad as the orc shaman had been killed, I saw the undead rogue sprint away from the fight with his last breath. Then I was dealt a killing blow... before I could panic about the prospect of being kicked I realised my resurrection window had more options than usual, Use Soulstone. If I could kiss that warlock I would have! I didn't even realise she had used one on me. Now I had to wait for the best moment to use it.

Sadly at this point the undead rogue had been killed, this left me in a state of limbo to observe the undead priest and blood elf warlock fight the foes that had bested us.

The rogue cries “TANK? A va pra pqp LIXOS fdps”

The shaman adds “i am more than sure”

I had no idea what that second bit was. I’m guessing that the language the rogue was speaking is maybe Portuguese? Regardless, I answered “my bad guys” because honestly I felt like I had screwed up and wanted to be honest with this group about it.

The shaman then says “that this priest does not how to heal”⁷¹

Well... at least it seemed I wasn’t the only one trying a new role in the group. To my relief I see that Strife had been dealt with. So I used it as the opportune moment to use the soulstone and resurrect myself. Instantly shifting from being a troll to a bear, I immediately fought back despite the fact I was at half health. With me as a distraction the warlock was able to support me while the priest recovered.

The shaman meanwhile adds “i don’t see a single power word shield ⁷²being toss around”

I keep fighting but immediately freak as I see the blood elf warlock succumb to her wounds. It was just me and the inexperienced priest... great... I was freaking out on my end no matter how composed my character was. The warlock says “brez⁷³ me”

I know as a druid I have that ability but with the way this boss is attacking I can’t even answer the phone. One wrong move and I’m dead!

Fortunately the shaman adds “naw hes got this” (Figure 24)

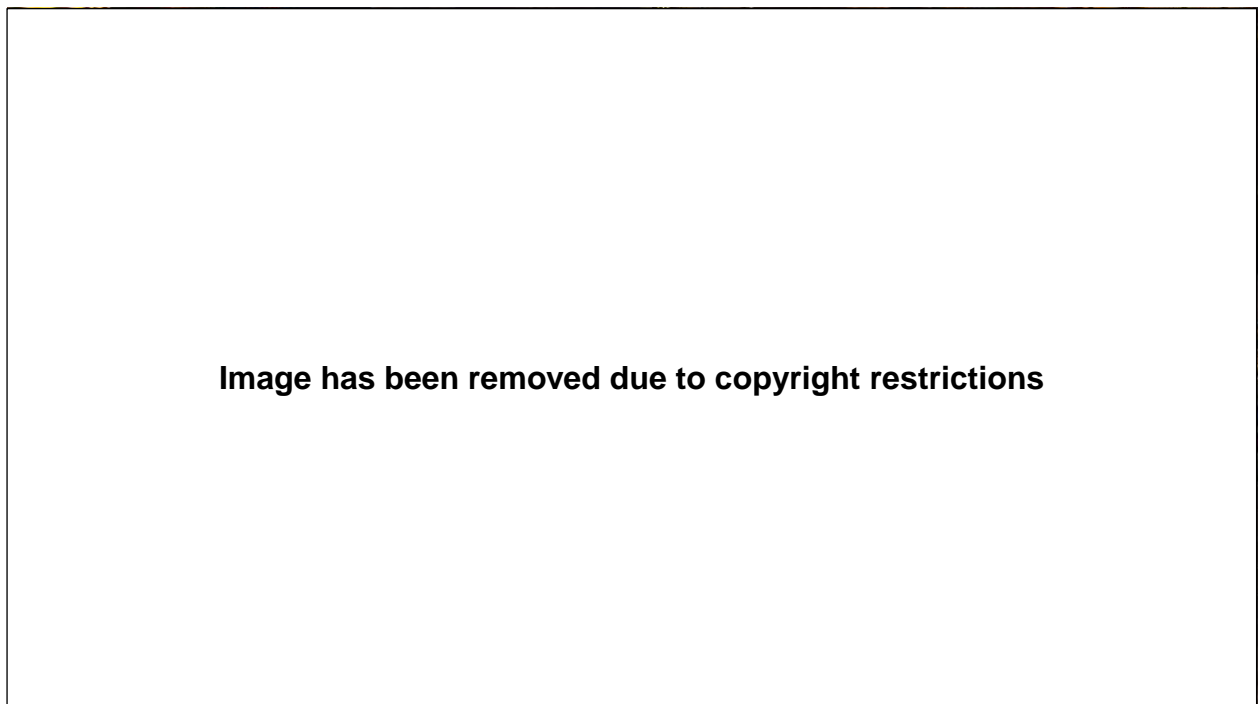


Figure 24: Assumptions being made of my gender

⁷¹I realise there should be a ‘know’ in that sentence but all transcripts have been recorded word for word for authenticity, I haven’t edited them in any way so there are likely to be typos.

⁷² The Priest class uses abilities known as Words of Power to cast their restorative spells.

⁷³ Brez or battle resurrection, an ability to resurrect a player instantly by using that ability, Druids are one of the few classes with this ability which is why the query was directed to me.

Strange, I didn't realise I had become a man during this encounter... even my character is female. The priest was also doing much better now she only had to worry about one person so I felt it was alright to persevere. Finally, Peril was slain by our hand! And we could regroup, I braced myself for an argument to break out from the three DPS, as they seemed to know what they were doing.

I nervously typed in "that boss always confuses me!" hoping it would make them more... sympathetic? Or willing to put up with me for the sake of perfecting my abilities? So I got to helping the priest resurrect and heal our party while the loot was distributed by need/greed system.

Moments passed in silence as we each rummaged through our packs and tended to our depleted health and mana. I was still waiting for some outburst to occur, I seriously thought I was going to be kicked and it terrified me that I had failed. But still... nothing. We still remained in silence as we travelled to the main courtyard (Figure 25).

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Figure 25: *Moving through the outer courtyards of the temple*

Double checking that everyone was there, I then entered the area to clear the trash mobs before the next boss emerge.

The warlock says to me "pull 2 side"

I clumsily attracted the attention of the two remaining mobs, every passing second I felt my panic rise. To be honest I had no idea what I was doing and I was just acting on knowledge I had gained from observation and research. Fortunately it went well after all, the three DPS were really good and supportive.

The shaman then says "priest 1st time healing?" The priest remained silent, so the shaman added "disc priests need to shield people so you gain mana"

Perhaps the priest's error in the previous fight was that she ran out of mana? I'm not sure, I was too busy freaking out over my own actions.

We cleared the mobs which only caused an enraged Liu Flameheart to emerge, clearly displeased with her newfound Sha followers. At that moment I hear the phone ring from the other room. I called out for someone else to pick it up as I couldn't leave my computer. The warlock noticed my pause and said "go"

I respond “ready for boss?” before lunging at Liu Flameheart. I then notice the priest is in the midst of generating a mana and hoped I hadn’t jumped the gun.

The priest answered the shaman’s prior queries - “cast about 10m or more shields that fight”

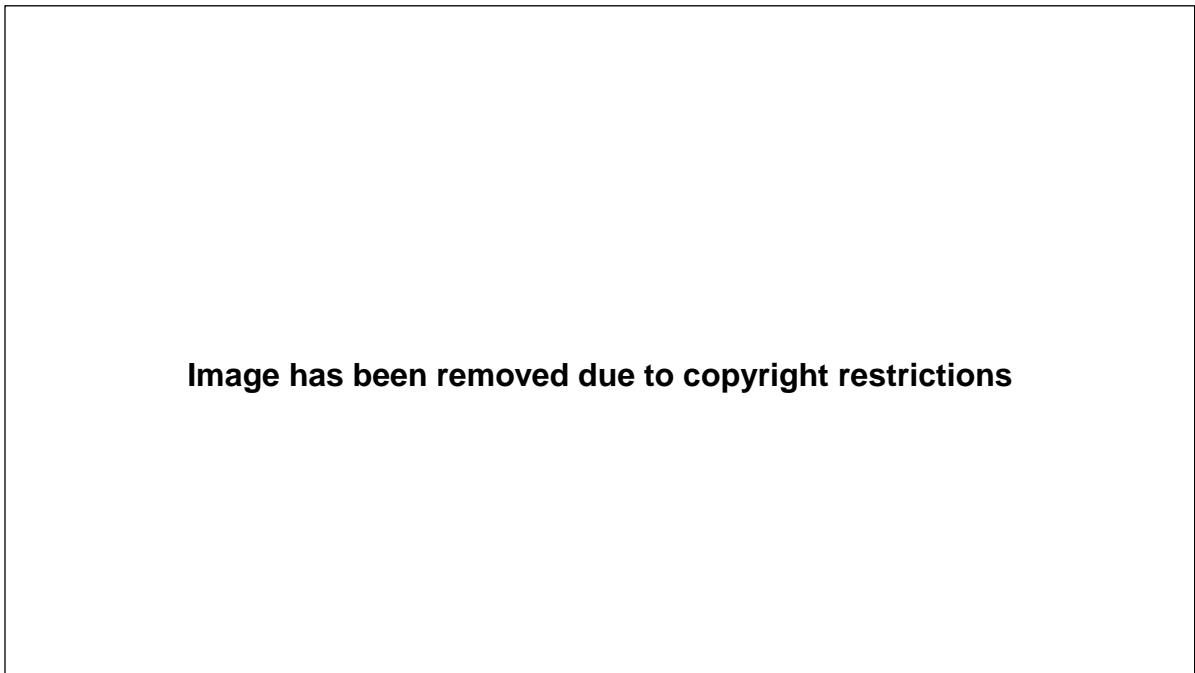


Figure 26: *Boss Encounter – Second Phase of fight with Liu Flameheart*

This boss fight went much more smoothly, then again we didn’t have to worry about juggling two bosses so that was a plus (Figure 26). The door to the Heart of Jade opened to reveal the sight of the Sha of Doubt. But before we could face the final boss we still had to deal with three minions of doubt. I had a lot of trouble keeping agro on me for this mob: luckily no one called me out on it.

I approached the doorway to the final chamber of the dungeon (Figure 27). The rogue had already snuck ahead using his cloaking abilities. I had read that the doors to this chamber closed behind you so you had to make sure everyone was ready to enter, or else your group may be locked out. With everyone behind me, I charge ahead for the final fight.

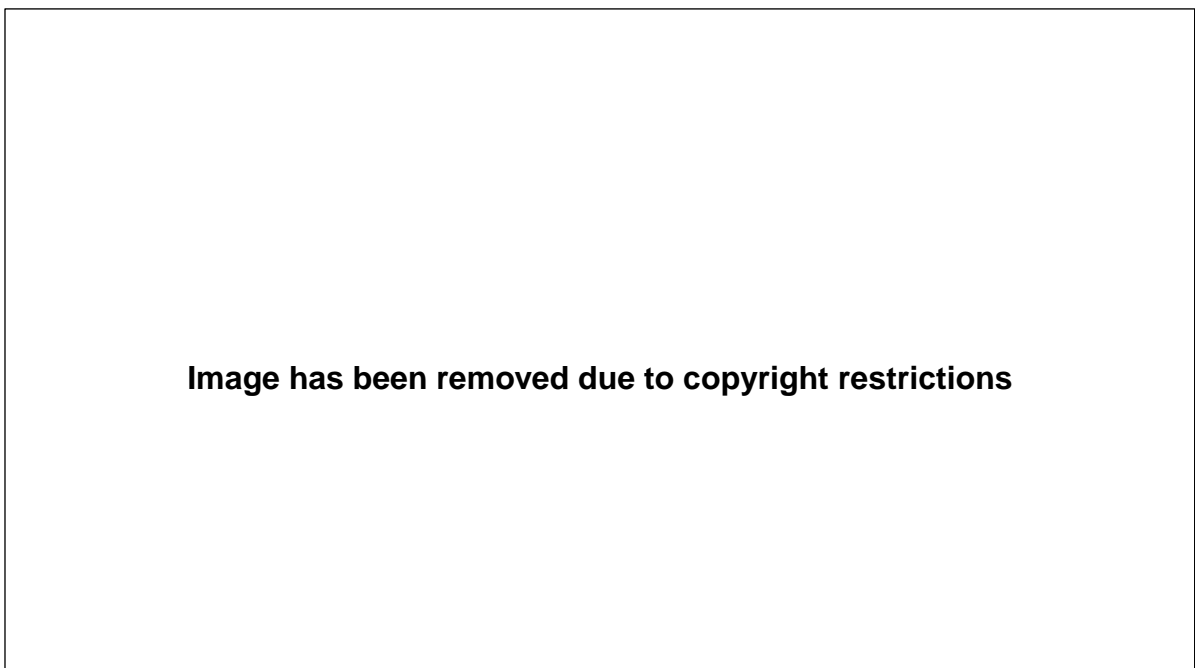


Figure 27: *Going to confront the Sha of Doubt*

The fight went rather smoothly until the Sha of Doubt vanished and summoned shadow copies of ourselves. In that wave the undead rogue had perished. I had tried to herd our enemies into one mob to make it easier to control them but he seemed focused on fighting his shadow one on one.

