

LIFE IN AZEROTH:  
EXAMINING PLACE-MAKING IN VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENTS

A Thesis  
by  
JOSHUA MONTANA PIERCY

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APPROVED BY:

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Dr. Robert Brown  
Chairperson, Thesis Committee

---

Dr. Kathleen Schroeder  
Member, Thesis Committee

---

Dr. Margaret Sugg  
Member, Thesis Committee

---

Dr. Kathleen Schroeder  
Chairperson, Department of Geography

---

Mike McKenzie, Ph.D.  
Dean, Cratis D. Williams School of Graduate Studies

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**Abstract**

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Joshua Montana Piercy  
B.A., Appalachian State University  
M.A., Appalachian State University

Chairperson: Dr. Robert Brown

The goal of this research is to develop a model of virtual place-making through which to better comprehend how place functions outside of the physical world. Most of the place-making research within geography has centered around our physical world, ignoring the incredible variety found in virtual environments. Using ethnographic methods and surveys, players of the massively popular online video game, “World of Warcraft”, are studied and worked with to develop this model. Ultimately, the most important components of virtual place are determined. Virtual place-making occurs similarly to that of the physical world, building upon networks of communication between living creatures, their environments, social traditions, and numerous other personal experiences.

## **Acknowledgments**

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I am also grateful to Blizzard Entertainment for creating and maintaining World of Warcraft, as well as its deep, beautiful world. Without their rich creation, this research would not exist. I also offer thanks to the Eminent guild within World of Warcraft, whose members accepted me with open arms and allowed me to take part in activities I would otherwise have failed to experience.

## **Dedication**

To my Mother and Father, my partner Damalis Caraballo, and the friends who have supported me throughout this endeavor. Without your help, I could not have achieved this.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

As morning breaks over the moonlit hills of the Arathi Highlands, a flock of birds greet the sun through majestic chorus. War-torn plains lie over what were once brilliant, emerald fields spotted with white and gold flowers. The sound of a Siege Machine's projectile crashing into a nearby structure breaks the peaceful birdsong, piercing the air with cacophonous static. These lands were once relatively peaceful, home to the Boulderfist Ogres and the city of Stromgarde. The Highlands were a cradle of human civilization, a breadbasket which resulted in one of the world's most prodigious empires. Now, a war rages across these once peaceful lands. The city of Stromgarde is a fortress, its walls marked with spikes and ballistae to resist the constant attacks which assail their walls. Where parks could once be found, barracks have risen amidst the greenery. The stench of smoke and sweat fills the air.

Azeroth, the planet on which World of Warcraft takes place, is filled with such locations. Teldrassil, a tree large enough to house a large city, lies in the northern ocean of Kalimdor. Its branches are home to the Night Elves, a purple-skinned people who live closely with nature. In their capital, Darnassus, the streets are lit by the light of lanterns. The sun penetrates only slightly through Teldrassil's leaves, with only the lanterns providing a warm amber glow to the city. The soothing scent of mana buns drifts through the streets, drawing crowds to food stalls in the crafting district. Guards patrol the streets on sabertooth tigers, their weapons and armor surging with cerulean auras of magic. Lordaeron, a city on the opposite side of the world, was a prominent human capital until later taken over by the



undead Scourge. Known as The Undercity, it consists of seemingly endless underground tunnels which are lined by rivers of green liquid. A rotting stench fills the air as undead line the streets and market stalls. A strange mist rests just above the ground, and the howls of the recently-risen dead send shivers down the spines of outsiders. Still, this is home to some- a cold home, but a place of safety and relative seclusion. Teldrassil, having been a hub of activity for over a decade, was recently burned to the ground along with its citizens. The Undercity was destroyed shortly thereafter, its streets wreathed in blight and its buildings shattered by explosives. These pockets of experience make up all of Azeroth, with each location consisting of the countless elements of which that make up our real world. This is how virtual environments function: constructing layers of experience and communication for participants in much the same way that real-world environments do.

World of Warcraft is a Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game, more commonly known as a MMORPG, a genre of video game in which players create characters through whom to experience virtual worlds. A crucial part of this genre is that which earns it the “Massively Multiplayer Online” portion of its name; MMORPGs are constantly connected to the internet, and players interact with one another in detailed, at times fantastic, worlds. These settings tell detailed stories through audio-visual cues and player interactions; World of Warcraft’s Azeroth is no exception. In this research, I will be analyzing the means through which humans understand places in virtual environments. World of Warcraft is my subject of choice, ethnography and surveying my methods, as I interact with regular users in one of the most prolific and dense virtual environments available. An immense amount of literature exists regarding the meaning and understanding of real-world place-making; despite our daily interactions with virtual environments, such literature regarding them is

scarce. As our world becomes more densely connected via the internet, it is important for us to understand the interactions we have in the online world- as well as how those interactions come to be.

Much of the world's population is constantly connected to the internet. Whether it is through smartphones, computers, or any other number of options, we cannot truly escape the online world. The internet's humble beginning began a fundamental component of today's society. When two computers first communicated with one another on October 3, 1969, it marked the birth of one of the most important inventions of the twentieth century. What would later mold itself into the 'Internet' consisted of two students sending simple messages to one another across 350 miles of telephone line; the message itself was an accidental "L-O", as one of the computers crashed before they could finish spelling "login".<sup>1</sup> No one could possibly have known what an impact such a creation would have on our society. The International Telecommunications Union estimates that, as of 2016, 3.385 billion individuals utilize the internet on a regular basis.<sup>2</sup> In 2010, this number was estimated to be 1.991 billion.<sup>3</sup> This suggests that not only is a sizable portion of the Earth's population using the internet regularly, the number of individuals who do so is rapidly increasing. As this number continues to rise, technology continues to improve at an incredible rate. The rise of alternative methods of interacting with the virtual world, such as virtual and augmented reality, will only increase the variety of ways through which we perceive these places.

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<sup>1</sup> Beranek, Leo. "Roots of the Internet: A Personal History." Massachusetts Historical Society. *Massachusetts Historical Review* 2 (2000): 55-75.

<sup>2</sup> "New Data Visualization on Internet Users by Region and Country." Statistics. <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx>.

<sup>3</sup> "New Data Visualization on Internet Users by Region and Country." Statistics. <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Pages/stat/default.aspx>.

Place is much more than physical location. While ‘space’ typically refers to the physical universe in which we live, Tuan suggests that ‘place’ consists of the psychological or ideological components which relate to specific spaces.<sup>4</sup> Hine poses place as both the general meaning of a space, as well as components such as societal function, morality, and personal associations.<sup>5</sup> A popular definition of place comes from Doreen Massey, who defines the phenomenon as “the focus of a distinct mixture of wider and more local social relations”.<sup>6</sup> In this definition, place consists of countless layers which build up over time through social function and interaction. While these terms are traditionally used in reference to physical spaces, the elements which make up ‘place’ similarly function in virtual environments which also consist of these social layers. Any website, video game, or even software package can serve as a nontraditional space; the layers of functionality, interaction, communication, and perception all attribute elements of place to a virtual space.

Paul C. Adams suggests that places are built up through countless layers of communication in various forms.<sup>7</sup> These layers of communication are endlessly complex, building upon one another as they form a ‘place’. These communications are both human and non-human: a brisk wind might be one form of said communication, while a crowd of people arguing might be another. Perhaps the communication is a long wait, or a hostile interaction. It could even be the result of something as small as bacteria, or as large as the Sun. Each of these, as well as other interactions, create what we perceive as place. A restaurant may be

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<sup>4</sup> Tuan, Yi-fu. *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Hine, Christine. "Virtual Ethnography: Modes, Varieties, Affordances." (The SAGE Handbook of Online Research Methods, 2008), 257-70.

<sup>6</sup> Massey, Doreen B. *Space, Place and Gender*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994). Chapter: A Global Sense of Place.

<sup>7</sup> Adams, Paul C. “Placing the Anthropocene.” *Royal Geographical Society. (Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 41, 2015), 54-65.

associated with the smell and taste of its food, the people who work and dine there as an additional form of communication. Its cleanliness, the light levels, the color of the walls- these all build up the restaurant's 'place' in its patrons' minds. Personal experiences build upon this as well; for example, perhaps one acquired food poisoning at a certain restaurant in one's past and now associates it with illness. Such forms of communication occur in virtual environments as much as they do in the real world, however, social communication in a virtual space is largely unique to virtual environments which are online.

Given contemporary society's reliance upon the internet, it is important to understand the ways in which we interact with it. To take part in the virtual world is to experience place. Whether the 'space' in question is a website, a video game, one's desktop, or a software package, these spaces provide the traditional elements of place. The definition of place according to Adams is particularly relevant to this idea; each part of these virtual environments provides numerous forms of communication.<sup>8</sup> The look and feel of a website, the interactions one has within, the experiences one has while visiting- these are all forms of communication by Adams' definition. Perhaps one finds a website soothing due to its color scheme, yet they have had arguments with other users which have soured their perception. By the same token, a website might present its users with certain services, such as shopping, which is itself a form of communication. Video games take this concept a step farther, providing interactions which extend beyond clicking buttons on a webpage.

Video games are a popular pastime enjoyed in homes, businesses, schools, and even militaries around the world. A study in 2013 stated that there were at least 1.2 billion people playing games online worldwide, a staggering 17% of the world's population; this number

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<sup>8</sup> Adams, *Placing the Anthropocene*, 54-65.

does not even include the number of individuals playing video games that are not connected to the internet.<sup>9</sup> Beginning with the introduction of Multi-User Dungeons<sup>10</sup>, text-based games which allow users to interact with one another via typing, online gaming has erupted into a massive industry that directly impacts over 17% of the Earth's population. Since the advent of MUDs, online gaming has grown substantially. Individual games sometimes have millions of concurrent users, with World of Warcraft crossing 12 million at its peak in 2010 and Fortnite, another popular online game, boasts over 125 million users since its initial release in 2017.<sup>11</sup><sup>12</sup> With rapidly growing user-bases and an increasingly strong presence in contemporary culture, online video games have exploded in popularity. With this in mind, it is crucial that we better understand the fundamental elements of virtual worlds and how we interact with them on a conscious and subconscious level.

In video games, the elements of space and place are particularly paramount. Whether one is exploring a frozen wilderness in World of Warcraft, fighting their way through a dungeon in The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim, or battling other players in Fortnite, one is moving in and through a virtual space. World of Warcraft takes this concept to a level beyond many others; players create a character which represents them and, in a way, lives inside of the game's world. When creating a character, players can choose from a variety of races such as Humans, Dwarves, Undead, Orcs, Goblins, and several types of elves. They also choose a class to play, such as Warrior, Hunter, or Mage; these choices directly influence the

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<sup>9</sup> Spil Games. *State of Online Gaming, 2013*. <https://spilgames.com/industry/state-of-online-gaming-2013/>.

<sup>10</sup> More often referred to as "MUDs".

<sup>11</sup> *Announcing 2018-2019 Fortnite Competitive Season*. (2018, June 12).

<https://www.epicgames.com/fortnite/en-US/news/announcing-2018-2019-fortnite-competitive-season>

<sup>12</sup> *World of Warcraft® Subscriber Base Reaches 12 Million Worldwide*. (BusinessWire, October 07, 2010). <https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20101007005648/en>.

experiences that a player will have in-game, and the appearance of a characters is also changeable at this point. From this point, players are able to enter the game's world and begin their adventure.

Several things separate World of Warcraft from other video games in the context of this research, making it an ideal topic as well as location for ethnography. Azeroth is a massive world filled with diverse locations and ecosystems, all of which are distinct from one another in some way. The frozen wilds of Northrend provide pine forests, dragon graveyards, and tundras populated by talking walruses. The island-nation of Zandalar is filled with dense swamps and jungles, Mayan-inspired cities, and a desert populated by snake and fox-people. Each location, regardless of how fantastic, is intricately designed and filled with countless audio-visual stimuli. Its nature as an online game only further builds upon this world, as players interact with one another through their carefully designed characters; these interactions can be social, cooperative, hostile, or entirely passive. These build up personal experiences and are, no matter how small, vital to a player's perception of the game world. In many ways, this world emulates the layers of communication found in our physical world. This leads to a sense of attachment to the game world, along with a massive time investment. It is not unusual for players to have a significant amount of time invested in their individual characters, providing a sense of personal belonging and wealth in said characters. A study by Sheng-Wei Chen shows that, on average, 75% of World of Warcraft players will participate in the game at least 1.9 hours per day, with 25% playing greater than 4.9 hours per day.<sup>13</sup> The amount of time spent playing World of Warcraft suggests that many users have a sense of

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<sup>13</sup> Pin-Yun Tarng, Kuan-Ta Chen, and Polly Huang. *An Analysis of WoW Players' Game Hours*. (2018, May 20). Retrieved September 23, 2018, from [http://www.iis.sinica.edu.tw/~swc/pub/wow\\_player\\_game\\_hours.html](http://www.iis.sinica.edu.tw/~swc/pub/wow_player_game_hours.html)

attachment to their characters and the world, and thus should provide significant insight into the game through ethnography.

Online video games are here to stay, and virtual settings have become a normal part of daily life for many people. As we move towards a more connected future, understanding our presence in virtual environments becomes paramount. World of Warcraft is a unique example of space, as it is intangible yet exhibits many components that we associate with the real world. As a result, it will serve as an excellent means through which to better understand the relationship between humans and virtual place. Through ethnography, surveys of World of Warcraft players, and understanding of Adams' model of place, it will be possible to determine the means through which place-making occurs in virtual worlds.



Fig. 1. “World of Warcraft Global Map”. Created by J. Schumpeter. From Atwar-Game. <https://atwar-game.com/map/?id=2859><sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>J. Schumpeter, “World of Warcraft Global Map,” Atwar-Game. <https://atwar-game.com/map/?id=2859>.



