THE MOST INVOLVED FORM OF STORY: HOW WORLD OF WARCRAFT
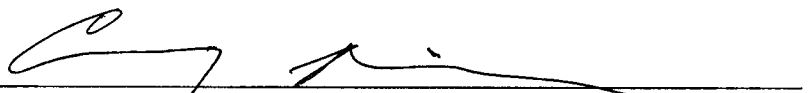IS A STORY-PLUS EXPERIENCE

by

Joseph McCabe Szilagyi

Honors Thesis

Appalachian State University
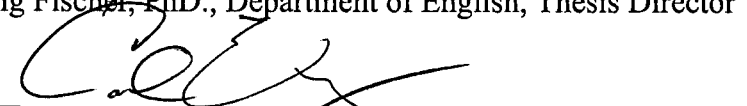
Submitted to the Department of English in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
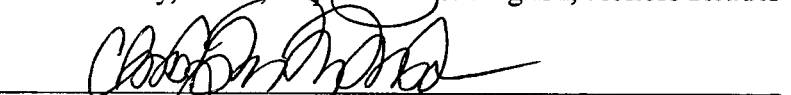
Bachelor of Arts

May, 2019

_____
Craig Fischer, PhD., Department of English, Thesis Director

_____
Carl Eby, Ph.D., Department of English, Honors Reader

_____
Chris Meade, Ph.D., Department of English, Thesis Reader

_____
Jennifer Wilson, Ph.D., Department of English, Departmental Honors Director

Introduction

      Gaming and gamer culture have never been bigger, and they are only getting more popular as games reach an ever-growing audience. Typically, video game stories are limited by the gameplay structure. Many games like *Halo* or *Legend of Zelda*, games that are primarily story driven, are still largely bound by their gameplay mechanics and controls. The story is then a linear progression much like that of a book or movie, and only when a game opens into an open world can the story be allowed to thrive. One might wonder if events occurring in such a free environment constitute a narrative at all, yet some open world games, like the popular massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*) by Blizzard Entertainment, have taken the traditional concepts of storytelling and put them to use. MMORPGs are online gaming worlds that consist of a persistent living environment, dynamic opportunities for players, and online social interaction. The immersive worlds within the game sustain substantial and continued involvement from and among players, and that continued support allows for active communities to form and grow (Lauro, 10). With so many people playing a game in a shared experience, the opportunity for player interaction, whether that be in a cooperative or competitive way, is everywhere. If a player chooses to walk through an area, there is a chance they come across one or many other players who are experiencing the same story at the same time. Furthermore, players can interact with each other as they progress through the story of the game, and whatever form that interaction takes depends on the players. *World of Warcraft* is a game designed around player agency, interaction, but most importantly around its story.

      The traditional story with a linear plot is challenged in *World of Warcraft* and expanded upon. Within the game, there is no single-story line. Due to the nature of how large the game is

and the ever growing amount of content in the game, there are thousands of stories contained within the game, and those stories do not have to build on one another or work together, yet they all exist within the same space. Each story is unique, and the completion of each story line is up to the player to find, pursue, and complete. All the stories in the game are part of the Meta-Story that keeps building up, but no one story is essential to the greater story. For example, the leveling experience in *World of Warcraft* is separated into brackets and zones (areas in the world that are named like a country or region on a map) where a player can go and find story to complete for the purpose of leveling their character up in power. Each zone in the game has its own story, quest lines, and aesthetics, but if a player chooses not to go to a certain zone throughout their leveling experience, they have the option to completely avoid it. Players have control over what content they complete, and the zones they pick greatly differentiate their experiences from that of other players. Quite literally, the game is a world of different stories, and as a whole is a stacking experience of player choices in their own narrative. This is an aspect that is unique to an MMORPG, and something that *WoW* excels at. Its Meta-Story is part of the reason why *WoW* is a Story-Plus experience.