The shaman then yells “you gotta dispel”

I’m not sure who she was yelling at in that moment. I didn’t think guardian druids had a dispel... we got a poison cure but not dispel... maybe resto or boomkins do... will have to check that later.

She called again “dispel me now or i will die”

I then realise a strange status under her character portrait. But as the tank I was busy keeping agro and freaking out completely at my screen so I hoped either the priest or warlock was going to her aid. Luckily she was dispelled but I don’t know how or who had done it. The battle progressed further (Figure 28), the Sha of Doubt was down to a quarter of its health... and we were all almost dead. The priest was working overtime just to keep us alive and frustratingly my survival abilities were still cooling down from the previous fight. The shaman was the next to die, but it wasn’t in vain. The priest, warlock and I had prevailed once again... miraculously.

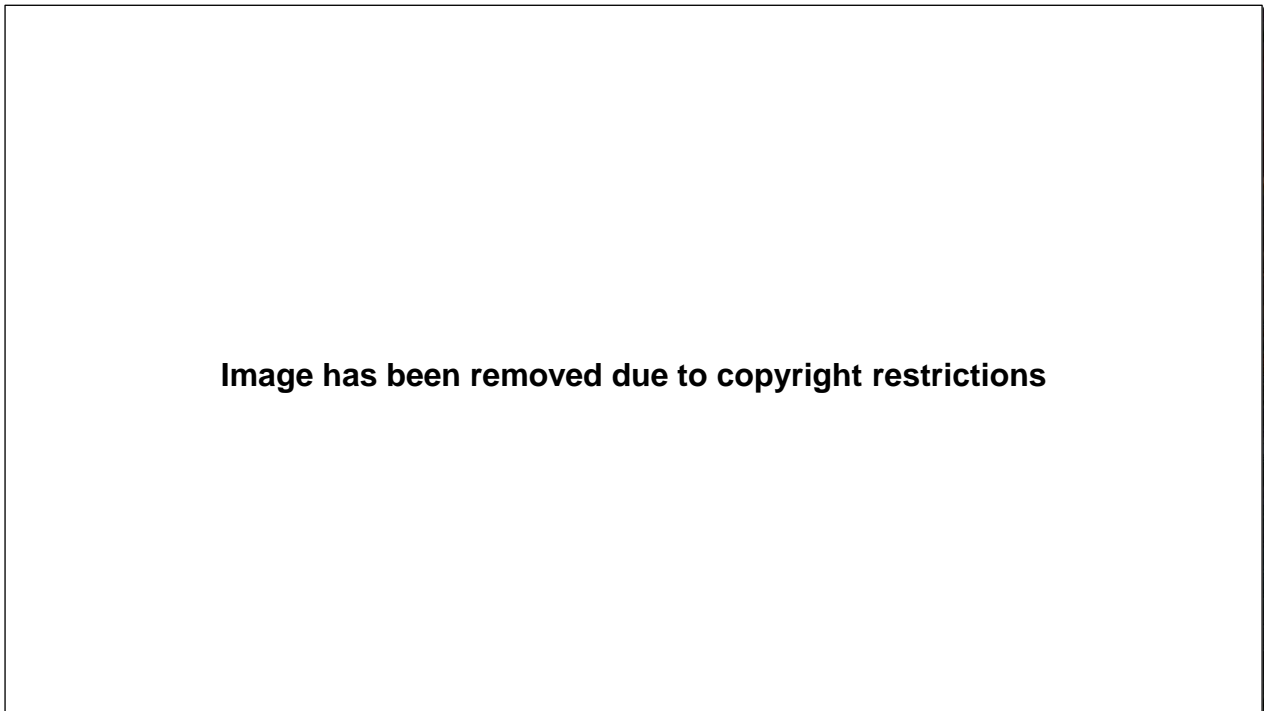


Figure 28: *Boss Encounter – Sha of Doubt*

Loot was distributed again and the resurrection had been done. The priest left instantly, I’m not entirely sure why. Given the situation I said nothing, I was afraid of being called out as a n00b so I left as well.

Technically, I affirmed my role as a tank or guardian druid, perhaps not an overly skilled one but skilled enough to run a dungeon. Had I possibly achieved a transition in my character’s status? The game appeared to react to a successful performance yet there is doubt that other players would agree. *Rites de passage* represents a transformation of identity, they do not guarantee that the new identity has a higher

status level (Turner, 1974, pg232). The change can manifest as simply as shifting the roles one can perform in an acceptable manner. The rite still underwent the separation, the symbolic detachment of the group “from either a fixed point in the social structure or from an established set of cultural conditions” (Turner, 1974, pg232). A group of players were transported to a dungeon which presents an unusual separate context of having only one acceptable result. It is unusual because the rest of Azeroth appears to be in open regions where the uncertainty of meaning is the start of the performance. For a dungeon, uncertainty is posed as locating the mistake in the performance. During the dungeon run, the liminal, there was ambiguity over whether the players present were skilled at performing as their characters. This ambiguity can only be answered by either completing or failing the task of defeating the bosses. Finally, once the dungeon is complete and the final boss is slain, the group returns to the open regions of Azeroth and a more familiar context. Their achievements are not obvious, unless they achieved a particular piece of equipment that symbolises their success. Yet the rite was still followed and completed and personally I think I received encouragement that I could be a tank and not die too horribly.

The comment of “naw he’s got this” during the liminal period acted as confirmation of my ability to perform adequately. Within the game this is a highly desired reaction from members of a PUG. It demonstrates that the other players, about whom I have no prior information, believe that based on my performance as a tank I could defeat that boss. The performance could be successful despite all the problems with that particular fight. I will not go as far as to say that I was skilful as I should have understood the boss mechanic better. However, I still performed the role of a tank in a way that appeared acceptable to other players. The game context also recognised

this with the boss' defeat. The health points of the boss reached zero: how it happened is irrelevant and does not change the fact that it did happen. A *rites de passage* can correlate to a rise in social status, and I am certain this occurs in the game when a guild is first to complete a newly opened raid. That forty players could perform together to face a relatively new and unknown context represents a difficult feat of strength in game. However, the rites that happen in a dungeon are akin to small reminders that a player can perform their character acceptably. It does not need to be a competition, it does not need to promise greater rewards. Sometimes it can be enough to have a way of evaluating one's place in the game, and to test whether one's ability to read the symbols of the game and use them in a performance are acceptable.

When a *rites de passage* does not lead to an elevation in status, it can be interpreted as a chance to experiment with one's ability to perform in different ways. PUGs are used as a testing ground for one's knowledge of their character and whether they can perform in a dungeon context. Players are responsible for maintaining their knowledge of the contexts and studying the performances of their characters, in turn imparting which interpretation of meaning is to be applied to their performance so they can be understood as a skilled player (Williams, 2014, pg128-129). The result of this is that it is very common for players to research aspects of gameplay; to ensure they can interpret, read and use observable symbols of the game. When or if they decide to alter how they usually play, they can still complement the group's performance as they know how to orientate themselves and adapt to the characters in the group rather than the dungeon context. In this instance, I had little idea what the dungeon actually entailed and yet I performed in a way that displayed an awareness of what I was doing, mainly by not openly admitting my inexperience. In

contrast, in the previous account, I performed a lack of awareness of what I was doing in the performance. My admittance or concealment impacted how the groups responded. One underwent sacrifice to remove the mistake. One persisted and managed to complete the rite.

The communal knowledge woven throughout contexts influence the meanings that the character interprets are adapted to every performance (Mead, 1934, pg168). While interacting, the context becomes a conversation that can potentially change and create new meanings through the reactions of the character (Mead, 1934, pg168). Dungeons offer an opportunity for solidifying a character's place in game and a chance to converse with the context of the game. The majority of PvE guides for being the most effective variant of character class are written predominantly by skilled raiders of the player community who have rigorously rehearsed their performances in dungeon or raid contexts to evaluate their performance in the game. Should a writer of such a guide develop a better way to perform a character class or role, they will present this perspective to the broader player community in order to validate their meanings for a character. The success of changing communal knowledge then depends on whether other players share similar success by adopting that performance to their character, thus influencing what other players in a group should expect. This process also allows players to distinguish themselves and others as skilled or unskilled in their performance (Mead, 1934, pg324).

The accumulation of knowledge is grounded in the use of symbols to navigate through the game, and whether the player can understand their application and relationships to various contexts. The more knowledge a player has, the more possibilities of meanings they can interpret. The player then appears skilled as they can adapt their performance to any context the game presents them with. In a

dungeon scenario this would be performed by a player using various strategies to defeat the boss. The end meaning is the same with the boss' death, yet the process of the performance may vary according to the group. Such adaptability permits players to adopt a leadership persona, or perform in a way that encourages the idea that they are a leader (Williams, 2014, pg124). When a leader emerges they can then impart their knowledge to other players via methods to improve their characters in ways such as the best procedure to level, how to build the character for a role, how to overcome a challenge in game, etc (Williams, 2014, pg125). An example of this dynamic was observed in the shaman communicating frequently throughout the dungeon and attempting to offer advice to the priest of how to be a more effective healer. By doing so the shaman also revealed that they understood the underlying mechanics of other character builds, thus encouraging the interpretation that the shaman was an experienced player and worthy of the role of leader. Rather than dictating their meaning, the shaman negotiated so that the group still remained as a collective whole instead of disintegrated as it did in the previous encounter.

During the encounter there was assumption made of my gender purely from my performance, with the assumption that a tank is coded as masculine. Gendered pronouns do occur in game, but when regarding players this is difficult to assume on-screen as the off-screen world is hidden. However, the comment "naw he's got this" from the encounter has ignited my curiosity, particularly in how this connects to our reality. The use of male pronouns speculated on the unseen player separate from the game to impose a gender identity based on my performance as a tank in game. Presently I do not possess a scholarly language to fully explore the interpretation of gender so I will not explore how a tank might be masculine. To do so would require further study of performing gender identity in the culture and society that

created and maintains the game. Instead I will focus on how this impacts the interpretation of meaning. The first point to address is that the assumption of gender does not appear to be crucial to the performance of characters in game. Character abilities and access to resources in game are not limited by gender, aside from aesthetics⁷⁴. This means that a character can assume any role in the group regardless of their gender⁷⁵. Their place in the game context is influenced by the symbolic totems I outlined in an earlier chapter.

Secondly, assumptions of the unknown player beyond the game and character cannot be easily disputed. WoW and other MMORPGs normalise anonymity by making players create or perform as characters from the outset. There have been attempts to collate data on player demographics and generally it is assumed by both the community and researchers that online games are populated more by men than women (Yee, 2003, 2005). When contemplating such attempts to survey players, it is worth considering who volunteers information and who does not. There may be a danger of discrediting individuals should such information be revealed. A statistic or survey can only show the information collated from the people who volunteered, which can present a false representation of a community. This ambiguity is not a result of error on the researcher's part because groups do not always wish to reveal information about themselves or perhaps certain categories of a subculture merely drown out others and over-represent themselves in order to appear as dominant members. This topic in itself warrants further attention in future research about the

⁷⁴ Commonly seen when plate armour appears as a suit of armour on a male character but magically transforms into elaborate lingerie on female characters, although there is slightly more variety in equipment designs with each expansion. Yet the original equipment pieces that become very revealing on female characters are still highly sought after on the auction house. As a gamer, I find it difficult to grasp how the same equipment changes so drastically given the gender of the owner. It appears more reasonable in terms of design and the game world that the equipment in question would be equally revealing or concealing regardless of the owner.

⁷⁵ Although, the gender dynamics represented by the choices of the player (e.g. how they adorn their character, their race, class, etc.) would impact the presentation of certain character aesthetics over others. However this is something to discuss in greater detail with a different line of questioning.

visibility of player demographics and how they are represented in the gaming community.

The male pronoun used in that comment during the dungeon run, speaks to issues of performing a gender binary of masculinity and femininity that have permeated the game from beyond its boundaries. There is a transferral of meanings from the society that created the game to the fantasy context that facilitates the game. This is noteworthy for the interpretation of meaning because the transferral of meaning from a broader social context to a game context reflects the attitudes of the society that created the game. In this way, games allow us to question the interpretation of meaning and resulting construction of identity in our lives outside of playing the game. Games can act as catalysts for broader social issues as they allow us to be critical of our own understandings of reality in an easily comprehensible way. They encourage critical discussions through aesthetically simplified interpretations of social life. Games are important as they are accessible to a majority of people regardless of their educational background, rather than being restricted to a scholarly minority.