## Chapter 2: Research and Methods

### Contributions to the Discipline of Geography

Geographers have held a long-standing fascination with the concepts of space and place. There have been numerous attempts by geographers to define these concepts throughout the last few decades. The definition of place is particularly contested. While space typically refers to a physical, three-dimensional location, place often involves those elements which give a space meaning beyond its physicality. Despite the discussion surrounding place, it is rarely discussed in the context of virtual settings. Edward Relph attempts to express the differences between virtual and physical place, noting that virtual spaces are far more limited in their interactions with our senses yet provide vastly more room for imagination and creative freedom.<sup>15</sup>

A great deal of the work done on virtual place is somewhat antiquated, and therefore fails to acknowledge contemporary advances in how we view place. It is difficult to believe how greatly we have come to depend on virtual environments in the 21st century, with even the most unlikely of devices being reliant upon computers and internet connections. As we continue to understand what place means as geographers, it is paramount that we acknowledge this somewhat foreign frontier. How does place-making function in virtual worlds? Do the same place-making processes occur in both the real and virtual worlds, or do they differ? What are the primary methods used, actively and passively, to make places in the

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<sup>15</sup> Relph, Edward. *Spirit of Place and Sense of Place in Virtual Realities*. (Techné: Research in Philosophy and Technology 10, no. 3 2007), 17-25.

virtual world? This research attempts to answer these questions, and it is my desire to inspire other geographers to look toward virtual environments as we grow increasingly reliant upon them.

### **Why World of Warcraft?**

World of Warcraft, first released in 2004, has been continuously updated and improved since its launch. While its release was seemingly only a short time ago, it is quite rare for a video game to update and maintain its player-base for 14 years. The video game genre to which World of Warcraft belongs is particularly long-lived when compared to others, yet most still fail to retain their players for so long. This has created a unique environment when compared to other video games, which generally remain somewhat static upon being released into the world. The significance of this is that through continuous updates and expansions of the world itself, Azeroth has grown and changed over time. Characters created by the game's developers, known as "Non-Player Characters" or "NPCs", drive the majority of changes in the game's world. Their actions are not governed by the same ruleset to which players' characters are bound; they can do anything that the developers deem appropriate in the context of story. It is in this way that spaces are altered, being destroyed, built-up, or simply repurposed. Player characters contribute to these changes through their actions within the game's story, working with or against NPCs to achieve certain goals. While these changes are largely established by the will of the developers, it is through player interaction that they are explained. As a result, every single player of World of Warcraft has, at some time, 'altered' the landscape in some way- even if the results were predetermined.

This is a somewhat unique situation in the context of video games. The developers, Blizzard Entertainment, provide regular updates to World of Warcraft. Smaller updates are known as ‘patches’, while large-scale, paid updates are called ‘expansions’. These provide new playable races and classes, new areas of the world to explore, and new story content to drive the personal journeys of players forward. Such updates have been taking place since the game’s original release in 2004, altering World of Warcraft’s virtual landscape consistently and significantly. When one plays World of Warcraft in 2018, they are experiencing the sum of 14 years of evolution. A specific example of the changes seen in expansions took place in the “Cataclysm” expansion, released in 2010. This expansion restructured Azeroth, ripping entire continents apart and allowing the developers to recreate spaces that had remained the same since the game’s initial release. Patches are much smaller endeavors, typically adding a few new missions for players to take part in, driving the game’s storyline along incrementally.

These constant updates result in an ever-evolving world that grows along with its inhabitants, the players. Even the ways through which players interact with the world change over time. In 2009, an update was released which provided a tool which made it significantly simpler for players to find others to experience the game’s content alongside. The ‘Dungeon Finder’, as it is called, trivialized a prominent part of the game’s experience: finding groups to take on dungeons, a form of content which requires groups of five players to team-up. This change was hotly contested, yet it remains an important part of the game to this day. For some, this change made it easier to find others with whom they could play; for others it led to a somewhat anti-social attitude, as they no longer needed to speak with one another to experience more difficult content. Regardless of opinion, this radically altered both the ways

that players interacted with World of Warcraft and their perceptions of the game. Players tell stories of ‘the old days’, wherein it was more difficult to find groups with which to play<sup>16</sup>. Some believe the game to have been more fun during that period, in the same way that nostalgia in the real world influences human opinion. Others adore these changes, citing them as major improvements to the game’s structure and making it easier to enjoy themselves. Regardless of opinion, this massive change significantly altered users’ perception of World of Warcraft- for better or worse. It is noteworthy that those who began to play the game following this 2009 patch have never experienced the game without it.

There are numerous other examples of such changes throughout the game’s life, with players having distinct memories of their experiences and the existence of notable divisions within the community. The announcement of “World of Warcraft Classic” in 2017 is evidence of this: a vocal portion of the community requested a way to play the original, 2004 version of the game for so long that Blizzard Entertainment opted to provide one<sup>17</sup>. Players, investing significant amounts of time and energy into their in-game personae, form a strong sense of attachment to the world of Azeroth and its inhabitants. To play World of Warcraft is to experience the entire world of Azeroth, taking in its environments and interacting with the game’s mechanics. A result of these significant experiences and varying opinions is that certain spaces hold drastically different meaning among individuals. This, combined with the unique component of players ‘living’ in a virtual world, provide a strong backbone for ethnography and study of place.

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<sup>16</sup> An example of such a discussion can be found on the Official World of Warcraft Forum: <https://us.battle.net/forums/en/wow/topic/20769397491>

<sup>17</sup> Blizzard Entertainment developers discuss the ideas behind World of Warcraft Classic in a “Dev Watercooler”: <https://worldofwarcraft.com/en-us/news/21881587/dev-watercooler-world-of-warcraft-classic>

## Ethnography and Surveys

A key element of this research is ethnography, a research method wherein a researcher takes part as a member of a specific cultural group for an extended period of time, sometimes years, to better understand those who exist within.<sup>18</sup> Some have described ethnography as “thick description”, a means through which to better understand the underlying elements of specific cultures through intense study and writing.<sup>19</sup> There is an underlying issue with this: the concept of culture itself is one whose definition has been contested for over a century. This issue will later be discussed in detail, although it is important to note that World of Warcraft players make up a specific, defined culture in the context of this research. To further develop concepts of virtual space and place, it seems fitting to immerse oneself in what is seemingly one of the most distinct cultural groups of such a setting.

In their guide to virtual ethnography, Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, Taylor, and Marcus pose, “How we conceptualize the scope of our fieldsite will shape the way we formulate our research questions”.<sup>20</sup> Boellstorff et al.’s guide later notes that ethnographers, “...follow the people, follow the metaphor, and follow the artifact [sic]”.<sup>21</sup> In this case, World of Warcraft players serve as the ‘people’, that which makes up place is the ‘metaphor’, and the ‘artifacts’ will consist of the numerous elements which aid in understanding the metaphor. Immersion within the culture of World of Warcraft players will provide significant insight into how these virtual environments might parallel those of the real world; it might also reveal ways in

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<sup>18</sup> Skill Zone Ltd. *Definition: Ethnography*. (Association for Qualitative Research AQR 2016), <https://www.aqr.org.uk/glossary/ethnography>.

<sup>19</sup> Geertz, Clifford. *Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture*. (1973).

<sup>20</sup> Boellstorff, Tom, Bonnie A. Nardi, Celia Pearce, T. L. Taylor, and George Marcus. *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 59.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

which they do not. Based upon Boellstorff et al.'s method, the 'people' and 'metaphor' components of virtual ethnography are somewhat straightforward. People are the subjects upon whom an ethnography focuses, while the metaphor is what you are seeking to understand.

Artifacts are where virtual ethnographies differ heavily from real-world ethnographies, as there are no obvious physical artifacts to acquire from subjects. Regardless, it is imperative for ethnographers to seek virtual artifacts as they would the physical. Boellstorff et al. suggest that nearly all things make acceptable artifacts in virtual contexts, including text, images, audio, and social interactions.<sup>22</sup> In the context of this research, artifacts of note are conversations, images, and social interactions. The primary means of data acquisition are conversation and surveying, with audio-visual artifacts serving primarily as means through which to explain results.

Surveys are a key means through which data are acquired in this research. While ethnography will be the primary method through which to understand the ways in which virtual places develop in the minds of users, surveys provide more analytical results. Questions provide insight into what locations World of Warcraft players most enjoy and dislike, as well as why- they also offer a glimpse into who plays World of Warcraft, showing who is answering the surveys and thus what my sample consists of. These data serve to provide a solid foundation upon which theories developed through ethnography might rest. If players develop concepts of place in a specific way, does that correlate to the virtual places that they are fans of? Do these locations fit into a specific archetype, centered around several key elements? Perhaps audio-visual information is most important to players, or the social

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<sup>22</sup> Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, Taylor, and Marcus. *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds*, 121-123.

experiences that they have within are specifically important. Better explanations for observed phenomena can be derived through comparisons between said observations and survey results. These forms of data collection will ultimately be crucial in better understanding the ways through which humans develop senses of place in virtual environments.

### Chapter 3: Literature Review

#### (Digital) Space and Place:

In the discipline of Geography, the 1970s saw a great deal of development on the concept of 'place'. The core beliefs behind each explanation tend to be approximately the same, wherein place consists of some combination of location and meaning.<sup>23</sup> While this component of its definition is somewhat static, the details constantly shift based upon whose explanation is examined. Yi Fu Tuan's seminal piece, "Space and Place", was published in 1977. Serving as a detailed explanation of what space and place are and how they function, this book has functioned as a cornerstone of geographic knowledge. Despite this, the definition of place is frequently in flux. Tuan puts the concept of space quite simply, stating, "We live in space. There is no space for another building on the lot. The Great Plains look spacious."<sup>24</sup> Space is an actual location, a point on a map, a building, a field, a lake. It can be more than this, though. Space can also imply openness, availability, freedom; such things can be defined as being 'spacious'. Despite its somewhat complex nature, the definition of space is well accepted. Place is somewhat a more complicated idea, derived not only from physical attributes but emotional, psychological, social, and sensual factors. Tuan suggests that place is a type of object, while places and objects define spaces. According to Tuan, locations and objects function as spaces before they become places.<sup>25</sup> A newborn baby perceives a

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<sup>23</sup> Cresswell, *Place: encountering geography as philosophy*, 132-139.

<sup>24</sup> Tuan, *Space and Place*, 3.

<sup>25</sup> Tuan, *Space and Place*.



geometric shape as space in the same way a blind person who recently gained sight would. These objects lack context, meaning, and structure. It is only through the inclusion of context and visual insight that a triangle acquires meaning; in this example presented by Tuan, the shape has now metaphorically acquired a sense of place.<sup>26</sup>

Unlike many other geographers, Tuan suggests that it is only with a complete sensory experience, sight being of paramount importance, that spaces can be perceived as places.

<sup>27</sup>Other human senses enlarge the wider perceptive experience of an individual but cannot provide a full understanding. Without these experiences, we lack the full context of a space through which we develop place. While smell, touch, hearing, and taste contribute to a sense of place, sight is alone in its ability to make us ‘fully’ aware of a spacious external world.<sup>28</sup>

Through sight, humans are able to acquire a sense of scale, distance, proximity to other spaces, aesthetics, and other elements which aid in the internal development of place. While Tuan’s work attempts to present a broad explanation of space and place, it builds toward the idea that visual components of a space are most important in place-development. The discussion of blind individuals is particularly interesting, as it suggests that the blind are incapable of fully developing a sense of place; in turn, it suggests that there is a standardized sense of place which is shared among multiple people. While some surely agree with this idea, some contemporary geographers have stressed the importance of places varying across individuals. Harcourt states:

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<sup>26</sup> Tuan, *Space and Place*.

<sup>27</sup> Tuan, *Space and Place*.

<sup>28</sup> Tuan, *Space and Place*.

“Place extends beyond the physical. People negotiate place as they protect and conserve places, enhance and modify places, create connections with other places at different levels. Our attachments to place are about social, spiritual, and cultural meaning and identity as well as economic need.”<sup>29</sup>

This seems to stand in stark contrast to Tuan’s theory of place, which largely consists of visual and physical components. While these surely have a large impact on one’s perception of a place, Harcourt suggests a greater emphasis be placed on social, emotional, and psychological components of place. Doreen Massey understands places as “meeting-places”, where networks of social relationships and understandings intersect.<sup>30</sup> In this definition, the social relationships and understandings surrounding a space are key, although Massey stresses that large-scale associations with spaces are the most prominent.<sup>31</sup> These large-scale associations might be countries, cities, businesses, regional, or any other title assigned to a space en-masse. Wherever these social relationships and understandings meet, a place can be understood in its relationship to a given space.

Cresswell notes that places, and therefore spaces, need not be stationary.<sup>32</sup> A naval ship is an example of this phenomenon; the ship has a defined physical structure, yet constantly changes its geographic location constantly. Despite the location of the ship

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<sup>29</sup> Adamson, Joni, William A. Gleason, and David N. Pellow. *Keywords for Environmental Studies*. New York: New York University Press, 2016. Chapter: Place, by Wendy Harcourt

<sup>30</sup> Massey, *Space, Place and Gender*, Chapter: A Global Sense of Place.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter: A Global Sense of Place.

<sup>32</sup> Cresswell, Tim. *Place: encountering geography as philosophy*. (Geographical Association. *Geography* 93 no. 3, Autumn 2008), 132-139.

on Earth being inconsistent, its physical structure serves as a space. Those who live and work upon the ship associate the ship with meaning, developing individual and shared perceptions of the space. In this way, the ship can also be defined as a place. In this same way, a small object can also serve as a place. A person's bed, for example, has a location, physical structure, and established meanings.<sup>33</sup> Based upon these comments, Cresswell defines place as "particular constellations of material things that occupy a particular segment of space and have sets of meanings attached to them".<sup>34</sup> The key to this definition is that it scales, failing to designate 'place' to only larger structures.

Another contemporary explanation for place comes from Adams, who suggests that place consists of intricate networks of communication.<sup>35</sup> These networks consist of the smaller forms of communication, such as bacteria utilizing chemicals to communicate, as well as the largest, such as the climate or social categorizations surrounding a given space. These networks of communication can be both human and non-human; Adams poses that such communication can involve the human senses, although those which we are unable to immediately sense are still valid forms of communication as they continue to define a place without our explicit knowledge.

<sup>36</sup>Following this model for place-development, there are countless layers which make up a given location.