Video games, although designed around a specific gameplay mechanic and often for a profit, are made with narrative in mind. Some games are less story oriented than others, but *World of Warcraft* is not one of those games. Instead, the story elements of *WoW* are the primary focus of the game. The narrative is driven by the player as they work through the game and experience it with other players, but the greater story within the game takes place whether or not the player participates in it. To explain further, the player drives the plot on as they play the game. An essential element of video games is the challenge they present. Working through and completing the game is often the main objective, and the journey through the game is the

player's alone. Therefore, players provide the point of view, perspective, and ultimately they create the narrative as they work through the game. However, *World of Warcraft* is not a game with one player, but a world with many players simultaneously working through its story. There is no one experience or perspective that is representative of the game because every player experiences the world in their own way. What begins to happen when many people begin to experience a story in a shared environment is the story evolves. *World of Warcraft* is not a linear tale with a concrete ending or single shared experience. The players create their own narratives, and the story of *WoW* is the aggregate of player experiences. Players are encouraged to explore and take detours. They are given the choice as to whether or not they want to participate in certain story lines present in the game, and those choices are what define the freedom of narrative within *WoW*. The world lives on so long as there are players experiencing it, and that shared yet unique experience for each player creates a basis for discussion and sharing.

Communities have sprung up around and within the game to allow players to connect further in their shared experiences, and these communities foster relationships, teamwork, and competition alike. The *World of Warcraft* is a shared world. Every aspect of the game from the mechanics to the lore is shared between all players, yet the most essential aspect of the experience is that it is still unique to each player. The meta-story may be the same for each player, but every choice, step, and action within the game is the player's to make. This interactive experience of player freedom and personal narrative, combined with the community driven participation in *World of Warcraft*'s living world contribute and create a story-plus experience: a story-plus experience is the experience of a shared and living Meta-Story of individual narratives of players conjoined with player interactions and relationships.

Most stories have a structure that can be broken down into three parts: a beginning, a middle, and an end. Through these three parts the story will set up, build, and ultimately resolve as the questions that were asked in the beginning of the story, such as how the story end will reach some sort of conclusion. Most stories follow this simple structure of a beginning, a middle, and an end, and many writers, such as Christopher Booker in his book *The Seven Basic Plots* (2004), suggest there is a common plot amongst all stories. Booker echoes Aristotle, Freytag, and Shakespeare in assigning five stages to story that are consistent throughout all seven of the basic plots. Booker defines these five stages as anticipation, dream, frustration, nightmare, and resolution. This pattern is by no means followed by every story, but it is a solid reference as to what a story is: a building tension that expands and progresses into a revelation or conflict that transforms the story before a final resolution is met. This progression of the story is the Meta-Story: the top level of the story that is pushing towards some sort of resolution within its narrative.

A Meta-Story can have any number of different themes, plot lines, challenges, and even multiple conclusions, but it ultimately will follow Booker's structure of anticipation, dream, frustration, nightmare, and a resolution within each of the individual story lines. A Meta-Story is a story that follows the same basic plot as any other story, yet it encompasses many stories and detours within its overarching story. It might help to consider a tree in which the roots of the tree are the plot mechanics as identified by Booker, whereas the tree trunk is the Meta-Story, and each branch and leaf of the tree is a story of its own. The player character's story could be considered like a leaf. Their journey through the game will deviate from other stories until it becomes its own narrative, but not entirely its own. Smaller stories can exist separately from the

Meta-Story and still follow Booker's story structure, yet each story still depends on the set up and the telling of the overarching story for the other stories told to have gravity of their own.

World of Warcraft has a story that follows Booker's common plot, but it is not a game with just a story. Rather, it has a Meta-Story that encompasses a universe of content, a universe that is filled to the brim with unique story lines and independent adventures that together constitute the Meta-Story itself. The Meta-Plot of a story is the stage-by-stage progression of a story that is shared amongst all stories in that they progress from anticipation to resolution in some way. The Meta-Story, however, is the Meta-Plot as experienced by the player. The Meta-Plot is the physical construction and execution of the story whereas the Meta-Story is the experience and mental construction by the player of the Meta-Plot. *World of Warcraft* has a Meta-Story that follows those same rules, and the story of the game progresses through each stage in turn. Whether that story is good or bad is up to the player to decide, but the process that the story progresses through and the execution of it follows the patterns established by great writers such as H.P. Lovecraft, J.R.R. Tolkien, and George R.R. Martin, who also follow Booker's concept of the Meta-Plot.