Azeroth, like all forms of social interaction, possess uncertainty over which potential meanings are relevant at that time, at that place. The individual then assumes a character that can comprehend the symbolic language present in a context to interpret meaning from the possibilities. Their ability to do so is dependent on the initiative of the player and how much time they have to invest in playing in order to perform appropriately to any context they encounter (Williams, 2014, pg135-136, Pearce, 2009, pg23). A player mostly learns this by actively playing the game and experiencing the game world. Deciding to be a part of Azeroth requires a level of awareness from the player regarding how they traverse the game world (Golub,

2010, pg23). To do so effectively, they require the aid of other players to help evaluate the contextual accuracy of their interpretation and the variety of processes that permit the interpretation of meanings. This is mediated by employing the use of a language game among the player community that is unique to Azeroth as the game provides ample criteria to construct meanings. A language game establishes an interpretation of what is logically possible to a particular form of life primarily learnt from experience (Wittgenstein, 1953, pg64, para147-149). Players of WoW actively presume the meanings of Azeroth through maintaining online databases and discussing game content with players to account for changing meanings (Davis, 2012, pg598, Golub, 2010, pg21). The language game of Azeroth is primarily focused upon the construction and reinforcement of the player's character's identity and place within the game. The gameplay cannot function without the player assuming a fantasy alias which must abide by specific symbols to appear as though they belong in Azeroth and that they have mastered the way of life to which it pertains (Fine, 1983, pg213, Nardi, 2010, pg57). On a theoretical level, a researcher can see a language game, players on the other hand experience this directly in order to navigate through Azeroth. The players are not necessarily deeply considering their actions through a critical, theoretical lens.

While playing WoW, I witnessed familiar social situations that shared a remarkable similarity to how one would navigate their daily life. Once one ignores the fact they are in a fictional world, their place in this community is influenced by their ability to perform a socially acceptable identity. The level of acceptance of your performance is evaluated by your peers or other participants in the same social event (Cohen, 1985, pg16, Goffman, 1959, pg20, 26, 34, 1974, pg127). The transition and transformations of contexts are so fluid that one hardly ever notices them changing,

but it is still an individual's responsibility to alter their behaviour accordingly. Failure to do so often results in distorted performances that are deemed bizarre for the intended identity by observers. This often leads to direct confrontation in hopes of correcting this error (Pearce, 2009, pg23). The pattern of behaviour described previously is a common situation we face on a daily basis as we perform for our peers in order to be accepted. It is very much the same for players in a non-online game as well as players in an online game.

Azeroth presents possible experiences for players to become engaged with their actions in game. Predominantly this arises during interactions where players know one another beyond their characters such as being part of a group or joining a guild of likeminded individuals who interpret similar ranges of meanings from contexts (Williams, 2014, pg135-136). In doing so, players may choose to reveal information about who they are in reality or parts of their personality through direct communication. This creates a more complex identity for the character beyond what they observe on-screen. They have access to the backstage of the performances in game and knowledge that may be hidden to the audience (Goffman, 1959, pg174-175, 142-143). Curiously, emotion tends to be reserved for the player, and often in the recounting of tales emotive language is used which pertains to the player's state of mind. I have found myself doing so in the series of tales I have shared throughout this thesis, although very rarely would I consider any possible emotion my character could be feeling. This has given me pause as to how emotion has meaning in game, to the character/player dynamic and the performances of that character in Azeroth. Oddly observing dungeon runs, where the negotiation of meaning has been constricted, the emotion of the players manifests as outbursts when the actions of the group deviate from expectations, or a context reacts in an unanticipated way.

A concept that is central to the thesis, character, is both a social performer and a reactive part of the context that impacts which possible meaning comes into focus for that instance. Characters can emote but emotes are frequently used to communicate with other players when words may not be exchanged, rather than to express how a character feels⁷⁶. In the context of PvE gameplay where random characters interact, the lack of emotion appears to change when the character is stopped from completing their task so they cannot receive a reward for their efforts. The expected or assumed meanings for the context are not interpreted through the performance. Rage, anger and annoyance of varying levels tend to emerge in reaction, as shown in the dungeon scenarios, eliciting the most vocal or written responses from the players. They are encouraged to voice their anger via the gameplay mechanics of being constantly rewarded for their efforts.

Conclusion

Dungeons constrict the potentiality of meaning that can be negotiated through linear design and clockwork patterns of NPC behaviour. The performance of the character is allowed to become the predominant focus as the random variables of Azeroth's open regions have been negated. This allows further scrutiny of a player's character as the success of completing the task lies with the group of players and should they fail, they receive no compensation for their labour in game. The dungeon context creates a very distinct reaction to the characters based on whether they succeed or fail at traversing it; thus prompting uncertainty to focus on the character as the

⁷⁶ However, the situation where emotes are used to express a character's emotion may come to light in a roleplaying scenario, which is a section of gameplay in Azeroth I have not engaged with as it is equally complex and deserves separate research.

context is definitive in what is acceptable and unacceptable for it. From a performative aspect, dungeons can be understood as a *rites de passage* as they are a test of a player's ability to perform with their character in a way that can be understood as skilful for either that role, that particular dungeon, or both. This potentially affects how others interpret them as they receive loot, a visual symbol, and at times achievements to display that they are competent dungeon travellers and able to cooperate in the group; thus altering their identity to a more experienced and skilled player. The combination of characters encountered in the limen period also shifts the way meaning is interpreted in relation to the symbols embodied by the characters. From this observation, uncertainty of meaning manifests in hindsight of a performance as well as at the starting point. It appears as though uncertainty is equally subjective to the performance yet consistently managed and assessed by whoever is present.

Knowledge of the game, its symbols and meanings is the player's individual responsibility. The players actively engage in prosumption and consumption of information about the game by researching outside the game in forums, websites and open discussion. They also do so by performing in game and experimenting with the ways in which they interpret their surroundings. This intensifies during a *rites de passage*. The performance of a player can be shaped by awareness; whether the individual can adapt and react to changes in the context. Awareness is also performative in nature as players can pretend to know what they are doing or admit that they do not, leading to diverse reactions from their group. The success of a performance is reflected by whether or not players profit from their endeavours in Azeroth. For a dungeon this is critical as failure results in multiple players not being paid for their efforts; the importance of this will come to light in the next chapter.

Failure to perform can result in the disbandment of the group or in rather volatile situations that have the potential to become toxic if not diffused properly in the performance. Social sabotage, even sacrifice, presents a performative uncertainty as it is difficult to interpret which players are genuinely skilled at playing the game or capable of understanding the symbolic instruction of the rite. Due to the random nature of collaboration, through usage of the Dungeon Finder, there are limited ways for players to interpret the performance of the collective characters in the group until they navigate through the first events of the dungeon or the first boss fight. From there the arena of performing takes place, uncertainty manifests around the actions of the anonymous characters around an individual. It shifts from the origin of attributing meaning to the key focus of the interaction with an acceptable result allowing completion of the dungeon's rite.

Chapter 6: Imposing Familiar Logic upon the Hidden

Uniting all performances in WoW is a sense of Azeroth⁷⁷ which allows players to interact and engage with playing the game. However, there is a final blind spot that cannot be truly deciphered: the hidden. Players may call upon logic to fill in the gaps of knowledge created by the hidden, but the application of logic diminishes the interest in knowing the hidden as it reveals the basic knowledge one must know to interact. At times, these logics can feel reductionist when one considers the complexity of a performance. Logic, in this thesis, refers to generalised ideas of how a context functions so one who is unfamiliar or inexperienced with that context can have a basic understanding of how to start learning about it. By creating logic, one provides a familiarity in the boundaries and symbols of social life which helps one better comprehend how it functions. However I would argue that one's understanding is reductionist if the individual only follows a single logic, i.e., if that logic does not change regardless of new information and experiences. Logic is not about reducing any form of interaction to a simplistic ideal; it is about covering the basic foundation of logic that permits understanding when knowledge is hidden. The hidden never goes away, instead attention is diverted so that the hidden knowledge becomes

⁷⁷ Azeroth as a game, as a virtual world, as a background to one's adventures, as a context that allows one the fantasy to play with meaning and symbols.

superfluous to a performance. To learn to play WoW, a player must develop their logic or a baseline of understanding the game. This baseline grows more complex as players learn more.

This chapter shows some of the logic I applied in order to comprehend the sociality of Azeroth, to divert my interest from the hidden so I could focus on what I do know about the game. All of this became more complex as I played the game and learned more about it, which in turn allowed me to identify the importance of symbols and social blind spots. By examining how I made sense of the game, I can reflect further on the experience of 'play'. Firstly, I share my notes on the construction of the familiar by comparing Azeroth's structure to urbanisation and then narratives of capitalism. As most players live in a capitalist and urban environment, the game mimics certain structural patterns to make the fantasy of Azeroth familiar and understandable to new players. However, this starting logic is imperfect in that it does not account for the complexity of performing as a player or even question the nature of play. 'Play' is usefully considered because all people logged in are known as players, and Azeroth is a world, in which one is 'playing' a game as one performs. From the various descriptions I have shared, 'play' does not always mean one is having fun. In view of the more familiar and serious logics underpinning the game, attention must then be paid to what 'play' entails and its relevance. Finally, I will conceptualise play as a language game that permits the dynamism of symbol and meaning to exhibit the relationship between language games and interpretation of meanings. While this chapter lacks temporal tales on which to reflect, the act of writing it involves me as a researcher adhering to a scholarly performance. I am engaging with an explanation of interpreting meaning that can be understood as

acceptable in an academic context in order to sculpt the uncertainty of my research into familiarity.

Familiarity in the Cities of Azeroth

Azeroth is populated and given meaning by players from our physical reality who have been imprinted with the interpreted meanings of their context's culture. Wirth states "our social life bears the imprint of an earlier folk society" (1938, pg3) which is also similar to Wittgenstein who stated "our language can be regarded as an ancient city" (1953, pg11, para18). As long as that city is occupied, the ways in which it is used will differ with time and how the decedents choose to utilise it (Wittgenstein, 1953, pg11, para18). Continuing with this metaphor, it appears that while the city may change, it will always speak to a previous, existing organisation of symbols that influences the construction of newer meanings. The overall point I am making is that while theorists offer a variety of ways to speak about life and may choose to focus their observations on different types of social life, they can possess overlapping perspectives that complement one another and speak to a greater sense of curiosity and familiarity in how we interpret meaning. It would be a mistake to assume all theorists are identical, yet there are times when parts of their findings overlap and potentially connect. On a superficial level, Wirth focused on the anonymity that came from a diverse population living in close quarters (1938), whereas Wittgenstein focuses on how meaning is determined through its use and played with through language (1953), yet they both made the observation that social life is reflective of previous societies. This was my starting point for constructing an interpretation of WoW.

Presently Warcraft is a game franchise with a massive community that has been consistently built upon by Blizzard since 1994. Like a city it has evolved, changed and adapted alongside our society, leading to the evolution of the game's symbols used to create Azeroth and its occupants. As a game it has had decades to evolve technologically from a single player real-time strategy game to an MMORPG, and as a result has become a complex online community. Warcraft evolved from a game that one played mostly alone to become an experience of play simultaneously shared by players all over the world, similar to the development of a small village becoming a thriving urban metropolis in virtual reality. The number of players communicating about the game both beyond the game's context and within it has risen exponentially, making it extremely difficult to know every player of the game, and therefore "the increase in numbers thus involves a changed character of the social relationships" (Wirth, 1938, pg11). MMOGs commonly share qualities of daily social life as they are made familiar to players through designs inspired by aspects of our physical reality.

The form of play in MMOGs can be regarded as similar to how many people function while logged off where they identify themselves by the nature of their employment and keep to a particular routine. This is where Wirth's perspective is useful as it allows a way to think about a massive, anonymous population in the assimilation of individuals through creating familiarity. MMORPGs have a massive population of engaged players, so as in an urban population when there are too many people to know individually, "it becomes necessary to communicate through indirect mediums and to articulate individual interests by a process of delegation" (Wirth, 1938, pp13-14). The increased population leads to a diversification of work which leads to individuals being "dependent upon more people for the satisfactions of their life-

needs” (Wirth, 1938, pg12); for a character in a game context their survival is dependent on whether they can handle the task at hand individually or if they need to enlist the help of other players. A character, even the character of a worker, has opportunities in that context to hone their skills to better complete the task or to complement the skill sets of other characters. Using one’s skills to complement the community increases the perceived value of the individual, because when anonymity is present “the enquiry is always about what kind of property creates the best citizens” (Marx cited in Giddens, 1971, pg28). The term citizens in this context relates to which individuals best communicate through indirect mediums to delegate roles to others within a massive community. Indirect mediums can include a skill set or an ability to read the symbols of that community, which permits interaction with blind spots by mimicking familiar routines of social behaviour.