In the case of a park, one might consider the visual communication which comes from the surroundings: trees, grass, children playing, birds pecking at bread upon the

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<sup>33</sup> *Idib.*, 132-139.

<sup>34</sup> *Idib.*, 132-139.

<sup>35</sup> Adams, *Placing the Anthropocene*, 54-65.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 54-65.

sidewalk, elderly people sitting on nearby benches, and couples walking along paths while holding hands. Auditory communication comes from the sounds of songbirds, the children laughing, footsteps upon the pavement, the wind rushing through trees. Perhaps someone speaks to the observer, providing social communication. These are perhaps somewhat obvious examples, but there are many more. The cells within leaves on trees are producing chlorophyll, resulting in the bright green that the observer sees. The temperature is balmy and the skies clear, communicating the weather. The observer knows that this is a park and that its functions primarily include relaxation and recreation; this is another form of social communication from society itself. There are other forms of communication that exist which are even less immediately obvious.

In Adams' explanation for place, all variables which might make up a place are covered under the blanket term, "communication". In a human-centric world, communication is key. How we communicate with one another and our environment make up our interactions with spaces, even if these interactions are less-than-obvious. This explanation of place encompasses those of others, such as Tuan and Massey; human senses are acknowledged as important elements, as well as social understandings and relationships. Unlike these definitions, Adams' goes deeper: it includes those forms of communication which are less obvious yet still affect the ways in which we view spaces. Adams' explanation is significantly more inclusive than most others, which is why I have chosen to use it as my framework for place in the context of virtual environments.

Some have suggested virtual environments are understood in much the same way physical ones are, despite traditionally being intangible and utilizing fewer human senses. Saunders et al. define virtual place as, "the perception of bounded space imbued with

meaning”.<sup>37</sup> ‘The perception of bounded space’, in this context, refers to a space being intangible yet capable of being observed and interacted with. In such virtual places, there is a defined space to which observers can provide meaning in the same ways one might with a real-world space. In the case of World of Warcraft, environments are sprawling and tend to feature a vast number of details. According to the website Wowpedia, World of Warcraft currently features 122 distinct regions across seven continents and two major islands, and several smaller landmasses<sup>38</sup>. These regions, typically referred to as ‘zones’, are further divided into ‘subzones’, social hubs such as towns or cities, and ‘instances’. Each region varies heavily from the next, from the frosted pines of Grizzly Hills to the seemingly-endless sand dunes of Uldum. Each of these greater spaces contain numerous smaller spaces, such as homes, settlements, caves, and dungeons. This unique contiguous geography of World of Warcraft serves to separate it from many other virtual environments, elevating it to the status of ‘virtual world’. This is far from the only element of World of Warcraft which sets it apart. In fact, nearly every major aspect of the game categorizes it as a virtual world.

In *Virtual Worlds Survey Report*, Symborski, Blackburn, and Pearce discuss the elements which make up virtual worlds. “Virtual world” is a more specific designation for virtual environments which often includes Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games such as World of Warcraft. According to these authors, virtual worlds are spatial, contiguous, explorable, persistent, populous, inhabitable, and feature embodied

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<sup>37</sup> Saunders, Carol, Anne F. Rutkowski, Genuchten Van Michiel, Doug Vogel, and Julio Molina Orrego. *Virtual Space and Place: Theory And Test*. (MIS Quarterly 35, no. 4 December 2011), 1079-089.

<sup>38</sup> A list of zones can be found at <https://wow.gamepedia.com/Zone>.

personal identities, consequential participation, and a sense of “worldness”.<sup>39</sup> This description of virtual worlds is derived from an explanation presented by Betsy Book in “Virtual Worlds: Today and in the Future”, who defines virtual worlds as “simulated environments accessed by multiple users through an online interface.”<sup>40</sup> The former description somewhat more detailed in what it specifies as a virtual world. According to Symborski, Blackburn, and Pearce, virtual worlds must have a spatial representation, whether that be through a graphical interface or text, which is geographically contiguous and must be explorable by users.<sup>41</sup> Such worlds are persistent in that access is always possible; they are invariably social in nature, which ties into the necessity for users to have a virtual representation of themselves and, through interactions with the world and other users, it is possible to contribute to a sort of culture or system.

The final component of virtual worlds is the most abstract, as the meaning of ‘worldness’ can vary among individuals and settings. Worldness is, at its core, the essence of a virtual world. Worldness refers to a certain consistency in the rules, aesthetics, and presence of a setting.<sup>42</sup> Worldness is the element which can lead to a suspension of disbelief among users, temporarily altering their perception of a virtual environment to that of an actual world. This sense of worldness is a key component of World of Warcraft, as players exist within a consistent, believable world through their computers.

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<sup>39</sup> Symborski, Carl, Bobby R. Blackburn, and Celia Pearce. *Virtual Worlds Survey Report: A Trans-World Study of Non-Game Virtual Worlds-Demographics, Attitudes, and Preferences*. (Academia.edu, 2015).

<sup>40</sup> Book, Betsy. *Virtual Worlds: Today and in the Future*. (Itnow48, no. 2 2006), 32-33.

<sup>41</sup> Symborski, Blackburn, and Pearce, *Virtual Worlds Survey Report*, 2015.

<sup>42</sup> Symborski, Carl, Bobby R. Blackburn, and Celia Pearce. *Virtual Worlds Survey Report: A Trans-World Study of Non-Game Virtual Worlds-Demographics, Attitudes, and Preferences*. (Academia.edu, 2015).

The question of what contributes to this ‘worldness’ within World of Warcraft remains. Pearce and Artemesia pose that worldness can be measured as “collective creation of belief”, a phenomenon that can be expressed in nearly any medium.<sup>43</sup> Each of the aforementioned components of virtual worlds serve to build this sense of worldness; each element, when presented together, serves as a means through which to build a believable and consistent world, even if it is unrealistic in comparison to the real world. In World of Warcraft, spatiality and a contiguous setting provide a geographic element of worldness. Embodied personal identities, represented through ‘avatars’ or player characters, inhabit a persistent, explorable world. Avatars, and therefore users, interact with other entities within said world, and their actions have consequences on the game world and other users. Worldness is not inherently based upon any one of these elements, but instead the ways in which they interact with one another as a whole. Worldness is ambiguous as a result; it is difficult to define exactly what provides it to a virtual world, as nearly every aspect of said world builds towards this concept in some way. Pearce and Artemesia note that worldness is reliant upon a cohesive ‘aesthetic’, the result of a consistent and believable world which follows its own patterns and rules.<sup>44</sup> In a fantasy setting, the sudden appearance of a dragon might not be immersion-breaking; this same dragon might completely ruin any sense of consistency and worldness in a game which takes place in the real world.

Some of the most crucial elements of any digital world are the rules and restrictions placed upon users and the world itself. Consistency therein is key to

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<sup>43</sup> Pearce, Celia, and Artemesia. *Communities of Play: Emergent Cultures in Multiplayer Games and Virtual Worlds*. (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2009).

<sup>44</sup> Pearce and Artemesia. *Communities of Play*, 2009.

developing any sense of worldness. These rules do not develop organically as they do in the real world, nor does digital architecture.<sup>45</sup> Instead, they are created by a developer and consist of intentionally written code. The developers of any virtual world have the final say on what is acceptable and what is not within their own world, whether it be the placement of walls or actual game mechanics. MMORPGs such as World of Warcraft are constructed in this way as well, albeit social elements allow for ‘rules’ which are not enforced by developers, recognized by a game’s community members instead. An example of such an ‘unenforced rule’ in World of Warcraft would be to always tip a Mage who provides a service such as teleportation. Other rules are enforced through gameplay mechanics determined by the developers, such as forcing players who leave dungeon groups unannounced to wait thirty minutes before joining another. A better example of the consistency referenced by Lessig would be that of the world itself. Players can fly upon the backs of mounts or through transformation magic but cannot normally fly unassisted. Breaking this rule would be harmful to immersion and thus worldness, while the incidental enforcement of rules established by the community serve to build a sense of worldness.

These elements work together to construct a ‘digital world’. The explanation for place from Adams fits this model well, as each part can be viewed as a means of communication between players and the virtual world.<sup>46</sup> A game’s environments must communicate with players in believable, consistent ways that promote socialization and exploration. Players of World of Warcraft experience this phenomenon constantly.

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<sup>45</sup> Lessig, Lawrence. *Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace: Version 2.0*. (New York: Basic Books, 2006).

<sup>46</sup> Adams, *Placing the Anthropocene*, 54-65.



Azeroth's environments communicate aesthetically, persistently, and consistently. Birds chirp in the distance, informing players of the presence of virtual wildlife. Well-worn roads lead between settlements and zones, offering players an approximate path through the contiguous world. Non-Player Characters, controlled via code, wander streets and through forests. Other players travel these same regions, providing socialization and perceived population of the game's environments through their unique avatars. World of Warcraft's Azeroth is nothing short of a complete virtual world, simultaneously meeting Adams' requirements of place.

Azeroth's status as a virtual world is significant to this research as it is more than a 'simple' virtual environment. While websites and simpler games surely have significance to the research of virtual place, World of Warcraft is something more, developed in such a way that it emulates aspects of the real world to appear more convincing and appealing to players. While this does not mean that it functions in the same ways as the real world, it does strive to maintain similar components of contiguous geography, socialization, and personality. This knowledge is crucial to understanding how the world functions in the minds of players.

### **Digital Games and Cultural Practices:**

Cultures, as shared systems of meaning and practice, shape our hopes and beliefs; our ideas about family, identity, and society; our deepest assumptions about being a person in this world.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, Taylor, and Marcus. *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds*, 50-80.

Culture is a nebulous and contested concept which we all interact with on a daily basis, perhaps without realizing. There have been numerous attempts to strictly define culture throughout the past, some more successful than others. A commonly used definition of culture is that it is “the system of shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviors, and artifacts that the members of society use to cope with their world and with one another, and that are transmitted from generation to generation through learning”.<sup>48</sup> There are numerous other definitions of culture beyond this. Some assert that culture is symbolic communication, the sum-total of learned behavior shared by a group, or that it consists of both explicit and implicit patterns shared within a group; it is also defined as the ‘way of life’ of a group wherein symbols and ideas are accepted and understood without effort.<sup>49</sup> Commonalities among these are requirements of sharing, symbolism, and unconscious understanding within any particular group. In other words, culture makes up every aspect of a society, from the ways in which individuals interact with one another, how they view those interactions, to the tools those individuals use. It is both shared and personal, collective yet individual; culture is more intricate than any single definition can properly express.<sup>50</sup> To exist as a human being is to take part in culture in some form. Our cultures define how we learn, how we interact with one another, what is acceptable within our societies, how we act when we are alone, and so many other elements of our lives.

A key element of culture is that it is shared, and that we can take part in multiple cultures at once. While some cultures serve almost as blanket terms, such as ‘American Culture’, there are also cultures present within cities, hobbies, religions, and nearly any unit

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<sup>48</sup> Bates, Daniel G., and Fred Plog. *Cultural Anthropology*. (McGraw-Hill, 1990).

<sup>49</sup> Hofstede, Geert H., Gert Jan. Hofstede, and Michael Minkov. *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*. (London: McGraw-Hill, 2010).

<sup>50</sup> Bates, Daniel G., and Fred Plog. *Cultural Anthropology*. (3rd ed. McGraw-Hill, 1990).

of human organization. We participate in cultures that we may never recognize as they simply function as a normal element of life. In the same way there are large cultures, smaller, more specific ones exist and play large roles in our lives. A culture of digital games is one example of such, itself composed of numerous subcultures.<sup>51</sup>

In some cases, culture is used as a framework through which to analyze a research topic. Viewing online video games through a lens of ‘digital gaming culture’ provides a means through which to determine perspectives and approaches which best suit a particular study.<sup>52</sup> Some have suggested that video games do not inherently contain their own culture, posing instead that they contribute to a greater “pop-culture”.<sup>53</sup> In opposition to this idea, there are numerous elements of individual game cultures which are not shared with any sort of ‘pop-culture’. Players of World of Warcraft might share with those who play another game, yet they are still distinct enough to warrant separation.

Of course, ‘digital gaming culture’ does not exist in a vacuum and thus incorporates elements from numerous other cultures. Interactive digital media inherently draw elements from real-world, physical mediums. Video games specifically tend to inherit conventions from older media, such as board games: human opponents, ‘avatars’ or game-pieces, and rule or scoring systems are examples of such.<sup>54</sup> These conventions are automated and digitized, yet they hold true to real-world concepts. A car in a ‘realistic’ video game will function somewhat similarly to a real car, just as physical locations will typically emulate those of the

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<sup>51</sup> Murray, Janet H. *Toward a Cultural Theory of Gaming: Digital Games and the Co-Evolution of Media, Mind, and Culture*. (*Popular Communication* 4, no. 3 2006), 185-202.

<sup>52</sup> Shaw, Adrienne. *What Is Video Game Culture? Cultural Studies and Game Studies*. (*Games and Culture* 5, no. 4, May 7, 2010), 14.

<sup>53</sup> Shaw, *What Is Video Game Culture?*, 15.

<sup>54</sup> Murray, Janet H. *Toward a Cultural Theory of Gaming: Digital Games and the Co-Evolution of Media, Mind, and Culture*. (*Popular Communication* 4, no. 3 2006), 185-202.

real-world in some capacity. An avatar can be expected to represent a character, just as scoring systems can be expected to function in a somewhat anticipated manner. As a result, video games reproduce behavioral patterns associated with real-world gaming.<sup>55</sup> These patterns be elements of a greater ‘gaming culture’ wherein both video games and ‘traditional’ games are both parts. This is significant as it represents the ways in which cultures share with one-another; while World of Warcraft’s culture might contain elements derived from traditional games, the most significant components are those which set it apart.