Before diving further into the topic, it will be helpful to define a few terms and explain briefly how *World of Warcraft* works. *World of Warcraft*, initially released November 23, 2004, is an MMORPG that takes place in the fictional universe of *Warcraft* and on the world of Azeroth. Based off the *Warcraft* real time strategy games, much of *WoW's* story is build off of the events that take place in those three games. The game is still currently being played by millions of players due to the cyclical nature and success of the expansions for the game that are released about every two years. An expansion is a content packed addition to the game that adds to and progresses the Meta-Story as well as provides new places to explore and new things to

collect. There have been seven expansions to the game since its 2004 release--*The Burning Crusade, Wrath of the Lich King, Cataclysm, Mists of Pandaria, Warlords of Draenor, Legion,* and *Battle for Azeroth* (the current expansion)--and the future of the game is promising as there will likely be many more expansions to come.

Within the game there are generally four differentiations of characters you can run into. First there is the player character that is controlled by a person playing the game via mouse and keyboard. Second, there are NPCs (non-player characters) which are named in game characters that can provide quests, share dialogue, or that might have some story as to who they are and why they are where they are. Third, there are creatures and enemies in the game that players can kill and defeat called mobs. They are called mobs because they generally are concentrated in packs or "mobs" of multiple enemies. Lastly, there are bosses. Bosses are NPC characters that are defeatable but that are also significantly stronger than a mob. A boss is typically a villain or anti-hero that resides within a dungeon or raid. A dungeon is an area where certain bosses, mobs, and stories can be found. A raid is a large scale, lengthy, and difficult dungeon with far more story and character significance. Raids are where much of the endgame or level cap challenges can be found as they are typically the most difficult content in the game. This is because a raid is where the resolution of a story arc can often be found due to the placement of many antagonists at the end of a raid as bosses. Additionally, *World of Warcraft* is still a popular game and there are constant updates, many of which include additional story and quest content. Weekly updates take place every Tuesday morning that fix bugs, add story, and even occasionally change the way the game is played by introducing new mechanics or class changes.

World of Warcraft is a game, but it is written with story in mind, and each event, boss, and even NPC has a story and a purpose within the game world. Dozens of writers have

contributed to *WoW's* in game story, and dozens more have written about things that occur within the *Warcraft* universe. By examining Booker's five stages of the Meta-Plot, I hope to display how *World of Warcraft* has a fully developed story that is not only well written, but also an ever expanding universe of story based content. *World of Warcraft* is capable of telling structured stories that adhere to the pattern established by Booker. Each expansion has a beginning with escalation, a middle with struggle and conflict, and an end that reaches some sort of resolution. This is the Meta-Story of *World of Warcraft*, the expansion-to-expansion story that contains Booker's description of a story, but *WoW* includes thousands of smaller stories that intertwine and contribute to the main story. This Meta-Story is one part of what is a Story-Plus experience within *World of Warcraft*. Furthermore, *World of Warcraft's* community driven content expands the story by introducing new and inventive innovations to the traditional Meta-Story.

Incorporated with the Meta-Story are unique aspects like player agency, community supports such as guilds, forums, and chat channels, and gated story content. I will be using Booker to support my definition of the Meta-Story, and through that definition I will define the term Story-Plus. I will also examine community supports in relation to the Meta-Story, as these supports benefit and help build the story without directly adding to it by building up the player character through dedication, interaction, and involvement. Each stage of Booker's common story can be found within *World of Warcraft*, and there are a multitude of moments in the story worth evaluating. I will bring up just some of these moments while investigating *WoW's* story, as sorting through all of the fifteen years of story would take some time and several books otherwise. When a well written story comes into contact and mixes with a dedicated community, I believe *World of Warcraft* becomes a Story-Plus experience that incorporates both a strong

Meta-Story and community aspects that work together to create a unique personal experience within the story world created by the writers and game designers of *World of Warcraft*.