If one regards the entire fictional realm of WoW and Azeroth as an online gaming community rather than towns scattered amongst the landscape it is possible to observe patterns of density, heterogeneity and population in aggregate. Density is the most prominent as structurally the game is divided by the vast wilderness, perilous dungeons and towns to act as hubs of game related services. There are also regions categorised by difficulty to ensure players venture into those that are suitable for their character. Density redefines the categorisation of space and place to be highly specialised for different performances to “resemble a mosaic of social worlds in which the transition from one to the other is abrupt” (Wirth, 1938, pg15). The abrupt transition is a result of the vast number of people that live in the close quarters of a city; these people are individuals with differing lifestyles and interpretations of meaning, so the surrounding context is specialised to facilitate a myriad of interactions (Wirth, 1938, pg15). The common ground between an urban

and online gaming community is that context is highly segmented according to the activity that takes place in an area in order to accommodate the greater diversity of meanings. Within a single log in, a player can navigate through tundra, desolate wastelands, lush forests, mysterious ruins and various cities. Each area is part of Azeroth, the home of the NPCs and shared among all player characters. Visually Azeroth shifts between regions through abrupt changes in aesthetics, providing ample symbols that indicate when a character has moved between places.

The concept of density couples well with that of population aggregate or the idea that a large number of individuals living in the same area leads to a greater range of individual variation or a division of labour through a diversity of skills. This creates a highly segmented community which thrives on competition over who provides the best utilities (Wirth, 1938, pg12). Individuals become recognised for their skills and often migrate according to who can best reward them, encouraging anonymity and high social mobility (Wirth, 1938, pp11-13). This can be observed by players migrating between servers to play with different groups, or in Azeroth by characters migrating around the world in pursuit of challenges and treasure worthy of their skills. In order for such individuals to communicate without intimate knowledge “it becomes necessary to communicate through indirect mediums and to articulate individual interests through a process of delegation” (Wirth, 1938, pp13-14). Theoretically density offers a way of moving into Symbolic Interactionism, where symbols are used to create meaning, and by extension Totemism, where categories of symbols are used by a community to discuss the world (Cohen, 1985, pg118, Levi-Strauss, 1962, pp11-12), which was outlined in the previous chapter.

To facilitate performances, symbols become specialised into totems to streamline communication. The specialisation of character has a common pattern of being

based upon labour roles; the interdependence of such labour roles thus creates a complex network of relationships in game and competition over the specialisation of skills (Wirth, 1938, pg13). “The individual counts for little, but the voice of the representative is heard with a deference roughly proportional to the numbers for whom he speaks” (Wirth, 1938, pg14), the individual can only act as a character who represents the broader context to which they belong. They conform to the greater expectation of their skill sets in order to receive adequate compensation for their actions whether this is financial, commodified or emotional.

Heterogeneity impacts the establishment of player identities in game. The high mobility and density of players and their actions in game lead to changes in what groups players associate with and which activities they focus on. The individual becomes involved in a variety of social activities which in reality only present the performance of a fragment of their identity (a character). Even though this can lead to the opportunity to create a complex identity, when placed in the context of an urban environment it can do the opposite and depersonalise an individual into a single role (Wirth, 1938, pp16-17). The urbanite then comes to normalise blind spots when “he comes to accept instability and insecurity as normal” (Hannerz, 1980, pg63), which then encourages migration through all manner of social circles that “cannot be arranged hierarchically or concentrically but touch or intersect in a variety of ways” (Hannerz, 1980, pg63). Context replicates this effect online as numerous contexts can exist simultaneously even though they pertain to different relationships of meaning. Yet each context is connected by relating to a specific larger communal understanding, such as a game.

In WoW, a player’s character is dehumanised by using Azeroth’s symbols. The game gives the illusion that an individual can participate in many different activities and

groups. The reality of this is that an individual is usually coerced subconsciously by underlying expectations to behave and perform identities that have been approved of. In both real life and in online games, characters will react to deviations in the expected performance in order to realign the meanings to what appears logical and acceptable. Urbanism provides a way of life where communication can occur by focusing on the character of an individual rather than the individual as a whole. This is where Wirth's interpretation of urban life possesses limitations, the most evident being a "tendency to see the city as a closed system" which can dismiss the potential for external influences to impact an urban way of life (Hannerz, 1980, pg66). Despite WoW appearing as a closed system due to being placed in virtual reality, it is still susceptible to external influences. The players of this game usually have one foot in Azeroth and one foot in their lives beyond the game. A character may move around on-screen but it is impossible to assume what the player behind the other screen is doing unless one is in the same room as the player off-screen. There can be other influences intruding on the game, numerous times during dungeon runs the group had to stop to accommodate actions in the physical reality. Whether this included household chores, feeding pets, settling newborn babies, tending to young children, the players were never isolated completely from their lives beyond the game. This is also the hidden, beyond the context of the game, which influences a player character's participation and engagement. Most communication in game can only be interpreted from what is observed on-screen and what the player accepts as normal.

The mechanics of an online game encourage similar patterns of socialisation as it mimics an urban environment. An individual is accepted by performing their character in the game effectively in accordance with the context. One's ability to socially perform allows one to choose one's identities and the ways to perform them

(Goffman, 1959, pp87, 90-91, 142-143). However, this is limited by what options are available or provided by the circumstances one lives in and how one learns to create meaning from symbols, because this impacts the possibilities of meanings one can construct (Cohen, 1985, pg118). This interpretation is reflected in online games, as from the moment a new player logs in they must create a character to fit into the game's world in order to start playing the game. They must then build this character by interacting with the game thus altering the meanings of their character through temporal performances. In hindsight, comparing Azeroth to an urban environment may explain how the structure of the game is made easy for new players comprehend. However, it does not account for how players navigate through Azeroth nor how they come to value and use the game environment.

A Familiar Social Order in Azeroth

Journeying through the Mists of Pandaria and beyond, I found that the performances of the players, the collective symbols that define their character in the game's context and the utilisation of symbols allowed them to communicate. The interaction of character and context permitted the formation of similar understandings from the same symbols, unique to the variation of play one engages with while playing WoW. As a result the ways players perform their understanding of WoW differs by individual because WoW provides a variety of experiences to engage with (Snodgrass, 2014, pg482). The game functions through the shared experience of playing in the same virtual world which results in the normalisation of blind spots. Through anonymity, by focusing on the character rather than the player, assumptions based on the contextual knowledge are the driving force of interactions

among players (Nakamura, 2009, pp131,133, Pearce, 2009, pg140). There is no universal agreement of the 'correct' way to play the game, due to the temporal and impulsive nature of most player interactions. With each interaction, characters must react by drawing upon their understanding of the game and their past experiences in order to comprehend and act appropriately.

MMORPGs entail a complex network of understandings that encompass social life for those who have chosen to and are able to log in. The style of gameplay encourages players to share meanings learnt through experiencing the game⁷⁸. The invoked meanings constantly shift according to the players who are logged in and the application of prior experiences to interpret the present context. The character in the midst of this performance is working with partial truths and knowledge from the context as it is impossible to fully account for every detail and aspect of what they observe. One's research then drives one to attempt to create a way of understanding what has happened and in turn be capable of explaining it to an audience or a reader (Clifford, 1986, pp2, 6). When one plays an MMOG and is immersed in the experience, these games become less about leisure and escapism and more about learning and mastering a language of play. This allows characters to react during a temporal encounter and formulate an acceptable logic to explain their experiences in hindsight. The result bestows the ability to assume various explanations for a performance and to judge its acceptability according to the game's logic.

Numerous MMOs are driven by an unending journey to amass endeavours of the player's efforts, it does not matter if the game is set in a mundane suburbia, a modern battlefield where one fights for the glory of one's nation or a forsaken

⁷⁸ Regardless of whether the player belongs to a guild or plays alone. They are still playing the game, being part of a guild is not mandatory to experience WoW.

dungeon littered with monsters. The amassed loot from one's endeavours are symbols of consumption and by understanding the context one can trace a player's movements throughout the game by acknowledging the value of a commodity to a level of challenge required to obtain it (Malaby, 2009, pg28). The game world toys with meanings and symbols to create a fantasy of control with predictable outcomes for social performances. When the context itself is a reimagined and idealist version of our reality, which neatly follows rules, it allows players to immerse themselves in the game due to its similarity to their routine lives (Mcguire, 2004, pg59). MMO games, indeed possibly most electronic games, are given logic and order by reinterpreting the experiences and narratives one may face in daily life. These games then apply fantasy aesthetics to transform these narratives into a pleasurable experience.

From my time playing WoW, I have been able to identify five broad propositions reminiscent of aspects of capitalism that player characters come to embody in order to perform acceptably. This is befitting as WoW is a product of a western, post market-capitalist society that invokes the label of play or leisure when referring to it in passing. Four of the propositions that resemble themes of capitalism include a strong work ethic to amass wealth, the shifting values of profit to keep that ethic strong, the fact that there is no foreseeable end to the game and a cycle of rationalising one's impulse to acquire profit. The fifth theme differs slightly as it introduces an opportunity for agency by the player, but only when they know the rules of the game so that they can better understand and manipulate the interpretations of meanings while playing. Each of these narratives will be elaborated using WoW and the dynamics of work and play as examples to display the relationship between aspects of capitalism and Azeroth.

The Capitalist Logic of Azeroth

Capitalism is ambiguous and sensitive to change, so it would be foolish to proclaim that Azeroth embodies all variations of meanings associated with it. This is not to frame this as a weakness as such fluidity shows capitalism is prone to change in how a society values particular commodities. Capitalism is a reflexive idea rather than a static piece, like a culture that evolves over time to advance into complex networks of understanding that conflict or coexist around social, political and economic issues of the era (Streeck, 2009, pp6-7). The application of broader themes of capitalism to WoW will focus on a more reflexive interpretation of capitalism which defines it as an experience, predominantly explored by Marx and Weber (Giddens, 1971). Marx extensively outlined the processes of alienation due to capitalism where workers dehumanise themselves into terms of production and labour. He also eloquently described capitalism as a “fetishism of commodities” (Giddens, 1971, pp10-17, 61-64, 224). Azeroth is an embodiment of this quote. It is a game about adventure and a market force where players labour to amass wealth which alienates and divides the player community regarding to how best to profit from their labour. This is a game that boasts cooperative play driven by an Azeroth-themed economy with demands for particular resources to build a powerful character. The commodities available are decorated by fantasy elements to make them seem mysterious and desirable. Yet the game and programmers have no control over how the value is distributed among the content of the game, for that is decided by the players’ experiences. WoW can be regarded as a game that celebrates the rampant materialism and labour routines brought on by living in a capitalistic society.

From an economic perspective, capitalism is centred on the investment of money for capital which then turns over a large profit in the market. The value of profit is

established by factors such as scarcity, distance and processes of accumulation to bring the capital to a marketplace, as identified to an extent by Marx (Giddens, 1971, pp10-17, 61-64, 224). In this way, markets can be manipulated by businesses or merchants who hold a monopoly on types of capital as they can drive the value of their products unopposed (Fulcher, 2004, pp1-4). Capitalism as a business model began as trading with scarce products to establish a monopoly before evolving into a model of production due to industrialisation. Markets became more competitive based on how much capital could be produced for minimal cost to then be sold for profit (Fulcher, 2004, pp4-7). Socially this adaptation of a business model also created a clear division between work and leisure, although leisure was commercialised by workers using their wages to pay for a variety of activities or excursions to do while not working (Fulcher, 2004, pg8). Through industrialisation, capitalism shifted from a focus on capital to the labour force, and the ideas of derivatives or deriving values based on something else. The result of this is that capitalism has become the process of identifying opportunities with a possibility to make profit (Fulcher, 2004, pp9-14).

This development introduced a social process to capitalism. In order to be capable of identifying such opportunities, an individual must be familiar with a context so they can notice these prospects when they emerge. "Capitalism is identical with the pursuit of profit, and forever *renewed* profit, by means of continuous, rational, capitalistic enterprise" (Weber, 1958, pg17). It examines the acquisition of wealth by tempering one's impulse of greed for an undisclosed amount of time. It centres on the process of acquisition and its surrounding contexts and the degrees of collaborative labour involved rather than focusing solely on the marketplace (Weber, 1958, pp16-18). Capitalism is not about the wealth itself, but the impulse taught by

and grounded in a culture that drives the acquisition of profit. In game this manifests as the totemic symbol of equipment, the need to acquire more elaborate or better equipment for one's adventuring. This is critical during the levelling process as it helps a character become strong enough to face the unknown space of Azeroth⁷⁹. Not all equipment is created equally with some benefiting one's character greatly while others only offer a minor boost, which alters a character's ability to survive. At the level cap, equipment becomes a way of measuring the elite status of a player's character, as some items can only be acquired through raiding or heroic/mythic-level dungeons. Even at the maximum level, a player continues to seek out stronger equipment, even though they can easily overcome any threat present in Azeroth's open regions. The player's character has sufficient wealth from their endeavours yet the search for more wealth does not stop.