It is important to note what distinct elements make up a culture of World of Warcraft. Players of World of Warcraft have their own cultural practices, sharing learned experiences, values, customs, symbols, and artifacts based upon their time spent within the game world. Some of these are shared among MMORPGs, such as a dedication to leveling-up and growing wealthy or more powerful; others are specific to World of Warcraft. Interviews were useful in learning more about the things which might constitute a culture within World of Warcraft. Dedicated player “Svanwhit”, when posed with the question, “What first comes to mind when one mentions World of Warcraft culture?”, answered: “Barrens Chat!”. Barrens chat is a well-known reference in the game, The Barrens being an in-game region which became famous for serving as a point where absurd conversations regularly took place among numerous players. In recent years this location’s purpose has largely changed, yet players continue to actively discuss its lore. This is an example of how knowledge is shared and passed down among players. It is common for any long-term World of Warcraft player to understand what ‘Barrens Chat’ is, regardless of whether they took part in it.

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<sup>55</sup>Idib., 190.

This sharing of knowledge is not isolated to Barrens Chat. Players share symbolic communication, which includes everything from visual symbols to shorthand phrases or slang. These forms of symbolic communication emphasize action and verbalization, as well as ritual and imagery, while having shared understandings within a cultural group.<sup>56</sup> Players of World of Warcraft encounter symbolic communication at every turn, with the symbols of the Horde and Alliance being a prominent case. In the game, these symbols are frequently seen in every possible zone. They serve as indicators of which settlements and bases are hostile or safe to enter, as well as which factions other players represent. The symbolic communication from these images is not inherently gameplay-centric- players might also associate the Horde emblem with pride or villainy, victory or fear. The same could be said for the Alliance's emblem, or that of any faction for that matter. The context will vary, yet these symbols have distinct meanings among the game's players which would not exist outside of the community.

Due to World of Warcraft's nature as a virtual world, the passing knowledge and the sharing of culture is largely done through the internet. Characters share culture in-game, although message boards and similar websites serve as other means through which knowledge is shared. Message boards such as the Official World of Warcraft Forums, MMO-Champion, and the World of Warcraft Subreddit are perhaps the largest sources of external communication among players. The relatively recent 'Discord' software is also a major site of communication, where users can freely create discussion boards for their friends or larger communities. Discord also allows users to communicate through voice-chat, commonly used by Guilds to coordinate while playing the game. Players communicate their unique

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<sup>56</sup> Des-Chene, Mary. *Encyclopedia of Cultural Anthropology*. (New York: Holt, 1996), Chapter: Symbolic Anthropology.

experiences in forums with others whom they might never interact with otherwise due to region, server, or faction differences in-game. This creates a greater discussion which builds up a culture unrestricted by in-game divisions and is thus crucial to World of Warcraft culture. Players need not actively engage in forum discussions; their use is a crucial part of the game's experience, even if a player is only a passive observer.

Culture is a difficult concept to singularly define, despite being a pervasive component of human life. It is necessary to understand this concept in the context of ethnography, as such studies traditionally focus on specific cultures. World of Warcraft's culture is distinct from those of other video games, containing its own distinct symbolic communication and values. Ethnography is therefore possible and a valuable tool in discerning concepts of place in World of Warcraft.

### **Ethnography in Virtual Environments:**

For many in contemporary society, virtual environments make up a significant part of the human experience. We encounter them constantly, whether we are on our phones, on computers, or playing video games. We are at a unique point in time where, according to Boellstorff et al., we must consider the meaning of the phrase, "in this world".<sup>57</sup> Virtual environments are similar to those of the real world, yet offer the possibility of being infinitely different. Creativity is paramount above all else, a true cornerstone of the concept of a virtual world; one's imagination is the limit regarding virtual environments. The sensory interactions one has with a virtual environment are decided by its developers, along with the standard interactions users have with said spaces. Social interactions are moderated by developers, but

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<sup>57</sup> Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, Taylor, and Marcus. *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds*, 50-80.

not controlled; these are reliant upon the actions of end-users. These interactions can vary widely, from performance to ritual and countless others; the ways in which virtual spaces are used are essentially boundless. These complex interactions between developers, users, and the spaces themselves create unique environments which can be both heavily moderated and more free than those of the real-world. While real-world environments can be constructed with creativity in mind, there is nowhere near the amount of inexhaustible freedom of conception and innovation. Video games, as interactive virtual environments, are a result of this freedom of expression.

Steven Johnson states, “I worry about the experiential gap between people who have immersed themselves in games, and people who have only heard secondhand reports, because the gap makes it difficult to discuss the meaning of games in a coherent way”.<sup>58</sup> While research surrounding online video games has been relatively common in recent years, it is still a somewhat recent field of study. According to Johnson, it is difficult for one to truly understand video games without taking part in them within some capacity. While it is certainly possible to study those who play video games without taking part oneself, it is through experience that it is possible to gain personal insight into the questions at hand. It is in this way that ethnography serves as a crucial tool of those who seek to better understand online video games through experience.

Ethnography in virtual environments can take a similar shape to those in the real world. Boellstorff et al.’s *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds: A Handbook of Method* describes in detail the methods through which one can conduct a thorough virtual ethnography. In the first chapter, he writes:

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<sup>58</sup> Johnson, Steven. *Everything Bad Is Good for You: How Popular Culture Is Making Us Smarter*. (London: Penguin, 2006), 25.

As ethnographers, what interests us about virtual worlds is not what is extraordinary about them, but what is ordinary. We are intrigued not only by the individuals in a group, but by the sum of the parts. We aim to study virtual worlds as valid venues for cultural practice, seeking to understand both how they resemble and how they differ from other forms of culture. We do this by immersing our embodied selves within the cultures of interest, even when that embodiment is in the form of an avatar, the representation of self in these spaces.<sup>59</sup>

A common element between physical and virtual ethnographies is the requirement of a 'fieldsite'. As an example, the 'gentleman scholars' of antiquated anthropological studies typically used villages as their fieldsites. This raises an important question: what is a fieldsite in the context of the digital world? Bigras suggests that current understandings of fieldsites are largely rooted in geographic thought and, as a result, have been largely delegated to physical spaces.<sup>60</sup> Boellstorff et al. defy fieldsites being geographic in nature, instead noting that they are an assemblage of places, artifacts, actors, and practices that can be virtual, physical, or anything in-between.<sup>61</sup> As a result, it is not inherently the physical location of a fieldsite that is most important, but instead its relevance to a study through what can be found within. Another important distinction when entering an ethnographic study is whether one's research will be multi-sited or single-sited, as these characteristics define an ethnographic study at its core.

A digital single-sited ethnography might focus exclusively on a single game. All research in this study would be conducted online, intentionally avoiding real-world observation and data collection. This is not to suggest that the real-world is not considered within a single-site digital ethnography; parallels may still be drawn between the physical

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<sup>59</sup> Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, Taylor, and Marcus. *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds*, 50-80.

<sup>60</sup> Bigras, Erik. *What Is a Field Site? Field Ontology of Distributed Ethnography*. (York, 2012).

<sup>61</sup> Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, Taylor, and Marcus. *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds*, 50-80.



and virtual, albeit data collection primarily comes from virtual interactions had in a specific location. Multi-sited studies in virtual environments can be considerably more broad, tying together information from multiple websites, video games, and even real-world data collection. In her extensive ethnography of the video game, “Uru: Ages Beyond Myst”, Celia Pearce conducted a multi-sited ethnography in the most literal of terms. When most players abandoned the aforementioned game for another, she followed them to the latter. Pearce discovered a forum which served as the primary source of communication among players of “There.com”, the game to which her subjects migrated. When a real-world convention was held by the game’s creators, she followed the players to meet them in person. Pearce, by following her subjects across multiple virtual worlds and the real world, defined the culture of Uru players as being transcendental to a single environment; instead, it was through the study of multiple fieldsites that she was able to better answer her research questions.<sup>62</sup> Such studies have inspired Pearce to pursue the topic of inter-game migration across multiple virtual environments, as well as how individuals develop their unique identities across these virtual worlds.<sup>63</sup>

These inter-game relationships provide a unique challenge for the virtual ethnographer who seeks to conduct multi-sited research. Users are not bound to a single fieldsite, instead migrating between games, forums, and real-world meeting places. This is true even when a single digital environment is the primary focus of research; other sites can serve to provide supplementary data. Forums, persistent message boards which serve as meeting grounds wherein text-based communication takes place, are commonly seen within

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<sup>62</sup> Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, Taylor, and Marcus. *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds*, 50-80.

<sup>63</sup> Pearce, Celia. *Productive Play: Game Culture From the Bottom Up*. (University of California, Irvine, *Games and Culture* 1, no. 1 2006) 17-24.

video game communities. Prominent World of Warcraft communities include Reddit, MMO-Champion, WoWhead, and the official World of Warcraft forums. Players interact on these forums regularly to discuss their characters, the game itself, other video games, and even real-world or personal occurrences. These serve as a means through which players can meet one-another and build a stronger community; researchers might also utilize forums as additional fieldsites in virtual ethnography.

In a discussion of their World of Warcraft ethnography, Nardi stresses, “We attend to important events but also slavishly observe the everyday, the mundane, the boring (although it is not boring to us). People, objects, and events that a journalist would pass over as lacking newsworthiness we find deeply interesting.”<sup>64</sup> This is a key difference between the works of a journalist who immerses themselves in a culture and an ethnographer; ethnographers study and emphasize the mundane as well as the extraordinary, building more complete images of target cultures. Williams et al.’s study of World of Warcraft focused specifically on guilds, a primary form of community within the game.<sup>65</sup> Guilds provide a system through which players can interact with other like-minded users in tight-knit communities, socializing and participating in gameplay with one another. Each character is bound to a single guild at any given time, although one can leave and join another whenever they feel compelled to. These are a primary form of socialization in World of Warcraft. Once a player joins a guild, it can become second-nature to speak and interact with them; these are a major part of the World of Warcraft gameplay experience, yet are seemingly less significant than a new raid, expansion, or zone. In an ethnography of World of Warcraft wherein a researcher was in a guild,

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<sup>64</sup> Nardi, Bonnie A. *My Life as a Night Elf Priest: An Anthropological Account of World of Warcraft* (2009), 29.

<sup>65</sup> Williams, Dmitri, Nicolas Ducheneaut, Li Xiong, Yuanyuan Zhang, Nick Yee, and Eric Nickell. "From Tree House to Barracks." *Games and Culture* 1, no. 4 (2006): 338-61. doi:10.1177/1555412006292616.

discussion of said guild would surely be prevalent. These are the sort of mundane-yet-pervasive aspects of culture which are emphasized by ethnographers. In Nardi's ethnography of World of Warcraft, the author joined multiple guilds which were thoroughly described and discussed throughout the work.<sup>66</sup>

The question remains of how a virtual ethnography is actually undertaken. A field site, or multiple fieldsites, are chosen after a research question is formulated. Once in a fieldsite, the methods utilized by researchers will vary based upon personal biases and the fieldsite in question. For this research, participant-observation is a primary means through which I seek to better understand World of Warcraft players' perception of place; interviewing, surveying, and participating in game activities are also primary means of data collection. In an ethnography of an online video game, fieldwork typically consists of actually playing the game in question. Whether the ethnographer is taking part in participant-observation or simply playing a game, recording interactions with the game and world is crucial to one's research. Conversations are extremely important data, as are screenshots and fieldnotes. Some ethnographers seek to take a passive approach, attempting to minimize their impact on the virtual world they have chosen to study.<sup>67</sup> Others find actively taking part in a world a better means through which to understand it, striking a balance between observation and interaction. A goal in fieldwork wherein one actively takes part in a virtual world is to attempt to match other users' experiences as closely as possible. For example, 'addons' are user-created modifications in World of Warcraft which provide utility to players which

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<sup>66</sup> Nardi, *My Life as a Night Elf Priest*, 30.

<sup>67</sup> Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, Taylor, and Marcus. *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds*, 71.

would otherwise not be available; certain addons are used very commonly within the game and thus become a part of the normal user experience.

Ethnography is unique in its capability of discerning both the ordinary and extraordinary aspects of life within a targeted culture. Research questions which involve such elements of culture are within the grasp of ethnographers, particularly when they involve topics which the average member might not be conscious of. Perceptions of place within virtual worlds are more easily understood by a researcher when they immerse themselves in their chosen world, experiencing these places first-hand and interacting with regular users. This is ultimately why ethnography was chosen as the primary means of examination- it appears as though there is no better way to study a virtual world than to immerse oneself in it.

## Chapter 4: Surveying Place

To better understand how World of Warcraft players establish a sense of place, surveys were drafted and distributed within the community. While ethnography served as a method through which players were directly contacted in-game, surveys were meant to gather insight from players outside of the game. World of Warcraft discussion boards, or forums, were the primary sites of distribution. The most affluent source of data was Reddit, a website wherein individual forums, or ‘subreddits’, are created for specific topics by community members<sup>68</sup>. The two subreddits contacted in this research were the World of Warcraft subreddit and another known as ‘SampleSize’, dedicated to surveys in particular. The World of Warcraft subreddit, “/r/wow”, has over 850,000 active users; “/r/SampleSize” has 75,000 at the time of writing. The World of Warcraft subreddit in particular is a hub of activity wherein players frequently meet to discuss the game and its world.

Two surveys were drafted through the “Google Forms” tool, free software which allows users to develop and disperse surveys efficiently through the internet<sup>69</sup>. This tool was chosen due to its ease of use as well as its numerous visualization options. Data acquired through a survey is easily converted to a spreadsheet, while relevant graphs and charts are automatically drafted by Google Forms. These features facilitate quality of life while making distribution and analysis far simpler than written or emailed surveys.

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<sup>68</sup> [www.reddit.com](http://www.reddit.com). The boards in question were [www.reddit.com/r/wow](http://www.reddit.com/r/wow) and [www.reddit.com/r/SampleSize](http://www.reddit.com/r/SampleSize). The former is dedicated to World of Warcraft discussions while the latter is dedicated towards surveys in particular.

<sup>69</sup> Google Forms can be found at <https://docs.google.com/forms/>.

The first survey, titled, “Online Gamer Demographic Survey”, was drafted in an attempt to better understand the audience of my research. This survey utilized voluntary sampling, as respondents had to intentionally enter the linked Google Form and respond. The sample was entirely random within the population of the chosen subreddits; it was not sent to specific individuals within the community. To find volunteers, the survey was linked within a discussion created specifically for this topic. Those who elected to take this survey were greeted with text which assured them they need not leave their names, and that by taking said survey they were consenting to the use of their responses in academic research. Table 1 contains the questions which were given to surveyees.