Anticipation

As Booker points out in the first part of his book *The Seven Basic Plots*, the anticipation stage is the first stage in any story, and *World of Warcraft* excels at creating anticipation within its Meta-Story and gameplay. The anticipation stage is where the setting is established while there is a relative peace that is stirred by a change by or that affects a character. In Booker's own words, the anticipation stage occurs at the beginning of a narrative:

> When we first meet the hero, heroine or central figures, they are likely to be in some state which lays them open to a shattering new experience. Their consciousness is in some way restricted. They may just be young and naive, with only limited experience of the world. They may be more actively curious and looking for something unexpected to happen to them. They may be bored, or drowsy, or reckless. But for whatever reason, they find themselves suddenly precipitated out their familiar, limited existence, into a strange world, unlike anything they have experienced before. (Booker, 105)

Character and world building are essential to the anticipation stage, and *World of Warcraft* does this by focusing in on the experience of the player character. The player character is the in game-created avatar that a person will experience the game world through, and it is the player character's narrative that the player will direct during their journey through the game and its story. At the same time, *WoW* is building up NPC characters within the story that have their own motives and reasons for pushing forward on their own journey. However, it is the player character that is challenged with making their own path, and it is up to the player to pursue

content and push themselves onward. A new player to the game is that naive or reckless character that Booker speaks of, because they are the ones who are being introduced to the game world and the story. The story cannot progress on its own. The player must find a drive or reason to progress through the game, and that player driven path through the story is why the anticipation stage starts with the player. The game story will build anticipation on its own, but the story the player follows is their own making, and it is up to them to find that building tension in their own narrative within the game.

Within *World of Warcraft*, the anticipation stage on the Meta-Story level (that being the greater story that encompasses all of the player's narratives) comes at an interesting time within the cycle of expansions of *WoW*. The anticipation stage often begins to build at the end of the resolution stage of a past expansion or story line. While one story begins to build up, another story is just ending. This serial nature of *WoW's* story has been consistent since the game's release, yet seriality is not a negative thing. Like a soap opera, the Meta-Story's main objective is to keep people interested in the plot while extending the life of the show through additional story. Booker's stages can be serial in that they lead into each new story respectively. The developers of *WoW* do this purposefully as the resolution stage is often the best time to get the player base interested in what story awaits them next. Each expansion that is released for *WoW* has a story unique to it. However, in order to lead into the next expansion, each prior expansion must begin with an anticipation stage during the respective resolution stage. The game does this by introducing the main story concept, such as a crusade against an undead Litch King who has been spreading a plague throughout the world, while it is wrapping up the current conflict.

The Litch King as an antagonist was first introduced in *Warcraft 3*, and the conflict with him was the most anticipated story line to ever release in *World of Warcraft*. *Warcraft 3* was

released in 2002, and it was not until 2008 in the expansion *Wrath of the Litch King* that the players of *World of Warcraft* were challenged with finally taking on the Litch King. Arthas, the Litch King, and many other characters had their stories established in *Warcraft 3*, and the resolution to their story lines had been put off until the release of *Wrath*. Anticipation was built for the return of the Litch King through leveling zones such as the *Eastern* and *Western Plaguelands, The Ghostlands,* and many in game characters who were affected by the events of *Warcraft 3* that followed Arthus on his descent from righteousness. The environment and the NPC's of *WoW* still showed the scars of the events that transpired years earlier. Players were reminded that there was a looming threat they could not yet face. The build up to *Wrath* took four years of players knowing the Litch King was still out there, and they played in a world that was influenced by his existence and story. When the expansion was announced, players were not surprised that the Litch King was an enemy that they would encounter. In fact, much of the player base was asking the development team *WoW* for the chance to face down the lord of the northern wastes and the undead for years before the expansion was announced. The Litch King was revealed while the players were still dealing with the previous threat. Each villain, crisis, or major conflict is heavily built upon before the expansion even comes out, and the expansive history, lore, and previous expansion all contribute to the anticipation phase of each expansion story and conflict.