The value and subject of such profit or how much needs to be accumulated and the means of acceptable production of said profit is dictated by the cultural context of the individual (Weber, 1958, pg17). As capitalism is a very common way to structure most western societies⁸⁰, it is possible to mistake this social process as an innate quality of the human mind in our present age. The uncategorised time frame for the capitalist narrative means that this form of social conditioning will continue so long as there is renewed profit through enterprise (Weber, 1958, pp16-18). The ambiguous time frame is also reflective of capitalism as the interpretations and possible meanings drawn from symbols by a society will shift with each era. This thus creates a cycle of acquiring profit that is deemed acceptable and desirable based on the interpretations of both the agents and the structure of a society. For Azeroth, this is reflected in the genre of MMORPGs which are characterised by having no clear

⁷⁹ As seen during my encounter with the Human Warrior in the Eastern Plaguelands (chapter 4)

⁸⁰ At the time of writing

ending. With each expansion released there are new variations of wealth to amass and changes to the value of existing commodities.

The quest to amass profit results in a strong work ethic being instilled and upheld in a culture and society. Work is a necessary part of the process as it is how an individual or group accumulates profit, from either amassing it directly from their labour or by gathering resources to then trade for profit (Weber, 1958, pp16-18). This has created an organised way of understanding labour resulting in a social shift to organic solidarity, where labour can be extensively specialised and categorised into different roles (i.e. characters). A focused work ethic produces a mentality that one must always be accountable for one's time so that one can utilise profits to the best of one's ability (Weber, 1958, pp48-49). One also has a duty to amass profit or risk being seen as inferior by the broader community (Weber, 1958, pp50-51). This becomes of crucial importance during dungeon runs as players are actively denied compensation for their labour if the performance fails. The individual players are in the dungeon to amass more valuable loot/wealth, and if the performance fails, they are not rewarded. The player's time in that dungeon is wasted as they have nothing to show for it, as seen in the Deadmines (chapter 5). A player can choose to leave the group, diverting their time to more worthwhile endeavours, or find the fault in the performance, identifying who is accountable for the mistake. Hypothetically the need to be productive and accountable for one's time and actions may also be why it is challenging to decipher the true meaning of play, because it has been interpreted in reaction to a regimented work routine. Play can be regarded as the antithesis of work (Lauteren, 2007), so the nature of modern games needs to be deconstructed in numerous ways as simply labelling it 'just play' limits our comprehension of game experiences.

The facilitation of play by technology has developed the possibility of games further. Online games or MMOs differ from the first models of video and computer games as they are always evolving rather than remaining as a static, completed product for experiencing leisure or entertainment. They operate by amassing subscription payments from players in order to remain active and create additional content which is vital to keeping players engaged in a particular game for years on end. The cycle of mass accumulation is exploited with such additional content because each expansion inherently shifts the meanings a player can establish from the symbols of the game. A common phrase among players I overheard around the addition of content is “Today’s purple is tomorrow’s green” referring to the colour code associated with items one can collect in game with purple representing epic, the best⁸¹ quality one can craft or receive as rewards for quests and completing dungeons, and green representing uncommon or less prestigious loot amassed from mundane tasks within the game. The saying refers to how the uncommon loot of a new expansion will always grant a better boost to your character’s abilities than the epic loot of the previous expansion. Inertly, Azeroth and the character’s place in this context are entwined with the improvement of the player’s character. This character can only evolve with acquisition of particular items and the investment of time from the player. The value of this investment is decreed by the context which is simultaneously developing alongside the present Azeroth, with the introduction of expansions and patches by the game’s moderators or programmers, thus encouraging players to maintain their work ethic to amass profit.

⁸¹ The term ‘best’ for epic gear is debatable as Blizzard allows the creation of legendary (orange) equipment at times. Most notably was towards the middle of the Legion expansion when players were given access to the Broken Shore region. Characters with who met the crafting criteria for Leatherworking, Blacksmithing or Tailoring could create certain legendary armour pieces after completing an elaborate sequence of quests.

The World of Warcraft, along with other MMO games, reflect a perpetual cycle of rationalising and controlling one's impulse to acquire particular profits or loot in an ever shifting world so that technically one can never permanently achieve an absolutely 'perfect' character. Perfection is an illusion of the player's performance in game that is defined by character performance. The character is categorised according to their labour or the role within Azeroth for which they are designed. A result of this is a market within the game for particular skill sets to encourage players to collaborate their efforts in order to overcome daunting challenges with opportunities to acquire valuable loot or wealth. A character is able to 'sell' their labour or abilities to other players by joining groups that are attempting to complete raids, dungeons and battlegrounds, or more elite experiences available only to groups. This reflects an ingrained functional quality of capitalism (Giddens, 1971, pg49). A player can only receive profit for their labour by ensuring that the task at hand is accomplished and the profit can be understood as private enjoyment that allows them to enjoy the game further. Similar transactions occur through aspects of Marx's interpretation of capitalism where wealth correlates to symbols for public status and personal enjoyment but the wealth alone without such meanings has little value (Giddens, 1971, pg28).

There is no defined ending to WoW where the player is left with nothing more to achieve or perform. Players are led through Azeroth to continue their adventures for achieving prestigious profits from their endeavours so they can remain powerful within the current context of the game. This is where the majority of the World of Warcraft or Azeroth's logic is focused because there is an inherently strong and unavoidable quest for profit amidst the fantasy of adventure. One could choose to avoid engaging with such a narrative and attempt to play in a different way, however

players quickly learn that they are rewarded by the context for pursuing profit by more exciting adventures, better looking equipment and abilities to mount flying beasts that are only available to high level characters. These games are not free either: players must pay a subscription fee in order to log in and play, so in order to feel that their investment is not a waste they must take opportunities to partake in the iconic aspects of gameplay such as raids and dungeons. They have to obey the context and adhere to the narrative of Azeroth's interpretation of capitalism, as woven throughout its structure.

Ultimately this leads to the underlying materialism rampant throughout the game's context, where the player is placed in a never ending cycle of constantly wanting more whether it is to do with a better character, rarer items or elite equipment. The quest for material objects drives the players to keep interested and form goals to achieve within the game. This parallels some of the central narratives of capitalism that underlie most western societies, which is unsurprising given that this game is a product of such a society. WoW has to embody similarities to our reality in order to appeal to a variety of player contexts and ultimately sell to a mass market. Azeroth embodies a familiar world with no true adventure unless you have been a fan of the Warcraft franchise or follow the lore closely. Through my experiences of playing the game, I would note that the majority of gameplay is focused strongly on amassing loot from your character's various journeys through Azeroth. The value of this is defined by the context and reinforced by the player community as they extensively catalogue the value of each item by how useful they are to particular character builds.

Regardless of how the player improves their knowledge of the game and utilises the resources presented to them by the context, they still have very little influence or

ability to change the virtual environment around them. From the totemic symbols that control who a player can communicate easily with to the layout of the regions over time, this power is only given to the moderators and programmers of Blizzard who create and manage the game, adding new content with patches and expansions as well as shifting the meanings of certain abilities with minor updates. All the player can do is adapt to the changes and accept the shifting meanings in order to participate in the game economy and appear acceptable to the player community. The process of adapting a performance can be complex as there are no formal rules of how to behave in parts of the game world. As seen in the Eastern Plaguelands (chapter 4), despite the area being reformed into a questing zone instead of a PvP event, there were players who still focused on PvP performances. Despite the frustration this caused through a lack of negotiating meaning, technically no players were breaking the rules of the game by performing this way. World of Warcraft and other online games are less about fantasy interpreted through a sense of adventure. The fantasy instead is an idealised replica of one's familiar society, with easily identifiable paths for success. Players strive to be the best by accumulating the most worthwhile treasures from their endeavours in game, in order for their characters to invoke desired meanings of acceptability within the player community.

With a presented goal to achieve, players are encouraged to strive towards building the best character they possibly can for a particular labour. The way to publically demonstrate one's superiority in game is by displaying one's mass accumulation of loot throughout performances. Whether it is by equipping visually impressive armour and weapons, showing other players one's achievement list, or by parading through the main cities of Azeroth mounted on a rare and exotic beast, it is very easy to perform a character's credentials in game. This creates competition among players

as the context has defined what are rare and common materials to collect. Greed and envy can take place when players research extensively and plot to amass the treasures they desire by using player moderated websites, databases and forums online dedicated to the game. Years can be dedicated to collecting a particular item in game due to its extremely low chances of dropping from a certain monster or appearing at a specific location in game. The value of the item as an enhancement of the character's statistics is nullified. Yet the possession of the item holds value and prestige due to how players have learned to regard it.

The interwoven capitalist understandings ingrained in Azeroth are glaringly obvious from the moment one logs in. The game dictates what one's character can become, what abilities they have, how one traverses the realm of Azeroth and what loot one can use. The player is presented with more freedom within the game as their character evolves, levelling up so that they can unlock more abilities to wield. It is still heavily controlled though, as players cannot deviate from the decree of the context. They cannot equip particular weapons or armour unless they have been allowed to by the game. They cannot wield a high level ability unless the character has first accumulated enough experience points to be deemed that level. To compensate for this level of control, players study the game so that they can learn the appropriate methods in which to rotate through their character's skills or master the necessary combinations of talents, gem socketing, professions and re-forging to improve their character. This makes the adventuring process, the backbone of the gameplay, progress smoothly as they are able to conquer more challenging adversaries.

While the other capitalist narratives are linked to the formation of context and the character's place in it, a fifth lies with the player. There is an opportunity for autonomy in using one's knowledge to build a character that may adhere to the

context, yet perform in unexpected ways without breaking any rules or boundaries. This is possible through the player's ability to identify opportunities with the possibility to generate profit through the manipulation of their character on-screen. There are moments when the player decides they have done enough within the present expansion of the MMOG. So they engage in other activities such as acquiring rare materials from previous expansions. A character levelled to the standard of the most recent expansion can easily traverse the most dangerous regions and perform the deadliest feats of prior expansions. This can be observed when high level players clear low level raids and dungeons for profit or specific loot or achievements; a level 90 character can easily dominate the foes of a level 80 raid alone. Alternatively, this was seen in the Eastern Plaguelands (chapter 4) as well as the max level hunter on the prowl in Hellfire Peninsula (chapter 3). Such players are still abiding by the rules of the game yet have identified an opportunity to amass profit or items of value without the need to enlist the help of four to thirty-nine other players to help them, so all the spoils of looting go to one player instead of many. This is where Symbolic Interactionism becomes relevant as it establishes a way of navigating through social life through the interpretation of symbols; the individual is permitted to have unique experiences that are influenced, not controlled by the social context of which they are a part.

Technically, the character a player must construct within the game is a hollow shell or a pattern of symbols for others to react to⁸². Therefore it has no mind or will of its own within the game until the player takes control. A character stands idle and

⁸² I realise roleplayers may argue this point with me. I understand that roleplaying characters are developed into much more detailed entities, so that they feel like entirely different individuals to the player. In PvE and PvP, characters are less developed and can be seen as representations of a player in game. One does not need an elaborate backstory to go on a quest outside of RP servers. Again, this perhaps speaks to differing intensities of character creation in the game, an aspect I am not yet ready to elucidate as I lack the vocabulary to do so at this point in time.

unconscious of the world around them when a player is away from their keyboard. Even when ambushed the character will not fight back under any circumstances, usually dying if the player does not command them to retaliate; they are effectively zombies awaiting orders. The player imparts their knowledge, which is subjective to their desires, and their directions to these hollow beings in order to interact with the game. Yet the player makes the choice as to what or how to perform. Otherwise the hollow avatar merely gazes at the distance, caught in a slothful trance of obliviousness that can only be broken by receiving commands from a keyboard.

The main opportunity for a player to break free of gameplay mechanics is when the rules are translated into a language game by the player community, thus allowing them to become symbols. This is reflected in the numerous ways one can choose to play the game and the types of activities in which they partake. Each player has a different way of traversing Azeroth yet they are all still adhering to the same rules as long as they have not been forbidden from logging in by the moderators. The fantasy of this world is nothing more than a shift of meanings associated with various symbols to create a new language and dialect to apply to performances. This reflects a paradox of society as it is simultaneously structured and chaotic. From afar the game, like most social experiences, is subjected to an individual's biases and can be regarded as illogical when one lacks the language game needed to attribute meaning. When one participates in the game, a new perspective is opened up as one can see how individuals and groups choose to utilise these experiences and the meanings they interpret. Azeroth thrives because multiple contexts are allowed to coexist simultaneously. The countless ways one attributes meanings to symbols, toys with interpretations of language and navigates each context may hinder one's

choices but cannot stop one from seizing the opportunity to twist the interpretation of meaning to fit their logic or base understanding of social life.