These questions were constructed with the goal of determining a rough idea of who plays online video games as a whole, as well as those who were visiting the aforementioned forums. There were ultimately 174 individual responses to this survey, and surveyees were completely anonymous aside from those who provided an email address in question eleven. It is important to note that the responses presented herein present a limited image of those who play online video games; it is but a small sample, intended to describe those who are taking part in the mentioned discussion boards.

Table 1. Demographic Survey

Demographic Survey	
Survey Questions	
1	What is your current age?
2	Which option best matches your current occupation?
3	What is your highest level of education?
4	What gender do you currently identify as?
5	Do you currently live in the United States of America?
6	If you answered yes to the last question, what state do you live in?
7	If you answered no to living in the USA, what country do you live in?
8	What is your (individual) estimated yearly income?
9	What is your most played/favorite online game?
10	What is your favorite genre of online game?
11	Would you be willing to submit to a short interview via email or Skype?

The mean age of surveyed individuals was 24.38, the median 23; the oldest respondent was 56 while the youngest was 14. The most common profession was student, of which there were 74. For 50% of surveyees, High School was the highest level of education achieved; 23.6% held Bachelor's Degrees, 13.6% earned Associate's Degrees, 6.4% had Masters Degrees, 4.6% dropped out of High School, and 1.7% held PhDs. Respondents overwhelmingly identified as male, with only 12.1% identifying as female and 2.3% stating that they are non-binary. Locations were heavily varied, with 51.7% residing within the United States of America and 48.3% living elsewhere. The most common average income was found to be between \$0 and \$25,000, as seen in Figure 2. While this data alone does not necessarily provide direct insight into how place is developed in virtual environments, it does provide information regarding who takes part in these discussion boards. Nick Yee, a

researcher at Stanford University, conducted a similar demographic analysis of MMORPG players in 2006 wherein he found the median age of players to be 26.57.<sup>70</sup>

What is your (individual) estimated yearly income? (173 responses)

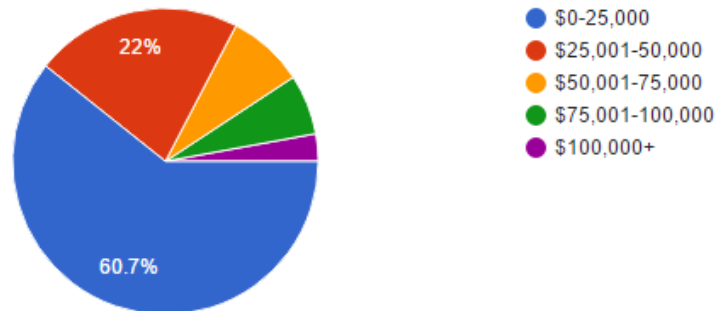


Fig. 2. Average income of surveyees in Survey 1.

The second survey centers around locations in World of Warcraft. With the numerous zones which exist across Azeroth, players have varying opinions regarding each location. Understanding how players feel about different spaces provides some insight into how places are established in World of Warcraft, along with why; survey answers are significantly less detailed than those which come from interviews and ethnography, however, they provide a broader image of the game's world through players' eyes. This survey was distributed on the same platforms as the last, albeit the questions focus specifically on World of Warcraft and thus those who accepted were expected to have played the game in the past. Discord was also

<sup>70</sup> Yee, Nick. *The Demographics, Motivations, and Derived Experiences of Users of Massively Multi-User Online Graphical Environments*. (*Presence: Teleoperators and Virtual Environments* 15, no. 3, 2006), 309-29.



a site where the survey was distributed, specifically targeting World of Warcraft-themed Discord servers. Table 2 shows the questions presented to surveyees.

Table 2. World of Warcraft Zones Survey

World of Warcraft Zones Survey	
Survey Questions	
1	What is your favorite zone/location in all of World of Warcraft?
2	What is your least favorite zone/location in all of World of Warcraft?
3	What sort of location would you say that you live in, in real life?
4	What would you say the climate that you live in, in real life, is like? Check all that apply.
5	From the following choices, which would you say is your favorite "type" of zone/location in World of Warcraft?
6	Do you actively play World of Warcraft?

54 individuals responded to this survey, 64.8% of whom currently play the game and 35.2% which do not, but did so in the past. Questions three and four were asked to determine whether or not there was a correlation between where players live and what their preferred zones were in-game. 46.3% of surveyees live in sub-urban areas, 33.3% live in urban environments, and 20.4% have rural homes. 61.1% of respondents claim to live in moderate locations, with temperatures which are typically neither hot nor cold. Despite this, 31.5% state that ‘It is often hot outside’ and 38.9% pose that ‘It is often cold outside’. This is due to their ability to choose multiple options in this question, with many seemingly answering based upon seasonal changes. 51.9% of surveyees state that they live in forested regions, 38.9% claim to see farms with regularity, and 37% live in areas in which snow is common. Hills are also common, with 46.3% seeing them in their region; the rarest form of terrain among respondents’ locations are deserts, at only 7.4%. These responses do fall in line with

the answers to question five, as 40.7% of respondents state that forested regions are their favorite in World of Warcraft. Deserts were the least enjoyed regions in Azeroth, with only one person claiming to prefer them over all others. Mountainous and ‘Dark or Decayed’ regions are tied for second most prevalent answer, with the latter referring to zones which are filled with dead trees, undead, and other such phenomena. While the sample is relatively small, these answers do appear to match up with the results of questions three and four.

From the following choices, which would you say is your favorite "type" of zone/location in World of Warcraft?

(54 responses)

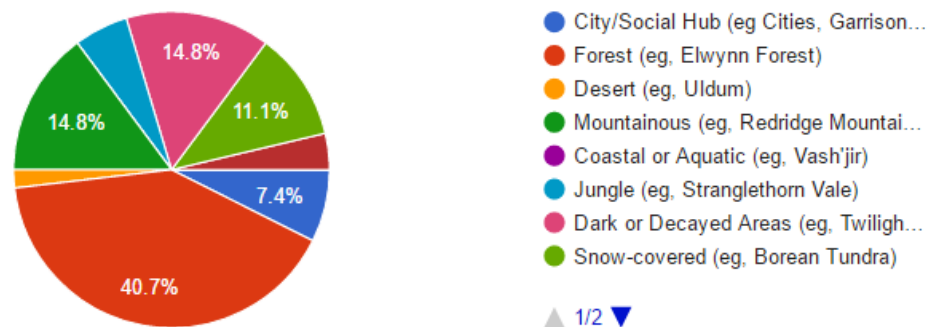


Fig. 3. The results of Question 5. Note that the most popular response was “Forest”.

Questions one and two relate directly to which in-game locations players of World of Warcraft prefer. These questions were short-answer, allowing for personal responses which were uninfluenced by the order of options as in a multiple-choice format. Seven of the 54 surveyees selected Grizzly Hills as their favorite zone in the game; the next highest choice was Nagrand, with three individuals choosing it. Thousand Needles, Teldrassil, Stormwind, Redridge Mountains, Karazhan, and Jade Forest each had two respondents choose them as their favorite zone.

To understand the significance of these zones being chosen the most frequently, it is important to explain what they are. Grizzly Hills is somewhat of a caricature of Alaskan forests, densely packed with pines with fresh snow peppering the ground. Nagrand is found on the shattered alien world referred to as Outland, a field of endless green dotted with floating islands. Thousand Needles is a land where flat-topped spires erupt from the ground as far as the eye can see. Teldrassil is the World Tree, now reduced to ashes, discussed earlier. Stormwind is the capital city of the Alliance, a bustling metropolis in the game's world. The Redridge Mountains are a land of rolling hills and rounded, rocky mountains which are dotted with small forests and settlements. Karazhan is actually an in-game raid, a 'harder' dungeon which takes place in a tower filled with magical paraphernalia. Jade Forest is inspired by Chinese mythology, a forest filled with steep mountains and dynastic Chinese architecture. These seem to follow a trend of either being aesthetically pleasing or having player or world-based significance, such as Stormwind and Karazhan. As a capital city, Stormwind is a location where many players have spent a great deal of time as they shop, socialize, or accept quests; Karazhan is a popular raid from the past, famous for its aesthetic and a notorious 'chess match' that requires players to beat the computer in a game of chess in order to proceed.

Question two asks the opposite of surveyees: what their least favorite zone is. "Silithus" was overwhelmingly the least popular location, selected by seven individuals. Seven respondents also chose "Vashj'ir" as their least favorite zone. "Desolace" and "Pandaria", an entire in-game continent, were tied for the second position with four votes each. These results were interesting as they portray another side of the game's zones. Silithus, prior to recent changes, is a land of desert. Massive insects rule Silithus, their hives

spiraling into the sky. It is a dark, desolate place which is not only unwelcoming, but often avoided by players when possible. A recent update had a giant sword pierce the planet in this zone, providing a new storyline and relevant content which has brought players back out of necessity; this survey was taken prior to the update, thus making the altered landscape irrelevant to this discussion.

Vashj'ir is about as dissimilar from Silithus as possible. It is an underwater realm, deep beneath the ocean of Azeroth, dotted with ancient Naga structures and vibrant coral formations. Vashj'ir is dissimilar from a number of the zones which were disliked by surveyees in that it is not traditionally visually unappealing or foreboding, instead being picturesque and filled with life. Instead, players seem to dislike it due to its general gameplay. As an underwater zone, players travel differently than they would on land, dramatically altering combat and exploration. Characters taking part in melee combat might struggle in particular, as reaching their foes requires extended effort from the typical environment due to the regular presence of a 'Z' axis. Vashj'ir is not detested due to latent inhospitality or less-than ideal aesthetics, with players instead disliking it due to the altered gameplay mechanics.

Desolace is similar to Silithus in that it is inhospitable and somewhat barren. The final resting place of countless Kodo, horned creatures used as mounts by the Horde, it is a vast land covered in ash and skeletal remains. It is a constant battleground, home to violence and constant reminders of death. It was updated during the Cataclysm expansion, as was Silithus, to make it more appealing; it seems that negative memories of this space are potent in the minds of surveyees. Pandaria is an entire continent, the primary source of storylines and quests throughout the "Mists of Pandaria" expansion. The general dislike of this zone

seems similar in nature to that of Vashj'ir; Pandaria is a vast land, covered in varying environments which include lush forests and Dynastic Chinese architecture. In this way it is quite dissimilar from the other regions disliked by surveyees, it has somewhat of a reputation which could have resulted in this outcome. Mists of Pandaria followed the “Wrath of the Lich King” and “Cataclysm” expansions, both of which had somewhat grim storylines which resulted from mass death, undead, and the destruction of the world. Mists of Pandaria was largely mocked prior to release, as many fans received the initial reveal poorly. The expansion takes place on Pandaria, a ‘continent’ which consists of eight major zones resting on the back of a massive turtle<sup>71</sup>. The Pandaren race was added in this expansion, a species of bipedal panda-like creatures with an affinity for martial arts, as well as the fist-fighting “Monk” class. While some players loved this idea, others were put-off, suggesting that it was a cloning successful movies of the time which featured pandas fighting with kung-fu. Others disliked the aesthetic of this expansion, arguing that it was too colorful or cartoon-like to fit with the rest of the game’s world. Instead of dealing with the undead and world-shattering dragons, it featured pandas on the back of a turtle. It seems that, despite its lush locales and typical gameplay, Pandaria is disliked due to the wider perception of it in the past.

These data offer different takes on how players perceive zones in World of Warcraft. While players tend to judge spaces based upon their aesthetic qualities, gameplay and outside-perceptions are far from negligible and can make an otherwise interesting, attractive space one of the most hated in all of Azeroth. These survey results will become important when utilized in ethnographic research, providing a base upon which further concepts are bred. The most and least-popular zones are of particular importance, as they offer insight into

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<sup>71</sup> A list of major zones found in Mists of Pandaria can be found at: <https://www.wowhead.com/news=206753/mists-of-pandaria-zones-overview>.

what actually matters to World of Warcraft players in regard to virtual places. The preferences of one player will not perfectly match all others, however, the knowledge that players do not only utilize aesthetics or quests to build their perceptions of in-game places is crucial moving forward.

## **Chapter 5: Ethnography in Azeroth**

The world of Azeroth is vast, filled with countless stories forged invariably by the developers and those who play the game. To step into the eyes of a citizen in this world, a brief narrative portraying a major event in this universe might prove advantageous. The following thick description depicts a scene which current players of World of Warcraft are intimately familiar with. While it is impossible to portray the act of playing the video game through words alone, this narrative intends to offer insight into the spaces and emotions involved.

### **Eyes on Azeroth: A Narrative Through the Eyes of a Guard**

In the northern ocean of the continent Kalimdor is the World Tree Teldrassil, a titanic structure large enough to house an entire country within its branches. The soul of the world cycles through this great tree, a monument to the planet's strength and resilience. Teldrassil, "Crown of the Earth" in native tongue, is the home of the Night Elves: a tall, lithe, violet-skinned people renowned for their connection to nature. Carved from the World Tree's bark and arms is the nation of Darnassus, serving as a stronghold for the Alliance in Kalimdor. Ruled by the Horde, the Alliance's eternal rivals, Kalimdor is one of the two largest continents on the planet Azeroth. While the two factions have been at war many times in the past, they recently struck a tenuous treaty of peace to combat a larger threat to the planet itself.

The light of the sun is obscured here, blocked by enormous branches and an ocean of leaves. The soft amber glow of lanterns is all that illuminates Darnassus, warm and welcoming. Buildings carved from the tree itself line roughly-hewn streets, wildflowers blooming where sidewalks might otherwise be. In a marketplace, the laughter of children can be heard as they chase down a hare. Guards, mounted on white tigers, patrol the district. Their spears crackle with the lavender glow of magical energy, a warning to any who might test their might. The smell of warm cinnamon buns drifts through the square from a busy street vendor, the enticing scent drawing in customers by the droves. The singing of songbirds provides the background music to an ordinary day on the World Tree, until the songs suddenly cease. Today marks the War of the Thorns, a moment in history that will forever live in infamy.