When each new expansion releases, anticipation for the progression of its story is built through the introduction of the players to new world zones (places to explore), characters, quests, and ultimately an introduction to the new story line through quests that are gated by time. Each expansion lasts for about two years, and the progression of the story during that time begins with an anticipation stage that will get the players introduced to the new expansion by starting them

out in the new zones with quests that get the player characters out and about in the new areas. With new areas, story, gear, abilities, and challenges to face, each new expansion brings a promise of new and exciting experiences that will jostle the player characters out of complacency. It is important to note that although each new expansion brings with it new story content, the entire expansion releases content consistently over the course of its lifespan, and the story will not reach a conclusion until close to the end of that life span.

One way for an expansion to build anticipation is on an individual level for each player as it is their own personal narratives that will drive them through the story, not the game story itself. According to David Bordwell, the typical story presents "psychologically defined characters who struggle to solve a clear-cut problem or to attain specific goals." (Bordwell, 18). Although the Meta-Story has no shortage of these characters that drive the story, it is the player that psychologically defines the personality of their player character and their goals in *WoW*. A player's goal could be to defeat a specific boss or to reach the highest level, and that goal will define their actions within the game as they make decisions that will best lead them towards achievement. For instance, the best way for a player to defeat a difficult boss is to power up their character with strong gear and equipment that will make them more likely to succeed, while also teaming up with other players with the same goal that will work together to achieve it. Their choices in game will differ from that of a player who does not care about defeating bosses, and the content that each player will experience will be different respectively. A player wanting to gear will challenge themselves by attempting many dungeons and raids (likely places to earn good gear), while a player trying to level their character might choose to do so through questing and killing mobs.

World of Warcraft based its lore on the themes of H. P. Lovecraft's works and an ever expanding universe of constant conflict. This is important when considering *WoW* as a Story-Plus experience because, like in Lovecraft's works, there is a mythical element to the fantasy *World of Warcraft*. Demons, Titans, Old Gods, Void Lords, Dragon Aspects, undead scourge, the Naru, and the Wild Gods are all examples of mythology added into the game world's lore. This allows for there to always be something more powerful than the player, more threatening than a beast or a soldier, and like Lovecraft's Cthulhu, unimaginably ancient and powerful threats that hang over the game world. It is these hanging threats and mystifying elements of the story that keep people playing the game and allow the game to both continue to grow and expand. Once a person first finds themselves on Azeroth, the game does little to satisfy the wonder they might find while progressing through the game. Beings like the Titans from the lore were never engaged by the game on any level rather than text and lore based information on them. They served to explain certain aspects of the game; aspects like certain creatures that they created, lore as to the beginnings of life and the universe, and hints as to their whereabouts all around the game. Most importantly however, it gives the players a promise that there is more to come and more to discover as the game expands. The Story-Plus aspect of *WoW*'s Meta-Story is the promise of more to come, and the constant introduction to new mysteries and unanswerable questions. Anne Stickney, a long time *World of Warcraft* player and academic, theorizes why *WoW* is so intriguing, different, and more engaging than a typical story as defined by Booker:

> What's at the end of *WoW*? Another level of gaming to do. And what happens when you reach the end of all there is to do at max level? Nothing beyond waiting until the next expansion comes out. Is that what people are racing for? Why do you continue to play the games you play? Is it the lure of repeatable content at the end of it all, is it the familiarity

of hanging out with friends and family, is it the story that winds itself through all the content? Are you more concerned with the journey, or with getting there in the end? And when you get to the end, what do you expect out of the experience? What do you want out of the game you play, what makes it all worthwhile to you?