The Potentiality of Play

So what does it mean to say that one is *playing World of Warcraft*? It is a necessary question to ponder because the character's existence is a reaction to the stimuli of playing WoW. This is a deceptively complex question that will no doubt continue to plague researchers long after this thesis is written. "Games are often fun, but in truth *games and play are not always fun*" (Kirschner, 2014 pg47); an MMORPG pushes the limits of what is perceived to be play by challenging reductionist ideas that play must entail fun. Regardless of how a player chooses to use the game, there is a lot of work that goes unnoticed to make their performances possible (Kirschner, 2014, pg47). There is also a lot of frustration and boredom in learning to master these performances and learning from failing in the process (Kirschner, 2014, pp47-48). A commonality in MMORPGs that keeps players going is the belief that "the game will reward them for their efforts" (Kirschner, 2014, pg48). I am not denying that the rewarding nature of playing a game keeps people logged in or that this process is not enjoyable, however I found myself rarely focusing on the reward for my endeavours while playing. Perhaps this was a direct result of playing alone rather than as part of a guild? I cannot truly confirm or deny that. Yet what does it mean when a player does not focus on the obvious rewards? Instead it opens an opportunity to question the allure of a game beyond terms of fantasy, adventures and rewards. The idea of play is elusive given just how diverse the performances in a game can be. Players will always find ways to navigate through and use the game

context to their liking or play style. So how does one come to appreciate what play truly is, or if it can even be conceptualised?

When play is regarded as a language, play then becomes a symbol, specifically a piece of the symbolic code that creates a character. The character then sparks varying meanings that overlap and contradict simultaneously, thus permitting the potentiality of meaning to exponentially increase. The character is no longer relegated to being just a piece of a game. They are a platform from which the player interacts with the game and an embodiment of a language game. For example in the academic realm, Huizinga alludes to the magic circle which has influenced the way researchers regard play. While this has opened up new perspectives it also limits the way one can regard play to the manner in which Huizinga describes it (Consalvo, 2009, pp410-411). When the researcher observes an interaction that is given a meaning associated with play, the researcher potentially imposes academic ideas solely reserved for analysing play rather than entertaining the potentiality of meaning invoked by the game and then formulating various explanations that allow the game to function.

Play can be regarded as a language game that allows players of a game to communicate through the dynamics of character and context. Play could also be a language game that academics play when attempting to analyse a form of game which would help explain why the idea of play is so vague with no clear conceptualisation in *Homo Ludens* (Huizinga, 1950, pg57). Throughout this thesis, these coexisting language games of play are deconstructed in the World of Warcraft by examining the performance of character in relation to a context that negotiates temporal meanings. Games are not just a shallow, fanciful escape from our daily lives in relation to the mundane routine of work. They are complex interconnected

social experiences that are subjected to performing interpretations that allows one to communicate meanings with other players in relation to a game. Whether play is serious, orderly, chaotic or fun is at the whims of the players and their interaction with the game.

Play is not an autonomous concept, the player is always unconsciously reacting to whether those around them are still reacting to the game and the player can also decide whether they want to stop playing at any moment (Cermak-Sassenrath, 2015, pg95). Simply focusing upon discovering one definitive concept only causes words such as play to rebel and break the definition by bringing to light contexts where such meanings are false. When one considers 'play' as a word; the variety of games one can play, taking a playful tone to an event, participating in a play, playing an instrument or acting in a playful way, many examples of different activities relating to the contexts in which using the word 'play' as an acceptable label come to mind. Play is often a relational concept as those interacting with play are assessing the aesthetics of the game and the fantasy of altered meanings attributed to symbols (Cermak-Sassenrath, 2015, pg95, Mead, 1934, pg181). Oddly though, there appears to be an essentialist process of conceptualisation that looms over words such as 'play' which leads to confusion as to what it truly refers (Bateson, 1973, pp182-184). Limits of conceptualisation in an essentialist manner can often mislead us into thinking about how a theory is proven correct in reality rather than examining what an experience can reveal about that theory in relation to reality.

In the context of this thesis, I have experienced in my own research that the more I attempted to control play, the more ways it resisted these definitions. I propose that to overcome the trap of creating a self-contradictory concept and weak position to ground a theoretical perspective, play should be described by its relational and

processional nature through a language game. Play relates to a way of organising meanings in relation to symbols associated with the context of a game.

It should be reiterated that this thesis is not written to completely disregard the perspectives of others when examining play. It is an exploration of the performances encapsulated by a game with play as a series of language games that alternate according to context and character. Language games were selected as they appear to offer the most applicable interpretation given the way an MMORPG functions by focusing on language and action as “Since Wittgenstein (1953) and Austin (1962), it has been recognized that by speaking we are not simply, solely, or primarily engaged in describing the world, depicting it, or indexing it in some way. Rather, by speaking we are acting in it.” (Sidnell, 2012, pg 303). In this context, it is not enough to describe an action as ‘play’ without considering the action itself, the context that permits action’s existence and the characters that perform the action. The resulting thesis has been written with my interpretation of play in an MMORPG, it certainly does not always feel like play as one can become restless, frustrated and bored, the opposite of the illogical, fantastical and leisurely nature of play. Yet we ‘*play*’ an MMORPG, the individuals who log in are ‘*players*’. Once the virtual world of an MMORPG, like World of Warcraft, is deconstructed and interpreted with the intention of exploring the way play challenges our perceptions of meaning, the grand fantasy of whimsical adventure vanishes as it is revealed to be related to the underlying social narratives and practices of our own reality.

Upon reflection of my various sessions of playing the game, I often sought circumstances where I was genuinely playing, when I was engaged with the illogical, unproductive experience of fantasy that is the antithesis of serious work. For the most part, I felt like I was waiting for these brief moments to flutter and envelop me,

but perhaps that lull between the exhilaration makes the spontaneous, the impulsive experiences of play more notable. For the instant in time when you are taken by 'play', autonomy thrives and the power of context diminishes greatly. In that temporal lapse of creativity, one has transcended to a state of play, they are not just performing an activity labelled as play. Then as quickly as it strikes them, it dissipates and leaves them amidst the activity they were participating in. Azeroth embodies capitalist understandings, there is a division of work and play when one set of activities within WoW is treated as more serious than others (e.g. raids in comparison to questing). This relation may also explain the disparity between moments of play while logged in. There is a division of labour to be mindful of, depending on what kind of character is used and where in Azeroth they are currently located.

Yet such a description does not feel entirely right either. The moments of excitement usually correlate to dungeon runs, raids or any kind of thrilling encounter. Often I find myself on the brink of a panic attack at those moments because it feels like I am failing the players around me, and as if I do not know enough about those performances to acceptably take part in them. Instead the waves of excitement I found correlated to matters of exploration, or when performances deviated from their expected outcomes. For example, when I encountered the Monk in the Arathi Highlands and the Paladin in Sholazar Basin (chapter 3), we performed in a peaceful way despite the rivalry between the Horde and Alliance. When the run through the Temple of the Jade Serpent looked like the performance was on the verge of failing (chapter 5), the group did not break apart despite the lack of skilled performers. It was the performances in the game rather than the particular activities that gave me the exhilaration of 'play', moments when what I expected of the game context

deviated to something unusual. The attribution of meaning in the face of so many unknowable factors, like the identity of players, was fascinating; that meaning could still be interpreted and communicated in the absence of knowledge. I suddenly found playing the game all the more intriguing because I was not actively expecting exciting things to happen in specific activities. All aspects of the game were capable of being exciting, being playful.

However, this realisation did not dawn on me immediately. It had to be cultivated through encounters and experiences of the game, much like the ones I have shared in this thesis. Our perceptions of reality are often shaped through reflection or as Daub stated “Life is understood backward through the idea” (cited in Kierkegaard, 2000, pg14). Simultaneously though, “one forgets the other clause – that it must be lived forward” (Kierkegaard, 2000, pg12). The majority of my accumulated knowledge about World of Warcraft was not found in a manual. My understanding of the game context was learnt over the past seven years from actively playing characters in this context as well as achieving some fluency in the language game among players. I have been part of guilds, I have played solo, I have even attempted raiding when the Looking for Raid mechanic became available and I am still learning new ways to understand this context. At times my performances are understood as skilled, sometimes they need work. There are so many incomplete details that become overlooked when you focus solely on matters of work and play or boredom and excitement. I was often informed by other players when I started playing I thought that dungeons and raids were the be-all and end-all of thrills in Azeroth. However when I experienced them, I personally found them quite lacklustre⁸³.

⁸³ An opinion that has sparked numerous arguments with raiders, I understand that it can be very thrilling when one positions a raid as the main performance of their character’s identity, finds the structure of a raid to be engaging and enjoyable to experience or perhaps have established a sense of comradery in their guild, all running raids together and

Instead I turned my attention elsewhere in the game and found that to play a game is highly subjective and at times illogical and difficult to describe. I have learned that in order to comprehend 'play', one must be acutely aware of the context. The way the character reacts to the game is critical in the way one defines play for that interaction. An interpretive approach, found in language games and symbols, has allowed me to understand 'play' within Azeroth in a way that appears logical to me and my experiences playing. To play a game is a process, there is a phase where new players are learning to perform, then they slowly develop to find their own ways of navigating through the game world by learning of context and character. They find their own ways to 'play' the game.

Together, the context and character provide a point of relation for a language game so players can communicate their different experiences of 'play'. The language game helps establish an acceptable explanation for a social performance that can be imposed in hindsight. The purpose of such an imposition is perhaps a result of wanting to control the uncertainty of interaction, reducing it to a neat, tangible logic. This chapter is the product of such an explanation as I am reflecting upon 'play' and how it was negotiated within Azeroth in order to impose control of the hidden through abstract generalisations. The act of citing theorists and employing conceptual ideas are expectations of scholarly language games used to create logical, tangible descriptions of social life. A lack of concise terms was chosen to convey the language of variations that influence the ways in which we navigate through social situations. Therefore the types of meaning negotiated from this research shifts with

having a really great time. Personally, I only enter the most current raids and dungeons when I have quests or a specific objective to complete in them. I don't get a lot of enjoyment out of farming equipment in those circumstances and after experiencing constant dungeon runs I found them a bit repetitive. Again, this is just a reflection of how I use and find enjoyment in playing the game. 'Play' is subjective to the individual player, so one is allowed to have differing opinions of the same game. It just means players enjoy the game for different reasons. I am not suggesting that my experiences are the only ones a player can have. I am merely reflecting on how I've come to understand the game.

each log in, as the circumstances of the language game alter according to participants, understandings of the dialects, shared meanings of symbols and how those who are familiar with the symbols in question choose to apply meaning to them. Even as I am writing this research, I am performing a particular character that I learn to perform through experience, trial and error.

A character evolves with new information to adapt to the surrounding boundaries and meanings of symbols, just as one's identity shifts to match the context of one's surroundings outside the game. When a player logs in, they are subjected to another game context which contributes to the meanings of their character. How they learn from each experience is often guided by the game they are playing. When play is linked to any type of game, whether it be a team sport or an MMORPG, this is categorised as a social activity that follows similar patterns of competition or rules for immersive fantasy of play (Huizinga, 1950, pg11). Some semblance of an orderly context for the rules and goal of the game to be logical to the players is required; a generalisation of how one is meant to play the game. Suddenly 'play' has been transformed from an illogical dream to a serious activity with numerous consequences for the players should they fail to adhere to the rules or not perform at a satisfactory level which results in them losing the game. This also establishes a sense of order to the potentiality of meanings so that players can perform their characters using a common language to best communicate their intentions. In turn this common language also allows other players to interpret the symbols and understand them. Without such a structure the game itself would be unplayable. As I have mentioned earlier, the act of generalising is not a problem if one is willing to evolve that understanding further. There always needs to be a starting point from which to work.

A generalisation can act as the starting point to understanding a particular context. It also allows players to learn their skill level within the context of that particular game or mark their progress as there is a baseline difficulty curve that determines a player's ability to interpret the game (Juul, 2005, pp112-113). Generally a player is identified and understood by other players and the subculture's community by the 'skill'⁸⁴ they possess while playing. Therefore, the more difficult the feat in game that can be overcome by the player, the more elite a player is understood to be within that game. The structure of the game provides a baseline of acceptable behaviours as well as knowledge of what other players are capable of within the game depending on their prior achievements. A cycle of success and failure is grounded in the game context with constantly shifting variables. So players must consider the following in order to comprehend the skill level of their fellow players, firstly, their prior achievements, secondly, their current performance and finally, whether or not their understanding of the game complies with present world environment of Azeroth. Failure to maintain one's language game to attribute meaning to the symbols of the game often results in conflict and volatile disputes among players. One's character is only relevant or logical within the context of a game. By creating a character and becoming part of the game world, the player is committing themselves to embodying the meanings of that world so that they can accurately comprehend how to navigate it in an acceptable way.

A generalisation or logic is not to be avoided. Instead I suggest that it be taken as a starting point for understanding; from there one can build on it, question it and even rebuke it as new information becomes available. For a character in the context of WoW, Azeroth is a product of a modern capitalist, urbanised society. Characters

⁸⁴ How well they perform in game and use the symbols of context and character to achieve a certain performance.

share similar key components of certain narratives that give logic and structure to the societies that live by them. There are definitely more monsters to slay and treasure to loot in Azeroth which makes it analogous with play as we do not experience such fantastical delights in our mundane routines. It does not alter the fact that games like World of Warcraft and other MMORPGs are made and maintained by people who are living in such societies and are selling subscriptions to play the game to people from similar circumstances. To structure a game to resemble a physical reality creates an accessible starting point to playing the game. It allows a sense of familiarity so the player can navigate that world to an extent with ease. As they continue playing, they learn more complex ways of performing their character to navigate the game's context. With each experience, their understanding of the game moves beyond generalisations of logic that allow them decipher what is vital knowledge to a performance and what is not, thus allowing the hidden to exist without being positioned as a problem.