A vicious warcry echoes through the market square, sending chills down the spines of those within. The clash of metal-against-metal sings throughout Darnassus, its origin just outside of the city gates. Without hesitation, the nearby guards rush towards the tree's base to meet their comrades. The people will be safe; there are more pressing matters to attend to. Crashing through a seemingly endless sea of undergrowth and wildlife, the guards arrive upon an all-too familiar scene. An intensely violent battle has begun. On one side, a crimson banner held aloft with bones and horns can be seen. On the side of the guards, a cerulean flag adorned with a lion's head oversees an army of Night Elves struggling against their attackers. Undead, flesh dripping from bone, shred through the city's defences. Massive, tusked men and women with viridian skin cleave the guards' brothers and sisters in twain with axes the size of men. The entire Horde has arrived- lifeless Forsaken, green-skinned Orcs, Tauren, Trolls, Blood Elves, Goblins, and Pandaren alike assault Teldrassil. Night Elf mages keep the



opposing forces at bay, blasting their foes with arcane energy. In a nearby clearing is a winged Night Elf, antlers stained with blood, standing firm; Malfurion Stormrage, a hero amongst his people, defies those who would defile his city. Ballistae bolts crash nearby, sending dozens of Darnassian soldiers soaring through the air. The screams of the injured and dying ring out across the battlefield, drowned out by the clash of steel and thunder of marching troops. Lifeless bodies litter a once beautiful meadow, its flowers crushed and its streams running red with blood.

As the guards take in this scene, an overwhelming stillness fills the air. Malfurion Stormrage, First of the Druids, Arch-Druid of the Cenarion Circle, hero to all Night Elves, has been struck down from behind by an axe. The owner of the axe, an enormous plate-wearing Orc, falls to his knees; he sees the dishonor in this action, the product of intense emotion in the heat of the moment. Severely wounded, Malfurion collapses to the ground. Seeing him fall, a Night Elf woman in white garments appears beside of the fallen hero. Tyrande Whisperwind, Malfurion's wife and High Priestess of the moon goddess Elune, weeps for her husband. She shoots a cursory, hate-filled glance at the Orc who cut him down before teleporting away. She will not see her beloved die on this day.

The Horde have won. The Night Elves' heroes have died or retreated, their comrades' bodies littering a blood-stained battlefield. An ashen-skinned woman steps forward from the Horde's ranks. She is Sylvanas Windrunner, Warchief of the Horde. Her eyes glow a dull red beneath her silver hair, whipping across her face in the wind. She wipes boots clean of blood, marching forward towards the few surviving Night Elves. The guards watch as she kneels to speak with their dying comrades, their conversation inaudible by the moans of the fallen. Thick, black smoke chokes the battlefield, obscuring their view. The War of the Thorns

draws to a close, a decisive loss for the Night Elves and the Alliance. Teldrassil, their home, will be occupied for years to come by the Horde; they and their children will soon be prisoners and slaves to a foreign people.

A voice shrieks in the distance. Confusion clearly rises amongst the enemy's troops- what was their order? The command is repeated, echoing across the tree's base. The Horde's leader turns to face her troops. "Burn it." Her order is met with hesitation, but the guards soon observe its consequences. Seemingly countless catapults launch flaming projectiles upwards, directly towards the branches of Teldrassil. One guard lets out a shriek, tears streaming from their eyes- surely this is a dream. They do not wake, instead taking in the most horrible sight imaginable. A great conflagration erupts from within, engulfing the World Tree in mere seconds. All that can be heard are the cries of civilians, innocent men, women, and children, piercing the crackling of fire as they are burned alive. There is nowhere to which they can escape; they are caught off guard in their bustling markets, their homes, their gardens. This was their haven, a place of safety and comfort. Some members of the Horde cry out at the sight, Druids and Shamans bursting to tears at the crying of a dying planet. This is, to many present, the most evil act imaginable. Teldrassil burns to ashes, the magnificent nation of Darnassus and its citizens within. A piece of the world dies on this day, its stalwart custodians alongside it.



Fig. 4: “The Burning of Teldrassil”. Created by Wowpedia. From Wowpedia.com.

<https://wow.gamepedia.com/Teldrassil><sup>72</sup>

### **Ethnography**

The ethnographic portion of this research took place intermittently between November of 2016 and November of 2018. Numerous updates to World of Warcraft were put in place within this timeframe, adding new content to the game as well as new locations. Individuals with whom I regularly interacted frequently came and went as well. When this ethnographic research first began, World of Warcraft’s most current expansion was “Legion”, and at the time of writing the most recent is called “Battle for Azeroth”. Expansions, serving as major updates, radically change the available content within the game. This is important to note, as Azeroth is always in flux, each year bringing new places

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<sup>72</sup>Wowpedia, “Teldrassil.” Wowpedia.com. <https://wow.gamepedia.com/Teldrassil>.

to explore and interact with. Following Boellstorff et al., the ordinary must be sought in order to truly understand a virtual world.<sup>73</sup> The most ordinary component of this virtual world is the gameplay within- the ways through which players interact with the game's world. World of Warcraft is a complex game which consists of numerous systems which work in unison. Players constantly work within the constraints of these systems; they are an integral part of the game and its world which must be understood in order to discern its more clandestine natures.

### **Dividing the Player-Base**

It is necessary to point out how the subset of users one will interact with through regular gameplay in World of Warcraft is defined. Users of World of Warcraft are divided in-game through a number of methods, leaving only a small percentage of the total player base with whom one can interact with at any given time. This is significant as it does skew acquired data, limiting the individuals whom ethnographers may interact with regularly.

Players are first divided by real-world location through virtual 'regions'<sup>74</sup>. Regions consist of large clusters of individual servers which divide, for example, players in the United States from playing with players from Europe, China, or Oceania. These regional versions of the game exist for most of the Earth, their goal to prevent network connectivity issues among players who are from different geographic regions. The entirety of this research took place on the United States of America's regional servers. These regions are further divided into 'data centers', massive clusters of computers which manage the individual realms upon which

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<sup>73</sup> Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, Taylor, and Marcus. *Ethnography and Virtual Worlds*, 50-80.

<sup>74</sup> See [wow.gamepedia.com](http://wow.gamepedia.com) for more information on the game's numerous regions.

users actually play the game. ‘Realms’ are a smaller yet more intimate form of division among players. Prior to creating an avatar to represent themselves, users must select a ‘realm’ based upon conditions such as real-world location and preferred gameplay-type. Realms are the only form of division which players are able to select, as regions are based upon one’s real-world location and data centers are based entirely upon which realm is chosen. Traditionally, players could not communicate openly in the world with those on other realms; the game now features ‘cross-realm zones’, a feature which allows interaction between the avatars of multiple realms at any given time. In fact, players can now play with a friend from any realm within their region for most content. This feature has reversed the former emphasis on realms as isolated groups of players, opening the game up considerably by way of open communication.

When creating an avatar, players must choose a faction; the Horde and Alliance are in a constant state of war, forcing players to choose a side based upon their avatar’s race. Players are unable to communicate with avatars of the opposite faction in-game without already being friends, and thus it is a serious form of division within a realm. The Horde features the Orcs, Undead, Trolls, Tauren, Blood Elves, and Goblins as playable races. The Alliance feature Humans, Dwarves, Night Elves, Gnomes, Draenei, and Worgen. Pandaren, humanoid pandas, are initially neutral and can thus be chosen by either faction; despite this, they are still locked into a single faction of the player’s choice early in the game. Players must then choose a class and customize their appearance; the available classes at the time of writing are Warrior, Rogue, Hunter, Shaman, Priest, Monk, Druid, Mage, Warlock, Paladin, Death Knight, and Demon Hunter<sup>75</sup>. Each class experiences the game differently from the

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<sup>75</sup> Descriptions of classes can be found at <https://worldofwarcraft.com/en-us/game/classes>.

rest and serve as perhaps the primary defining characteristic of an avatar. These many divisions are crucial to any ethnographic research within World of Warcraft, as they heavily determine which subset of players one will interact with in-game at any given time.

For this study, I primarily played as two separate characters. Alboreo is a Blood Elf Death Knight on the realm 'Thrall', a member of the Horde faction. Bordeaux is a Draenei Shaman on the 'Proudmoore' realm, a member of the Alliance. Both characters are in the United States region of servers. Creating characters on two separate realms across both factions allowed me to interact with more players than if I had been locked into a single group. There are two further mechanisms through which World of Warcraft avatars, also referred to as 'characters', are divided: their 'level' and the 'item level' of their gear.

As one plays the game, their active character will gain levels by completing various content. The primary content for 'leveling up' includes completing quests, defeating foes, gathering materials and crafting them into usable objects, completing dungeons, and fighting other characters. As characters level up, new content becomes available to them. As an example, a level one Human will typically spend their time in a zone called 'Elwynn Woods', wherein the available quests and enemies are of an appropriate level for them to access. If this character were to go to a higher level zone, such as 'Stranglethorn Vale', they would struggle to accomplish anything at all without being slain. Death in World of Warcraft is only a small setback, as characters' spirits are sent to an angelic 'Spirit Healer' who can revive them for a nominal fee. The alternative to this action is to instead run back to their corpse, which is often not far. Despite this, it would be difficult to actually make progress in a zone if one were to die continuously; instead, players typically keep characters in somewhat level-appropriate zones. Upon leveling up, characters gain access to new abilities,

spells, gear, quests, zones, and dungeons. These mechanics fundamentally alter the way that characters function over time. Leveling also divides characters from a gameplay standpoint, physically separating them between zones and quest series. The maximum achievable level increases with the release of each expansion, providing incentive for players to interact with newly introduced content and locations. The current maximum level is 120 as of the release of World of Warcraft's newest expansion.

The other fundamental method through which characters are divided is through 'item level'. Players naturally acquire new weapons and armor for their characters as they progress through the game, but once a character is at the maximum level this becomes the primary means of progression. Gameplay at this 'end-game' revolves around acquiring new weapons and armor; as one completes relevant end-game content, more powerful gear is found. Multiplayer 'Dungeons', 'Raids', and 'Player-Versus-Player' content are perhaps the most profound methods through which to acquire new equipment. When a character can no longer level-up, they will typically begin taking part in these gameplay systems as their primary means of progression. Some players will focus on Dungeons and Raids, wherein they and their comrades combat enemies controlled by the computer in an instanced area to acquire better gear. Others will turn to Player-Versus-Player content, battling other players in objective-based Battlegrounds and to the death in Arenas. Some players will take part in all of these gameplay systems, while others will focus on only one. Regardless of which they pursue, a primary goal is typically to increase their characters' item levels. There is another subset of players who will do none of the above, instead continuing to do quests throughout the world, fighting their way through old content, creating new characters in order to start-over, or simply engaging in socialization. The importance of item level is the innate division

it provides within the player-base. Characters are ‘locked out’ of content prior to reaching certain item levels and thus indicating that they are physically capable of completing said content; this is most commonly seen with Dungeons and Raids, both multiplayer undertakings in which every player must pull their own weight. For this study, I have taken part in every content archetype available in order to interact with the most players possible. Alboreo, my Blood Elf Death Knight, is of the highest level attainable in the game; his gear is acceptable, capable of allowing him to access any form of relevant content in the game. Bordeaux, my Draenei Shaman, is at a lower level, with appropriate gear for such.

### **Building a Social Network**

As is often the case, I was alone when first entering World of Warcraft. It did not take long to find others with whom to play thanks to the in-game “Dungeon Finder” tool, which groups together players for specific content such as Dungeons and Battlegrounds. The “Party Finder” tool is similarly helpful, allowing users to find like-minded individuals with whom to do anything at all- even socialize. These make it substantially less complicated to find others in-game, even if one enters Azeroth with no acquaintances. While these tools are extremely helpful in regard to finding players to tackle grouped content with, they are not intrinsically designed to help players form lasting relationships. Dungeons are typically quick affairs, with players rushing to complete their task and leaving shortly afterwards, offering little time to communicate on a personal level. There is, however, one feature in World of Warcraft which helps players to form intimate relationships with one another: Guilds.

Guilds in World of Warcraft are player-created social institutions wherein groups of users can connect and form personal bonds. While the game does mechanically provide the



tools through which Guilds are created, players choose all of their details; names, types, purposes, emblems, and members are all unique. Guilds serve many purposes in World of Warcraft. Guilds have a certain type or purpose, such as ‘Social’<sup>76</sup>, ‘PvE’<sup>77</sup>, ‘PvP’<sup>78</sup>, or a combination of these. These provide a vague description for potential members, allowing one to somewhat discern what they are joining prior to doing so. Emblems and names are purely aesthetic, although they might have an impact on who wants to join. A humorous name will attract certain players, while a more serious one might draw a different crowd. Joining a guild is the primary means through which to socialize in World of Warcraft. Whether large or small, they provide an in-game community wherein players can meet one another, take part in the game’s content, or simply communicate with players on the same server.

I was invited to join the “Eminent” guild upon beginning this research thanks to an acquaintance made early-on. Eminent has 30 members, making it a relatively small guild in comparison to many; 1,000 members is the largest possible size. Eminent is a mixed-purpose guild, emphasizing socialization and player-versus-environment content. A significant portion of the socialization experienced throughout this research took place within Eminent. Communication within a guild ignores spatial location, allowing players to send messages which are seen by the entire group. This feature allows for more personal conversations than those which one might experience in the game’s more generalized chat networks, while providing room for larger discussions than one-on-one messages.

Other common forms of inter-player communication in World of Warcraft can be seen in “General Chat” and “Trade Chat”, through which players within the same zone can

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<sup>76</sup> Centered around making friends and socializing.

<sup>77</sup> Based upon forming groups to fight computer-controlled opponents.

<sup>78</sup> These guilds typically focus on fighting other guilds or individual players.

speak freely with one another. The intended use of trade chat is to purchase and advertise in-game items, while general chat is a channel for free-for-all discussion. These are used alongside local chat, a somewhat more realistic form of speech in which only nearby players can hear one another. Local chat could, for example, be used to communicate with nearby characters in a dungeon. Players are also able to manually message one another, ignoring location and realm; this system requires players to have one-another's names in advance, thus making it a more personal means through which to speak. These systems all serve as the backbone of in-game inter-player communication in World of Warcraft, with outside forums and discussion boards acting as additional social platforms.