These are questions that every player of *World of Warcraft* will ask themselves. The game is massive, and it never seems to have a true ending in sight. When one story wraps up the game introduces the next in concert, and that is the Meta-Story of *WoW*, a continuation and lead into the future of the game world. Every *WoW* player will answer that question in their own way as the game allows for the players to have diverse personal narratives that can lead them any which way they choose. Stickney continues and ends the article on a thoughtful note about the lure of the ever expanding story, "In the dawn of a new year, I'm trying to figure out my own answer to that question. Until then, I'll be doing what I always do -- playing with my friends, killing some dragons on the internet, and trying to puzzle out stories that have yet to be." (Stickney). There has always been anticipation in the *WoW* Meta-Story because there is always the promise of more to come. *WoW* is fifteen years old as of 2019, and the game story continues to promise more to come. The player will find clues, promises, and references to future story yet to come, and it is that promise and anticipation of the story to come that keeps people like Stickney and myself playing *World of Warcraft* for so many years.

　　World of Warcraft takes from other great stories and builds its game world around a variety of themes, feelings, influences, and philosophies that build upon one another to create anticipation. The Meta-Story part of the Story-Plus experience, as shown by the examples of Booker's common story structure, is capable of good storytelling and excellent story and character writing. The characters in *WoW*'s story are dynamic, sympathetic, and deep, and the

game world's size and detail reflect those well written characters to a degree that almost makes them feel alive. It is difficult to imagine sympathizing with an undead king who kills the living and then raises them under their command. However, within *WoW* it is possible to look at a character like that in a way that makes them sympathetic even when they are written to be the enemy of the player and of life on Azeroth. The writers and game designers of *WoW* do this by paying homage to and referencing philosophical questions, stories, and theories to allow for their characters to each come alive through deep personal philosophies.

One such example of philosophy within *WoW's* story is in regard to Plato's *Ring of Gyres* mentioned in Book 2 of his Republic (Laird, 2001). This connection to Plato in *WoW* is best described on page four in the book *World of Warcraft and Philosophy* by Luke Cuddy, and Nordlinger. There, the *Ring of Gyres* philosophy cpncerns holding the power (in that case the power to turn invisible at will, a theme also heavily played on my Tolkin in *The Lord of the Rings*) to do something that can be used for one's benefit. The Ring of Gyres, for clarity, is a ring that would allow the user to become invisible when worn, and through Plato it raised the philosophical question of nobility through granted power over use for personal gain. The writers of *WoW* incorporated this philosophical concept into the undead king, Arthas in order to make his character both relatable and tragic. As said by one of the lead writers of the character Arthas when asked about his character, "We want to add some layers of psychology that put you in strange moral situations . . . that mimic some of Arthas' own experiences. . . . By the time you stand toe-to-toe with this bastard, do you still have your pretty principles and highfalutin morality, or is it a mirror reflection? Arthas is after that as much as global domination." (*World of Warcraft and Philosophy*, 6). The player is taken through quest lines that give the player power over life and death, are presented with power, and are given difficult choices to make that

mirror the story of Arthas that was written long before the player would face those dilemmas. It is purposefully uncomfortable to be placed in the shoes of the antagonist that the player is up against, and every player is placed in that situation in the expansion *Wrath of the Litch King*. *World of Warcraft's* story does this well by giving the player more than a game to play, but a story that can raise philosophical questions, generate debate and discussion, and can create real feelings of sympathy in the player. A good Meta-Story requires characters that are well written and that can leap out of their story and actually affect a real person emotionally or mentally, and *WoW* is filled with characters that push the story and that give it real emotion by engaging the player on an emotional level.

When considering the protagonists and antagonists of *World of Warcraft*'s Meta-Story, it is important to note that the player's feelings towards such characters are a result of their experience, interactions, and learned knowledge about that character. *WoW* is much like the real world in that if you want to learn the truth about something, you need to seek it out. Knowledge isn't freely given when a player begins the game, and depending on where they start race and faction wise, they will only be given a bare minimum of the lore to understand a brief history of the place their journey starts. For example, the only introduction you get for the human race once picked is as follows,

> Emboldened by the return of their heroic king, Varian Wrynn, the proud humans of Stormwind led the Alliance to victory in its war against the dreaded Lich King. While successful, the campaign in Northrend proved costly and the humans now seek to bolster their strategic holdings throughout the world. Under Varian's daring leadership, humanity now braces itself for a renewed conflict with its perennial enemy, the Horde.