Conclusion

The hidden is something that cannot be unveiled so I prefer to position it as a way of outlining basic logics one can use to comprehend social life. The logics are present to create a starting point so an individual can interact with a discussion of meaning. The first half of the chapter outlined the first notes I ever wrote about this game; these notes had to happen in order to produce the resulting chapters of this thesis and I wanted to demonstrate partly how this transformation occurred by working through them again. The second half was me reflecting further on 'play'. I could do this by accepting that there is hidden knowledge and asking how does a game normalise it? How does a game make itself familiar so the hidden is just part of it

without being a hindrance? By focusing on what we cannot know, we reveal what can be known. We use the hidden to create logics so newcomers to that facet of social life can find it tangible to comprehend through familiarity. Consider a first year student attending their first lecture: they need to start with a basic logic that is accessible and encourages growth in their learning. Then consider the position of a first year student to a post graduate. The first year starts with a reductionist, basic logic that is used to facilitate comprehension. If they choose to study further, the logic multiplies into many and becomes more complex. To get to that level, there must always be a start that often barely resembles an advanced level⁸⁵. The point is that logic only remains reductionist if it does not develop. To create logic one must experience and learn actively, it does not evolve alone. In this view, the hidden can be encouraging as it reminds us that there is always more to learn, and that is a fascinating part of social life. I feel it should be celebrated, not positioned as an enemy to overcome.

To experience a game is to play it, so curiosity turns to how 'play' becomes characterised under such logic. Play manifests by informing the player when something is exciting, such as performing tasks to acquire rare loot through difficult feats of strength. This can lead to a disjunct between when a player finds the game tedious and boring and when they are enjoying themselves or having fun. To limit the parameters of enjoyment to specific types of experiences in game can also limit one's ability to comprehend play. From a performative aspect, play is aligned with the ability to toy with interpreted meanings. The moments where a performance deviates from the expected logic of the context are often quite exciting because you

⁸⁵ Of course, I can see how more established researchers and academics may regard a postgrad trying to receive a PhD in a similar light. It is just another starting point to a more complex understanding.

do not know the oncoming result. One is challenged in their perceptions of reality so that it leads to further reflection and learning of how to comprehend the variances of meaning. There is excitement in the hidden knowledge of a performance which reignites the spark of playing a game.

Conclusions: To Embrace Blind Spots

When blind spots are considered part of the interaction process, one can consider the process of attributing meaning. An interaction will start at a point of uncertainty: which meaning is most relevant to the present situation? To interpret uncertainty one may choose to draw on symbols, specifically totemic symbols that represent a broader social order. During the course of an interaction, one may find oneself performing characters with other people. These people are likely to be anonymous through their characters, as one does not usually possess all the intimate knowledge of every individual one meets. While performing, one may experience the unknown space whether it is because one finds oneself somewhere unfamiliar or because one crosses paths with a revenant of the past during a performance. There is a possibility the unknown space may present unexpected factors in the attribution of meaning which changes the course of the performance. Finally there is the hidden, knowledge one cannot know and can only assume, so to manage it one constructs elaborate logics to draw upon in order to understand. Caution must be used at all times regarding the hidden because if one relies too heavily on generalisations of logic one risks falling into a monotonous understanding of social life, that social life cannot deviate or react and must always function according to the generalisation. Such a

perspective limits the experiences one can partake in. Blind spots encourage a perpetual interpretation of meaning to allow varied experiences of the same part of social life to happen and be accepted and understood by those who take part in it.

To return to my original questions stated in the introduction, I have formulated the following answers based on my experiences playing WoW:

- How do we learn what is vital and superfluous knowledge in a context so we can interact with it?

It is through considering the hidden or what one cannot know that one learns vital knowledge to navigating social life. The hidden is not directly part of the performance or interaction yet it acts as a reminder. Similar to the use of totems as representatives of a greater societal structure, the hidden draws a boundary between what knowledge is needed to interact and what is superfluous or merely desirable knowledge, as it unconsciously adds more detail to one's understanding while permitting interactions. The logic prompted by the hidden acts as a reminder of what one can tell a newcomer to a form of social life, and shows how to begin explaining and teaching someone to interact with it. There is a risk that the hidden can encourage reductionist thinking, yet this is dependent on the individual and whether they continue to learn and evolve their knowledge.

- How do we create meaning with the blind spots of social knowledge?

To simplify, interpretation starts with uncertainty, then is subject to anonymity and the unknown space through character and context interacting to attribute meaning. The hidden is present throughout and acknowledged through the use of generalisations, yet it acts as a reminder of the temporality of meaning and that it

must be perpetually interpreted. There is always a blind spot that one learns from and works with during an interaction; that to create meaning, one must first begin with meaninglessness. The context one finds oneself in and the characters assumed offer a sense of order to follow; a way of beginning to interact by presenting a series of potential meanings that can be attributed through interaction. Contexts and characters are flexible in the boundaries they create. The symbols they embody are present yet it is the performance that shapes their meaning. There is a fine balance of structure and autonomy in every attribution of meaning as individuals perform in a way they perceive to be acceptable for their characters in that context.

- How do we position blind spots as part of the interpretive process and a normal part of social life rather than a hindrance that must be avoided or ignored?

The most effective way to structure this response is to consider each blind spot in stages of the performance of interpretation. The hidden was addressed in the first question so I will omit the retelling here. First is uncertainty, the starting point of the blind spot, the reason that interpretation is needed. One needs to perform when all potentialities of meaning are still possible to ascertain which potential meaning is relevant to the situation. Uncertainty may also manifest in hindsight or once the performance has concluded. This tends to happen when performances occur in specific places, rather than non-places, because there is a more linear or limited range of acceptable performances in such a context. As a result, individuals may scrutinise the actions of the performers around them or the performance itself in hindsight as there are few acceptable outcomes to such interactions.

Secondly, the unknown space and anonymity correlate to the relationship of context and character observed during a performance. The unknown space relates to context and usually takes effect when one is in a non-place. There is a higher chance of seeing remnants of the past in performances when there is an openness of interpreting meaning in performing one's character. When an unexpected performance occurs in a non-place, it does not come under the same level of hindsight scrutiny when compared to a place. Third is anonymity which relates to character and permits individuals to communicate with one another through their characters. This removes the need to know all intimate knowledge of each performer so one can interact. Both anonymity and the unknown space have the potential to teach an individual how context, character and the symbols they entail are used by a community, culture or society. As a result, the unknown space and anonymity can exist on individual and communal scales.

A summarised understanding of blind spots can be outlined as such, when meaning is invoked through interaction, a blind spot forms. By understanding what knowledge is missing, one can see how interaction compensates for it to make navigating social life possible. To compensate what cannot be easily known, one reads the symbols embedded and embodied by character and context to create meaning. Theoretically, one often questions how one knows about social life, yet seldom questions how one does not know. To know or not know is inextricably linked as one leads to the other so we should be able to work from knowing and not knowing to build further on our understanding of reality.

From these questions, MMORPGs have challenged the way I understand the interpretation of meaning from a dramaturgical perspective. The virtual world of an MMORPG requires the individual to completely reconsider the potentiality of

meanings that defines them as acceptable to the game. Their character creation is not limited by who they physically are so there is a possibility to experiment with how to create an identity. There are scholarly observations that online character creation can lead to issues as individuals may design their characters to be idealised variations of themselves, disembodied from the individual (Besley, 2010, pg13). When characters embody idealised qualities of one's identity there is concern about the mental well-being of the individual (Bessiere, 2007, pp531, 534). However from this thesis it can be argued that such a translation of individual to character is how an individual establishes a way of interacting with the virtual context that is understood as acceptable, so the player's characters are part of a virtual world rather than outside it. If the individual were to participate in the context as a complex whole instead of a character, they would not be able to perform appropriately.

By using the example of an online game I have identified the following qualities of engaging with the experience of playing WoW. Players are anonymous yet identifiable by the game's symbols their characters embody. The meanings affiliated with the players are temporarily defined by the use of these symbols within the game (which also reveals the player's interpretation of the game's context). The game world defines the context, the point of relation that influences the conduct of the game and a hierarchy of meaning based on their acceptability. Players are constantly reading and reacting to the game and each other to shape their experiences of 'play'. A player can manipulate the context into aligning with their perspective of the game as there are constant interpretations simultaneously occurring. 'Playing' the game is facilitated by symbols found throughout a context, the broader community or society, and embodied by a character, an individual that must navigate through that community or society.

Symbols have the potential to create the illusion that blind spots are removed by a performance or interaction. This is achieved by the use of logic to validate interpreted meanings which is established in numerous ways such as totems, language games, *rites de passage*, etc. However by writing about these processes I am imposing my interpretation of meaning from uncertainty. There is a simplification at hand in such processes that the act of writing can be considered as controlling meaning and relegating it to a static, reductionist concept. So as a character of a scholarly context, I will keep performing in hope of uncovering new meanings from blind spots because an illusion can appear as the only reality when we lack the breadth of knowledge to see it from multiple perspectives. Therein lies the challenge. I am aware my interpretation is not the only one and I am sure other scholars see the World of Warcraft in radically different ways. While I feel I am stating obvious common sense, it is necessary because “while common sense can be applied retrospectively, it is not much help in making actual decisions” (Kaptelinin, 2006, pg263). Interpreting reality often transforms into common sense in hindsight and that interpretation can occur once the methods of attributing meaning have been thoroughly studied (Kaptelinin, 2006, pg264). This is a challenge for all scholars as we are expected to synthesise our collective interpretations into simplified writing by comparing different understandings of the world. To counter this static transformation all we can do is keep writing to formulate many perspectives to be applied as deemed necessary instead of a monocular illusion of a single truth.

To perform a meaning or interpret a symbol, the characters present are creating an illusion of simplicity and control of blind spots through meanings that appear logically acceptable. This logic is related to a greater community or group to establish a shared understanding of the world they are immersed in. This grants the ability to

assume blind spots are removed when in reality they are being ignored in favour of an interpretation that is simpler to comprehend. The performance between character and context interprets the dominant meaning for that time. Performing to impart meaning to a virtual context is parallel to social performances in the physical reality as social actors perform characters to impart meaning. As explored consistently, this is a quality found in the theories of Language Games and Symbolic Interactionism. This is reiterated by two quotes that acknowledge uncertainty in their own ways; “Similarly with symbols: they do not tell us what to mean, but give us the capacity to make meaning” (Cohen, 1985, pg16) and “one cannot guess how a word functions. One has to look at its application and learn from that” (Wittgenstein, 1953, pg116, para340). Cohen and Wittgenstein, while very different types of academics both acknowledge a point where meaning is unclear; that it must be interpreted from how it is used in temporal encounter (Cohen, 1985, pg16, Wittgenstein, 1953, pg116, para340). As a result, blind spots are pivotal components of interpreting meaning, they are the catalyst for seeking out meaning in response to the abundance of possibilities. Blind spots create the dynamic of character and context which is facilitated through the use of symbols, social performances, totemic species to organise meanings and stimuli, language games to negotiate possibilities and *rites de passage* to validate the evolution of meanings for a broader social context or the development of an individual’s character. This thesis will now conclude by imposing further explanations made in hindsight, firstly on symbolic meaning, and closing with the significance of play in virtual reality.

On Symbolic Meaning

Symbols provide a method to organise and form patterns of meaning then attribute meaning through interpretations of one's surroundings. In order to interpret and mediate the relation between symbol and meaning, individuals must be knowledgeable of the contexts that permit that meaning to be understood as acceptable for the use of that symbol, as well as how to perform their character to invoke that meaning (Edgley, 2003,pg144, 149, Hewitt, 2003, pg310, Goffman, 1959, pg14, 20, Cohen, 1985, pg12, 16). An individual interacts with other individuals in a community, culture or society where such interpretations manifest in order to learn the process of negotiating the possibility of meaning according to symbol (Cohen, 1985, pg16, 18, Hewitt, 2003, pg310). By doing so they learn the ways in which the potentiality of meaning is negotiated, and learns associated ways of performing that are sincere and believable to the broader community or audience (Goffman, 1959, pg77, Wittgenstein, 1953, pg6, para3, pg8, para7). The performance of the interaction is a negotiation over which possibility of meaning is most suitable for the situation, thus elaborating on the relation of symbol to meaning as a complex series of reactions according to contexts and characters, rather than a linear process (Hewitt, 2003, pg210, Turner, 1974, pg25, Wittgenstein, 1953, pg38-39, para72, Goffman, 1959, pg21). This is further mediated by the existence of totems that influences the categorises symbolic species to impart communal knowledge and expectations (Wittgenstein, 1953, pg6, 8, para3, 7, Levi-Strauss, 1962, pg7, 11, 16).