### **Exploring Azeroth**

Azeroth, the planet upon which World of Warcraft predominantly takes place, is expansive and filled with unique locales. The primary 'continents' of Azeroth are Kalimdor, Eastern Kingdoms, Northrend, and Pandaria. Smaller islands which are also prominent in-game locations include the Broken Isles, Kul'Tiras, and Zandalar<sup>79</sup>. Each of these larger regions are distinct from one another, containing smaller zones within them of even greater distinction. Players are also capable of exploring Draenor, another planet in the game's universe, and Outland, a ruined version of Draenor. Despite being planets, these masses are roughly the size of continents on Azeroth. When expansions are released for World of Warcraft, new land masses are typically added to the game- in the dissenting cases, existing areas are renovated<sup>80</sup>. Players begin their time in-game within a specific location based upon

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<sup>79</sup> List of continents and large islands found at <https://wow.gamepedia.com/Continent> .

<sup>80</sup> The primary case of this happening was the release of the 'Cataclysm' expansion.

their race, always near a 'capital' city. For a new player, the zones surrounding this 'starting area' will have a large impact on their initial perception of Azeroth. Travel is slow for a new player, as they do not have immediate access to mounts.

Mechanically, players interact with the world of Azeroth in several distinct ways. Players explore the world on foot, on ground-based mounts like horses, or atop flying mounts such as dragons. Teleportation is also an option for players, as well as temporary 'vehicles'; siege engines and zeppelins are prominent examples of these, as well as flight-paths which allow one to pay for automated flights between zones. Characters are not restricted from entering zones by their level, however, content within each zone is centered around certain levels and thus a level one player entering a level 40 zone will die very quickly against enemies and have no access to local quests. There are often multiple options for a player who is seeking to level-up, so the path is not inherently linear.

Once in a level-appropriate zone, players can accept quests from computer-controlled characters and objects. Quests have wildly varying objectives, from killing a certain number of monsters to spying on enemy forces or gathering armor from fallen foes. Quests reward players with gold and experience points, the resource which allows leveling-up, as well as items. This is the primary means through which players increase the strength of their characters. It is also common for players to take part in dungeons as a means through which to level. Every few levels, a new dungeon will become available for characters. These are multiplayer affairs, five players entering an instanced zone to fight their way through to the end. Each dungeon has a unique aesthetic, enemies, and story behind its presence. Aside from the mechanical gains acquired by completing dungeons, they serve as brief periods of socialization for players. Running these repeatedly are traditionally an expeditious means

through which to level-up and acquire better gear, although the current expansion has decreased experience point gains through this method.

Perhaps the most pertinent part of quests and dungeons to this research are their provision of storylines for players to experience. Quests are particularly emphasized as means through which to build the world of Azeroth; they drive players across the world, each zone having different themes and roles to play in the greater events taking place. In many cases, the quests available to a character will vary based upon their faction. As an example, the focus of Stormsong Valley in Kul'Tiras is placed upon cultists reviving ancient, tentacled creatures through which to gain power. The Alliance and Horde both work to put these cultists down, however, Alliance players must fight their way across the zone as a part of a grand design to save the region's inhabitants. Horde players instead work to wipe out the inhabitants while also fighting off cultists, acquiring new allies in the process.

The stories told within different zones actively build up the world in players' minds. Zones become associated with specific events, stories, and characters- particularly those which players enjoy. Jubilation, a Horde player on the Thrall realm, expresses his love for a zone named, "Twilight Highlands", stating that the 'lore' surrounding this region is what entices him. Jubilation states that this interest can be traced to Warcraft II, a predecessor to World of Warcraft, wherein a cult named the "Twilight's Hammer" can be employed as soldiers by players. As a result of using these characters so frequently, Jubilation followed the related storyline closely; when World of Warcraft was released, the Twilight's Hammer were mentioned, but not prominent until the Cataclysm expansion. This expansion added the Twilight Highlands zone, which prominently featured this cult and was designed to fit their aesthetic and lore. Dark woods filled with twisted trees blanket a rugged landscape, pock-

marked by towering spires emitting murky clouds of purple energy. Legions of soldiers are embroiled in mortal combat across barren hills, where profane rituals release a blight upon the land- even the local dungeons and raid are centered around this theme, conveying tales of cultist horrors. Jubilation states that the aesthetic of the Twilight Highlands would surely entice him either way, however, it is the story told within which makes it special.

Each zone in Azeroth is constructed in this way. Unique storylines make up each location, whether they are ‘actual’ stories, told through quests and in-game events, or ‘perceived’ stories, experienced by the individual. Upon entering a zone, players are immediately bombarded by information. An example of this can be seen in Dun Morogh, a zone discussed by Discord user ‘humanistichidegger’. Dun Morogh is the Dwarven homeland, a mountainous realm shrouded in snow. Pine trees blanket the landscape, with wooden cottages occasionally appearing to provide respite for local hunters and trappers. Ironforge, the Dwarven capital city, is found here- carved into the side of a mountain, it is cavernous yet warm, lit by the glow of massive forges and braziers. The ‘actual’ storyline experienced through quests in Dun Morogh has players delivering mail, hunting, providing aid to wounded combatants, battling invading Trolls, and other, similar tasks<sup>81</sup>.

Humanistichidegger presents the story here as a dull affair, one’s actions having little impact and the requirements being monotonous. About his perceived stories, he writes:

“After long hours of “work” farming for potion mats and crafting high value items, checking and rechecking the day’s prices on the auction house in Ironforge, it’s nice to wander down to the suburb outside, hear the snow crunching underfoot as I make my way to the local pub to watch the facsimile of daily life played out by NPC bartenders, cooks, and merchants milling about while the soundtrack of a tavern at night plays in the background. I might even watch a movie split-screen with my character in the inn before falling asleep IRL.”<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Details of this storyline can be found at [https://wow.gamepedia.com/Dun\\_Morogh\\_storyline](https://wow.gamepedia.com/Dun_Morogh_storyline) .

<sup>82</sup> Written response from Discord user ‘humanistichidegger’ regarding their experiences in Dun Morogh.

Humanistic Heidegger's portrayal of perceived stories represents a single user's experience, guaranteed to vary among individuals as it is not inherently enforced by gameplay mechanics. Instead, these are constructed by the user; this player specifically chooses to seek crafting materials, shop around, and then slowly travel to spaces they consider 'cozy' in order to relax before going to bed in real life. This is a testament to the impact the virtual world of Azeroth can have upon a person. As opposed to simply following the storyline presented to players by the game, personal desires, interests, and traits lead to the formation of unique stories. In this case, the perceived story is of both the character and the zone, Dun Morogh- the character is the one taking the specified actions, while the zone is what provides space for and allows them to take place.

Similarly, interactions with other players serve to create unique stories within zones. Certain zones have earned reputations for player-versus-player combat, such as 'Stranglethorn Vale', a jungle-covered region on the southern end of the Eastern Kingdoms. Stranglethorn Vale earned its reputation as a place wherein rampant 'ganking', unsolicited in-game murders, take place with regularity<sup>83</sup>. It is somewhat common for powerful players to attack those at lower levels who quest here, killing them repeatedly and leading to frustration among those who are simply trying to level-up. Positive interactions might also alter one's perception of a zone, such as making friends or defeating a powerful creature with the help of others. There are also perceived stories which might alter players' perceptions of spaces regardless of whether they were the parties involved. The story of Leeroy Jenkins is widely renowned within World of Warcraft, becoming so famous that it was acknowledged

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<sup>83</sup> A discussion which references Stranglethorn Vale as a hotbed of 'ganking' can be seen at: <https://eu.battle.net/forums/en/wow/topic/17618023840>.

by the developers in the form of an in-game achievement and obtainable title<sup>84</sup>. Leeroy Jenkins' story began in the form of a YouTube video wherein the character caused a disaster of sorts within a raid, Blackrock Spire; the video quickly became viral and that area is now commonly associated with this tale.

Following Adams' model of place, these manifold stories serve as forms of communication which, in combination, create 'place' in the minds of those who experience them. A location in World of Warcraft is much more than the way that it looks, or the quests that are available within- the storylines unique to individual players and shared among them are both crucial in the development of place. These function similarly to the means through which we develop place in the real world; stories passed down regarding spaces, as well as experiences had within, create personal and societal narratives which are at times pervasive. Aesthetic components of spaces might also assist in the construction of these narratives.

In World of Warcraft, each region of the world is unique from all others. The frozen forests and wastes of Northrend, near the northern pole of Azeroth, is home to twelve separate zones<sup>85</sup>. While these are predominantly designed around 'cold' geography due to their northern location, they each are wildly different from one another. Howling Fjord, on the south-eastern tip of Northrend, is based upon Norway's numerous fjords. It is a land where meadows and forests are blanketed with fresh snow, while fjords reveal ocean as they cut deeply into the earth. Dragonblight is a vast field of ice, its permafrost dotted with the skeletal remains of dragons. Grizzly Hills, modeled after the dense pine forests of Alaska, is a stark contrast to the rest of Northrend. Sholazar Basin, the most prominent departure from

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<sup>84</sup> A description of the title and how to acquire it are found at <https://www.wowhead.com/title=143/jenkins>. Titles are a form of customization that places specific text before or after a character's name.

<sup>85</sup> List of Northrend zones, found at <https://wow.gamepedia.com/Northrend>.

the region's frigidity, is a primal jungle protected from the frost through ancient technology. While only a small sample of Azeroth's zones, these adjacent locales represent the diversity seen within a single continent. As a character strides through Howling Fjord, wind whistling through the air, the crunch of soft snow beneath their feet, it becomes clear how such a space might come to conjure real, personal emotional responses.

To better understand how others are affected by the forms of communication presented through the game, I interviewed other players both in-game and through the Discord software. Questions focused on in-game spaces, what they mean to players and which ones they enjoy or dislike, along with why. These interviews were largely conducted with members of the Eminent guild, as well as players met casually through World of Warcraft-centric Discord servers and the in-game 'general chat'. These interviews were useful as they offered an unfiltered means through which to understand how players feel about the world in which they play.

Interviewed players revealed several noteworthy components of place-making in World of Warcraft. Players tend to have feelings of attachment to certain zones, their past knowledge and experiences working to develop these senses of place. Players continue to access the game for varying reasons; some seek power, some seek to socialize, and others create their own goals such as achievement-hunting or seeing all of the game's content. These goals must be considered when contemplating place-making in World of Warcraft, as players might approach spaces for differing reasons- they might not even see certain spaces as a result of their playstyle. Players who only participate in player-versus-player content will potentially not witness the spaces presented through 'raids', while players who only do the latter will likely miss arenas frequented by the former.



## Chapter 6: Research Discussion

The results of surveys taken throughout this research are abundantly clear: people tend to like spaces which they find attractive, comforting, or generally aesthetically appealing. Gameplay is crucial to this as well, as players seem to dislike zones which are boring, tedious, or generally unappealing to them. There are other factors which affect this perception, as players might enjoy or hate locations for reasons such as past or shared knowledge, personal experiences, social interactions, the reception of others, the hostility of a location, or any other form of communication which has taken place in a space. These factors are what create place within World of Warcraft; these are the elements which give meaning to each space, provide reasons for players to have emotions, attachment, or just ideas which surround a given location in this virtual world.

According to Adams' communication-based model of place-making, each component of a space communicates with a viewer to develop their perceived environment, place.<sup>86</sup> Anyone can look at an image of Grizzly Hills and see that it is an attractive space, filled with beautiful pine forests sprinkled with fresh snow, a welcoming environment to those unacquainted. Players of World of Warcraft will have knowledge beyond this. Perhaps they are aware that it is the homeland of Furbolgs, a race of large bear-like creatures with human features who are hostile towards outsiders; players might also be aware of its history of violence, a hotbed of player-versus-player combat wherein characters were encouraged to

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<sup>86</sup> Adams, *Placing the Anthropocene*, 54-65.

battle over land. Others might love the zone for its music or hate it for its storyline despite its relative beauty. While these are all varying opinions, each is a form of communication between players and the game. Each component of a zone provided by World of Warcraft communicates with players, players' reception of these components varying between individuals. The highly individualistic nature of this process is standard to the development of place through Adams' model, with some elements portraying similar information across individuals and others being bound to experience and personal biases.

Derived from survey results, ethnographic observations, and interviews, there are some forms of communication which stand out as prominent, broad components of place-making in World of Warcraft. The audio-visual components of an in-game space are the most immediate form of communication between players and the game. These include the general appearance of a zone, the creatures within, the music and sound effects which play throughout, and any other component which adds to a location's general aesthetics. Players are often drawn to locations whose appearances appeal to them, with audio components adding to, or detracting from, said appeal. The survey results illustrate this, as the most popular zones are typically lush or visually interesting while the least popular are barren, dull; there are obvious exceptions, which are where other forms of communication become clear. Despite the initial impact had by the numerous forms of audio-visual communication taking place between a player and the game, it is not inherently the most important factor in determining how one feels about a space. Players often dislike zones which they consider unappealing from an aesthetic standpoint, yet zones which others do find attractive are still at times heavily disliked for other reasons; this indicates the presence of other prevalent factors in the construction of these virtual places.

Developer-based communication is that which is put in place by the developers of a virtual world in order to interact with players. When a player walks around the world, they are experiencing developer-based communication. Players killing creatures or one-another could be classified as developer-based, as would simply walking around the world. Any action taken in-game could fall under this category, although it emphasizes actions with the game-world itself. Taking on quests is a prominent example of developer-based communication. These quests exist only because the world's developers created them; whenever one takes part in a quest, they are experiencing precisely what the developers intended, and thus the developers are communicating directly to players.

These developer-based interactions also include general gameplay found in the world. In the example of Vashj'ir, the underwater zone discussed earlier, characters are forced to swim between locations. As opposed to the standard, grounded gameplay seen in the rest of the world, here players are forced to move in all directions to find objectives. This is particularly noticeable during combat, wherein characters who fight with melee weapons are forced to navigate in frustrating ways to reach their opponents. This change will be less noticeable to those who use magic or ranged weaponry, as their movements are not as heavily affected by being underwater; the result of this individualized experience is an altered perception of Vashj'ir. This is not to suggest that players who like the zone are all users of ranged weaponry or magic, or that all who dislike it are melee combatants. Instead, each user's experience therein acts as a form of communication, altering the way they view the zone. This is true for the experiences had within all spaces in World of Warcraft.