While logged in my perception of Azeroth's symbols and my knowledge of the possibilities of meaning, continued to evolve. No meaning was ever made obsolete with each addition as symbols remained in use whenever the symbolic context arose. Much like a city that is old enough to be understood as ancient with each

generation passing through the streets, the use of the city may change but the original architecture still stands (Wittgenstein, 1953, pg11, para18). In the case of learning a symbolic language and the meanings invoked, every interaction is an “interactional *modus vivendi*” because it is the performance of those involved that decides which meaning will be temporarily honoured as logical for that situation (Goffman, 1959, pg21). Symbols present the potentiality of a collection of meanings, often developed over generations of communities or societies. It is up to the individual to recognise which meaning is the most appropriate for the context. Individuals learn meanings for symbols through interacting with others so they can actively experience the connections of meanings in relation to the context, all of which is shaped collectively by the context and the individual’s character.

Symbolic Interactionism’s strength is its ability to adapt to any change in social life. While this can create ambiguity in a theoretical sense, it also means the researcher is not limited in how they regard a form of life and can permit the field to inform them rather than enter with preconceived ideas. Admittedly when I began my research, I attempted to understand Azeroth in Huizinga’s magic circle by labelling the interaction as playing a game and this limited my ability to interpret potential meanings⁸⁶. As I collated experiences from this game, I realised that the idea of ‘play’ through the magic circle severely hindered my ability to observe how these situations made sense in the game. It was through dramaturgical Symbolic Interactionism that I was able to question my bias of treating games as separate entities, and realised that they were relevant to everyday life. This was demonstrated through the ways in which the presence of symbols influenced the potentiality of meanings, because they provided a foundation of expectations from a larger social

⁸⁶ The notion of ‘play’ continued to plague me throughout this research as I attempted to craft an understanding of it.

context from which to base my character's performance. There was a perpetual reminder of the broader societal structures in each performance. Symbolic Interactionism can be challenging to define or easy to overlook as it relies heavily upon temporal interactions. Yet there is potential for this perspective to provide a methodology of understanding both society as an organisation of meanings and sociality in the ways that individuals wield such meanings. Symbolic Interactionism becomes a way of thinking that is dynamic. The interpretation is focused upon the relativity and presence of symbols in a context, as part of the character and the potentiality of meaning attributed to these symbols that is interpreted for that performance. The dynamism incorporates a reflectivity of meaning throughout the symbolic language, a reflexivity in the fluidity of meanings for a symbol and an interconnectedness of symbols and meanings. All of this accumulates to a perspective that appears simple at a superficial level yet has the potential to find insightful meaning in the mundane.

Playing within Virtual Reality

Online games possess a fantasy aesthetic, yet gameplay and how players navigate through them are similar to the application of meanings in a physical reality through performances. This is a logical observation given that these games are a product of the society the game producers are immersed in or at the very least the players are familiar with. The design choices often possess a familiarity, whether it is by using embellished fantasy aesthetics reminiscent of various cultures throughout human history or employing similar gameplay mechanics unique to that game genre. Both techniques are employed by game designers to make a game more appealing and

encourage players to engage with it⁸⁷. There is a perceived idea that the relationships created in a virtual space are somehow false as such space is mediated by technology and therefore radically different from our interactions in reality (Besley, 2010, pg13, Waskul, 2003, pg27, Calleja, 2015, pp 216-217). This is not a new observation, particularly when it comes to games, as the cultivation of Huizinga's magic circle and application to theoretical analysis can segregate and delineate forms of life that can be labelled as 'play' or 'games'(Golub, 2010, pg23). This segregation is problematic as it removes games from the severity of everyday life and the ability to connect meaning by applying the symbolic label of 'play' (Golub, 2010, pg23).

Golub provides an eloquent rebuttal to this critique of interaction facilitated by technology as less real or genuine. "Compelling projects may have their origin in or be anchored to a particular virtual world, but this does not mean that the sociality, action, and cultural formations created by that project need to be confined to that world" (Golub, 2010, pg40). The context of this quote was in relation to previous conceptualisations of virtual reality and how scholars have chosen to study online games without considering how these games connect to other parts of virtual reality. However, I could see how this quote also relates to the dichotomy of virtual and physical realities, that the processes individuals use to navigate these virtual domains are similar to those found in the physical reality. The two realities may be divided by technology yet they still overlap and flow into one another whether it is directly, such as players discussing the game either offline or beyond the game like in a forum or on social media, or indirectly, such as the design of the game and how players engage with it are similar to how one navigates day-to-day life. For example,

⁸⁷ This also allows a game to be sold on mass and generate profits for the company that created it.

the relation between player and character as well as the act of playing an online game demands a level of commitment, similar to any personal interests that an individual volunteers to pursue in the physical reality. There is a willingness and awareness to partake in this activity so that the player can learn the variety of meanings associated with the game's world to safely traverse the dangerous terrain (Golub, 2010, pg23). A player must first familiarise themselves with the symbols associated with that particular game. This acts as a stepping stone to collating the potentiality of meaning associated with each symbol in conjunction with the context and the character they are performing. The decision to become a player of an MMORPG entails a greater commitment other than possessing the technology to play, the funds to maintain a subscription to the game and a guild to belong to. The player always needs to create a character, impart meaning to them, and then meander through the game world to evaluate whether their applications of meaning are acceptable enough to let them experience the game. The process that permits this pattern of interpretation is Dramaturgical Symbolic Interactionism because it simultaneously permits the acknowledgement of overarching communal meanings through context while allowing the negotiation of meaning through the performance of characters. The use of symbols permits a method of organising, collating, connecting and applying meaning in reaction to the world around us. The ability to learn the meanings that correlate with symbols can evolve from a simple, linear relation, to complex networks of possibilities of meanings, symbolic species and contexts.

By engaging with an MMORPG, the academic language associated with studying experiences labelled as 'playing a game' has been challenged. As I have reiterated in the introduction and throughout this thesis, to play a game, to even label an action

as 'play', is to play with meaning in relation to the perceived mundane aspects of contexts. For a social researcher, games challenge the ways in which we perceive meaning as they encourage us to rethink the methods we use to make logic for them. Games function using elements of fantasy with a foundation of socialisation in reality (Fine, 1983, pg81, 73-75). AN MMORPG presents a new challenge as it takes into consideration the meaning of playing a game as well as the meaning of facilitating technology to interact. The nature of role playing games, particularly online games like World of Warcraft, can encourage the idea that the player is aware that the focus of their attention should be the character which can potentially make the player irrelevant (Isabella, 2007, section 2.1). This is demonstrated thoroughly through the relation between players and their characters which they must create in order to comply with the game world (Fine, 1983, pg194-195, 205). Within the game world, the player is not limited by gender, age, appearance, disability, class, creed or any other physical qualities that may hinder one's ability to interact with others (Bessiere, 2007, pg531). An individual can assume whatever identity they want, even if it is just merely enhancing their own more desirable traits and downplaying their weaknesses (Bessiere, 2007, pg531). Players are free to construct a character from the criteria offered by the game so that their character can belong to the game world without appearing out of place.

In some communities, such as those of online gamers, the so-called 'real' identity of a player is often unimportant so long as their character plays the game effectively in the game context (Isabella, 2007, section2.1). A player's commitment to their performance and their intensity, determines the general disposition an individual possesses when crafting their character (Hage, 2002, pg193, 200-201,205). The virtual world of an MMORPG provides the opportunity to craft a player's identity from

scratch through character creation so that the individual may belong in that particular setting of virtual reality. The success of that character and how they progress through the game world is determined by how the player engages with and interprets meaning from it, the decision to actively play a game is voluntary (Huizinga, 1950, pg7). For the time an individual is logged in, they transcend to the virtual domain and then reconvene with the physical reality once they log out.

Arguably, the key difference between a virtual and physical reality is the inclusion and facilitation of the interaction by technology. In light of this, I suggested the concept of the social puppeteer and puppet to illustrate the dynamic of player and character on-screen rather than the social actor to acknowledge an individual's divide between on and off-screen. In the virtual domain, any active participant makes their identity by engaging with social media, online games or forums, leaving a digital imprint (Besley, 2010, pg12-14). This imprint requires mandatory updating or carefully controlled evolution from the individual controlling it in order to become a noteworthy participant and be accepted in an online group or subculture. A digital imprint cannot alter itself in response to changes in the online world and remains as data in virtual reality permanently (Besley, 2010, pg12-14). The idea of a digital or virtual identity can be summarised as "it is what you publish about yourself, and what others say about you and includes any electronic exchange with both human and with non-human digital agents" (Besley, 2010, pg13). The quote above describes the usual process of social performance aside from the inclusion of technology and virtual reality. Throughout one's life they are expected to perform various identities and so only put forward what they deem an acceptable interpretation of a particular social role in relation to the context (Goffman, 1974, pg125-127). One may even consult various non-human agents such as books or a website to study a particular

cultural facet or gain common knowledge. The ways in which one finds acceptance by society is constantly updated as one grows and evolves through various identities from childhood to adulthood.

The physical world, or reality, is not far removed from a game's world or fantasy, because games and play are products of the various cultures and societies that coexist and interact (Huizinga, 1950, pg6-7). Goffman eloquently explains the connection between reality and fantasy in all its forms as "Fanciful words can speak about make-believe places, but these words can only be spoken *in* the real world" (1974, pg247). Geertz also touches on the importance of fantasy through the example of seeing a play "You wouldn't go to *Macbeth* to learn about the history of Scotland – you go to it to learn what a man feels like after he's gained a kingdom and lost his soul" (1973, pg450). Games provide fantasy through the ability to create one's character from scratch and reveals experiences of being human that you may be unable to experience in other circumstances. In a physical reality, the potential to interact with particular groups or attend certain events is hindered by our physical appearance, social class and geographical location which are diminished variables in a virtual world like Azeroth⁸⁸. An individual can easily change their gender, their ethnicity, their ability, their age, their size and shape, and in some circumstances even species depending on the game while revealing nothing of their offline identity⁸⁹, and the individuals can simultaneously be part of a range of online communities (Nardi, 2010, pg30-31, 52). In WoW, characters are created to facilitate various roles in game to complete the task at hand. In day to day life, a man may

⁸⁸ Note that I state 'diminished' as there are still many toxic aspects of gaming culture that manifest in extremes of racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, ageism, etc.

⁸⁹ This is an aspect of power that shapes online anonymity (one I was not able to discuss in this research), the questions of who can choose to reveal themselves and who is forced to remain anonymous to avoid abuse, harassment and rape or death threats. There is a distinct pattern of who can make the choice to remain anonymous or reveal themselves further and those who feel they need to remain anonymous for the sake of their safety and well-being.

assume the characters of husband, father, employee, son and friend throughout the day in reaction to the contexts he finds himself in, to navigate through the events of the day in a socially acceptable manner. Both examples encapsulate that social interactions are elaborate performances where individuals assume various characters to invoke certain meanings. While they exist in differing planes of reality based on whether or not such reality is facilitated by technology, both examples follow similar processes of navigating through situations and interpreting meaning from their surroundings to do so.

Virtual reality is a by-product of technology's evolution and its use in our daily lives. The virtual world is not an alien frontier gifted to us by another species or any other metaphor along those lines. It is a tool for society to utilise and identify as it so chooses, but it loses all meaning if there are no people interacting with it to impart a meaning. To exclude virtual domains and the social life it facilitates based on the fact that technology plays a part in the feedback cycle and that such domains must be continuously updated is perplexing to say the least. Throughout the encounters I've shared, characters and the way they are performed form a social construct that is constantly evolving throughout an individual's life. There are times when games set in fictional realms can prompt critical reflection of the society we navigate through, commonly through the representation of gender and race in games. A language game can still exist in an MMORPG as a key component of the communication processes wielded by players to make sense of one another. Totems can be used to categorise species of symbols to streamline the learning process of how we learn to interact with one another. Symbols can allow the creation of meaning through interacting with them. Virtual reality and technology are nothing more than additional tools that we can choose to employ while performing to interpret meaning such as

playing an online game. Symbols can allow the interpretation of meaning based on incomplete knowledge so the anonymity of who is behind the other screen becomes less crucial for the sake of socialising in an online game. Meaning in itself has the potential to become as complex or simple as needed through its interpretation from uncertainty. Such uncertainty exists due to the mass potentialities of meaning and how we select which meaning is temporarily acceptable.

As stated earlier this is not the only way to interpret the World of Warcraft; I have already seen and hope to see more interpretations of this online world. As scholars, we can keep observing the variations of meaning that are possible so that we can record that particular occurrence from a specific moment. When you use technology, you are limited to witness what is present on your screen; however you can still adjust the angle and the scope of the vision. The writer reveals what the reader can see. The actor performs one play to the audience. The scholar can only present limited interpretations of meaning at a time. Blind spots are why we keep questioning the meanings of our reality which drives us to challenge our perceptions of reality and its possibilities.

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