Social communication is that which, either directly or indirectly, takes place between two or more players. When one player speaks to another in-game, that is social

communication. When a player kills another in-game, that too is social communication. The same can be said of players joining parties to hunt monsters, conquering dungeons and raids, and roleplaying with their guilds. A wonderful example of this can be seen in an interview with World of Warcraft character, “Jihadjoust”. This player explains how he only plays World of Warcraft due to the social bonds formed in-game, its gameplay being of no interest to him at this point<sup>87</sup>. Socializing with friends is more important to this player than mechanically progressing in the game. Social communication also includes any interaction had between players, whether it be hostile, friendly, or passive.

Social communication extends beyond the virtual world. Players communicate regularly through forums, software such as Discord, and in the real world. Discussions of the game’s world extend to these exterior communications. While they lack the personal experience of place-making found in other forms of communication, this is a way in which rumors, stories, and opinions are widely shared. When players discuss “The Barrens”, the popular phenomenon referred to as “Barrens Chat” inevitably appears; even players who have never experienced this in the past begin to accept this component of a place, adding to their own understanding of it. Where a player once viewed The Barrens as a rocky wasteland, they now have added to it the famous stories surrounding Barrens Chat, perhaps lending to it a sense of community or levity. This works in other situations, such as Raids. Online discussions surrounding new Raids can lead to players having established opinions of them prior to entering. Uldir, a raid new to the Battle for Azeroth expansion, has several boss-encounters which are notoriously difficult. Players learn this, and a sense of intimidation can overcome them- or, they instead view them as challenges to which they must rise.

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<sup>87</sup> Interview with Jihadjoust, a Horde player on the Thrall realm.

Regardless, the perceptions of players change as they learn more about locations by communicating with other players, both inside and outside of the game.

‘Experience’ is the broadest form of communication, taking place in and outside of Azeroth. Experiential communication is the result of a player’s time spent within, and outside of, a virtual world; every moment spent within World of Warcraft, players are buffeted with communication which is the result of experiencing the game. All other forms of communication in a virtual world are, in some way, experiences. These include the events which take place while a player is in a zone, the storyline experienced within, the interactions had between players, and the general feeling of playing the game in a specific location. The most obvious example of this is interpersonal communication, whether it be social, cooperative, or hostile. When players speak they are communicating, however, they also communicate when fighting one another or teaming up to defeat difficult creatures or clear quests. When players take on quests alone and absorb the storylines found with a zone, communication is taking place. A player being murdered by another communicates a certain level of hostility- this might follow players for some time, associated with the zone in which it took place. Similarly, players joining up to take on a difficult quest communicates comradery, forming a place of kinship and cooperation. On the other hand, a player might choose to go about a quest alone as opposed to joining others; this, too, is experiential communication. The acquisition of powerful gear, important guild interactions, world events, earning notable achievements, visiting a zone which is considered beautiful or hideous- these are all forms of communication between the game and players which are derived from personal experiences.

Experiential communication might also take place outside of the virtual world, as players take real-life experiences and associate them with virtual spaces. A fight with a loved one might invoke memories of hostility, just as memories of depression or a real-life struggle while navigating a certain zone could sour its presence in the mind of a player. It is not irregular for World of Warcraft players to use the game as a form of escapism wherein they temporarily leave behind the struggles of their lives, stepping into the shoes of their characters<sup>88</sup>. These negative experiences could lead to altered perceptions of in-game spaces, just as positive real-world experiences might. Regardless of what players experience in this context, their understandings of places change.

These varying forms of communication generate the backbone of place-making in World of Warcraft. The three more specific types of communication interact with one another, overlapping under certain circumstances. Experience is the core form of communication involved in placemaking inside a virtual world. Everything that a user does in said world is an experience. Every action taken communicates place to a player, regardless of whether they are simply viewing the screen, spending time with others, or slaying a powerful creature. Figure 5 shows this dynamic relationship.

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<sup>88</sup> A discussion of World of Warcraft as escapism can be found at: <https://blizzardwatch.com/2016/10/22/escape-real-world-wow/>. The comments confirm this.

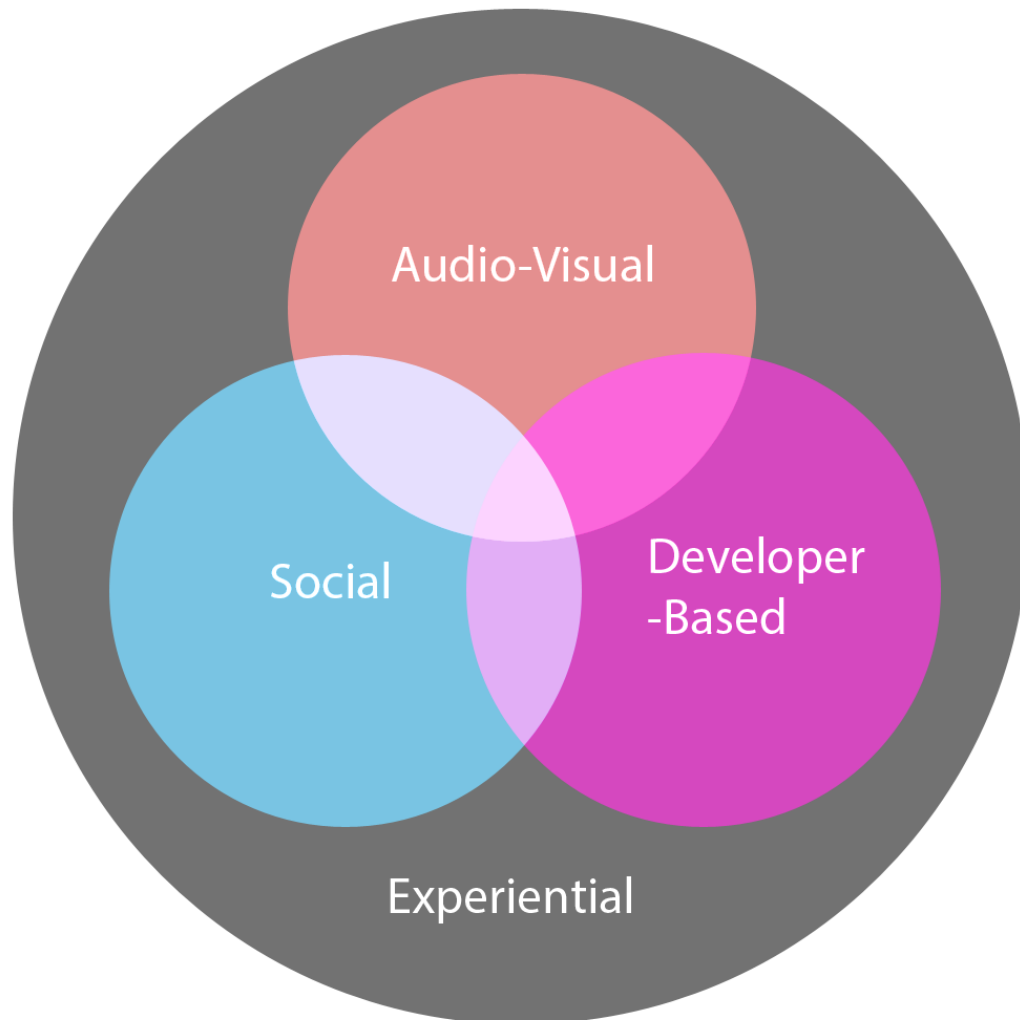


Fig. 5. A Venn diagram explaining the primary elements of place in virtual environments.

The experiences players have in-game, and outside of it, are what ultimately determine their perception of the game's world. This is also why perceptions of places will always vary between players. No two individuals will have the same experiences, in life or in-game, thus it is crucial to understand that place is not a static concept nor is it one that is standardized. Places are constantly evolving in the minds of those who experience them and are always susceptible to change. This dynamic relationship between players and place is

similar to that of the real world through the model presented by Adams.<sup>89</sup> Communication experienced will always vary between individuals in the real world and will result in differing senses of place, if only slight. The same can be said of virtual worlds. It is difficult to say whether or not players will like or dislike a certain location in the virtual world, as their sense of place is the summation of personal experiences, perception, and knowledge in relation to the space in question.

Of course, the goal of this research is not to determine whether World of Warcraft players enjoy certain in-game zones. Place-making in the virtual world appears to be an intricate process which mirrors that of the real world, albeit with emphasis on different forms of communication. Sensual communication is far more limited due to restricted use of senses in the perception of virtual worlds. On the other hand, social communication is encouraged due to the ease of speaking with others in an online environment. Moderate anonymity, along with access to forums and discussion software specifically tailored to the virtual world in question, allow individuals to share knowledge freely and with less restraint than some real-world spaces. Developer-based communication could best be compared to the information portrayed by real-world architects and designers, however, it stretches beyond what can be created on Earth. The developers of a virtual world are limited only by their imaginations and budgets, thus allowing them to create fantastic worlds which would be impossible outside of computers. Developers also determine the ways through which players might interact with their worlds, and thus exercise a level of control over what in-game experiences are possible. While not completely limiting, the communication which takes place between developers and users is monolithic in comparison to that seen in the real world.

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<sup>89</sup> Adams, *Placing the Anthropocene*, 54-65.



## Chapter 7: Conclusion

World of Warcraft's Azeroth is unique from many other virtual environments in its intent to emulate geographic components of our own world. Those who live within it, along with its developers, continuously morph the world and find new meanings in its manifold spaces. As Adams suggests, communication is the key to understanding how place is formed- in our world, as well as those which exist within our computers.<sup>90</sup> This communication does not need to be inter-human. Through the proposed model, all experiences are communication. The optics of a tree, the sounds of a bird in the distance, walking through a dense forest, slaying a powerful foe- these are all communication. These extend beyond simple gameplay, instead pulling from exterior, real-world communication. Players speaking outside of the game, reading news, watching videos, hearing the opinions of others, and personal experiences in the real world all communicate place to players as well.

While all actions taken in reference to a virtual world can be considered communication, they take three primary forms. Audio-visual communication is that which is primarily seen or heard, portrayed through sight or sound. While this could be expanded to include the other human senses, such as smell and touch, current technology rarely affords these capabilities. Instead, sight and sound are the senses through which humans largely experience the virtual world. Viewers might derive certain ideas from the appearance of a

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<sup>90</sup> Adams, *Placing the Anthropocene*, 54-65.

space, the creatures which live within, the soundtrack to an area, the local ambience, the appearance of other players, or any other element which is primarily experienced sensually.

Social communication can be seen both in and outside of the virtual world, as its only requirement is the transmission of information between humans. When players speak in-game, social communication is taking place. Players grouping-up with, or killing, one another is also an example. When players speak on a forum about the game, communication regarding specific spaces might. Societal and cultural ideas also conform herein, as they involve social interactions which might transform a players' view of a space.

Developer-based communication takes place when players interact with anything intentionally, or inadvertently, created by the developers of a virtual environment. This involves anything that is seen in-game while playing World of Warcraft, however, it specifically refers to activities such as quests and game mechanics or 'user experiences'. When a player moves throughout the game, a form of developer-based communication is taking place. The way one interacts with the game world, limited by the developers' intentions, is crucial to place-making in World of Warcraft. Each storyline, feat of combat, quest, and movie communicates place to players. These acts of communication assert the means through which players view the world, providing a framework which inherently allows the perception of place. Without this, there would be no virtual world to discern.

These forms of communication intrinsically overlap, working together to build a potent and diverse perception of place for each player. While one might see a barren, charred forest as a place of pain and despair, another might view it as a place of hope and intrigue. This is because each player's personal understanding is varied, combining interior and exterior acts of communication which build a sum: their experience of a space.

Experiential communication is a sweeping category which encapsulates all others. Every perceived audio-visual, social, or developer-based communication is in itself an experience of the viewer. Experience is the core of virtual place-making- any time information regarding a virtual space is communicated to a player, this can be qualified as an experience. While broad, this category's purpose is to serve as a blanket-term which describes how virtual place-making takes place. While there are more descriptive terms which can be used, all communication effectively takes place in the form of experience.

Virtual place-making takes place in much the same way it does in the real world. Communication is still the key to forming places in the minds of viewers; instead, the degree to which different forms of communication impact place-making varies. Sensual communication, that which involves the human senses, is heavily limited yet still provides important information regarding spaces. Social communication is much faster and, due to anonymity and ready access, particularly emphasized. Discussion and the dissemination of knowledge are a cornerstone of communicating place among users. Developer-based communication determines the framework through which users might interact with a virtual world and, thus, what is possible to portray within. With this in mind, it can be surmised that virtual places function similarly to real world ones in the minds of observers. How these places are perceived can have monolithic impacts upon the experiences of those who live within them.

Virtual environments remain a relatively fresh realm of research in the field of geography. To study these environments through the lens of geography is to better understand the ways in which they relate to our world. When geographers open the field to virtual environments, a new world of opportunities arise. In this case, place serves as an

entryway through which to further virtual studies in the field. As a fundamental concept within geography, virtual place is merely a building block upon further theories can be founded. It is my desire that work on virtual environments continues to progress in the discipline, with others recognizing the inherent value which comes with understanding a realm in which, to some degree, we all exist.

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### **Vita**

Joshua Montana Piercy was born into a military family in Las Vegas, Nevada. After briefly moving around the country, he graduated high school in June of 2010 at Fred T. Foard High School in Hickory, North Carolina. Following two years at the local Catawba Valley Community College, he transferred to Appalachian State University where he graduated in 2015 with a major in archaeology and a minor in geography.

Throughout his undergraduate degree, Joshua participated in excavations at several archaeological sites throughout the Blue Ridge Mountains while simultaneously working for the University's Technical Support Services. He began working toward a Master of Arts at Appalachian State University in 2016 and will be awarded the degree in May 2019. His work throughout graduate school has largely focused around human geography, GIS, historical geography, and website development.