Yet as the great Cataclysm rips across the world, familiar threats have once again arisen closer to home. It now falls to you to defend the kingdom and uphold the honor of humanity.

With that brief introduction, the player only knows enough to know the condition of their own people and the situation they will find themselves in when they begin their dive into the game. That description says nothing about the plight of the other playable races, the troubles of the other faction, and merely gives the player a base level overview that would be akin to a common NPC's knowledge of that race about the ongoings of the world. A new human player would know nothing about Sargeras, Gul'dan, or any of the other "big bads" (villains that are the primary antagonists of an expansion). Their first worry when they get into the game is to clear out Horde spies and prepare to wage war on the remnants of the undead, the Forsaken (the playable undead race). The story of the player character is built through these interactions, decisions, and experiences through *World of Warcraft's* story, and moments such as a conflict against one of the mentioned "big bads" are made meaningful by the anticipation process that is the player character's journey through the game.

The gated experiences and NPC interactions greatly differentiate one player's story experience from another's, and one such reflection of the gated knowledge within the game world that can change the player experience has to do with a character named Garrosh Hellscream. Garrosh was the Warchief of the horde for a time, and the player has many opportunities to counter the hulking Orc throughout their gameplay experience. During these encounters or interactions with Garrosh, he will change his dialogue based on who he is addressing. For instance, if he is talking to a player who is also an Orc of the Horde, he will regard the player with respect and command respect in return. It begins to get interesting, though,

when Garrosh interacts with another race. When interacting with the Forsaken (a redeemed yet unwelcome number of undead who still retain their humanity in death), Garrosh clearly displays his distaste and even borderline racism against his fellow Horde members of the Forsaken. Because of this difference in experience and interactions with the major story character Garrosh, players see him differently and either supported or put down his actions based on how they responded to his attitude towards them. An Orc player may have seen the once Warchief as a strong leader with an iron fist who they could follow, while a Forsaken player would see Garrosh as a threat to their very survival. In the opening credits of the game when a player first creates a new Orc character, a short cinematic will open and say the following,

> The great Cataclysm has shattered more than just the world. Warchief Thrall, arguably the most powerful living shaman has left his people behind so that he might stop the Cataclysm at its source. Yet in his absence the orc champion Garrosh Hellscream has become the Horde's new Warchief. Though popular amongst the orcs for his victories against the Lich King, Garrosh's reckless leadership has begun to cause a rift between himself and the other leaders of the Horde. With Durotar's natural resources nearly depleted, Garrosh seeks to take whatever his people need to survive regardless of who stands in his way. A dangerous new era for the Horde has dawned and it falls to brave orcs like you to uphold the will of the new Warchief and assure the dominance of your people. (Valley of Trials, *WoW*)

The depth of Garrosh's character and his reasons for his interactions stem from a well written history. In his head, all the others look down on his race, "There are some that would call us barbarians... the "mongrel races" of Azeroth." (Garrosh Hellscream, *WoW*) and so he returns the hatred he feels unto others not like him. Furthermore, he deeply cares for his people and their

plight. Unfortunately, this dedication does not include his allies as he neglects their needs in order to fulfill his people's first at whatever cost. The racial differences in the game are more than just an aesthetic or customization option. That choice, although appearing unimportant at the time of character creation, directly impacts the player experience and the personal narrative of each player character. As a result, when Garrosh Hellscream's story would lead him into a civil war within the Horde, some players would argue on the behalf of the strong willed Orc while others openly challenged his rule.

The player of the game is not reading a narrative passively, they are present in it and are subjected to the sights and feelings of the protagonist because they themselves, as the player character, are in many ways the protagonist of *World of Warcraft*. Some games do this well, and they portray historic or emotional gravity by placing the player in the position of a person's experience. *World of Warcraft* does this by making the player character the protagonist. That player character is both a reflection of the player who created it, as well as a reflection of the game's lore. When creating a character, a player has control over several options that allow them to create a character unique to them. For starters, the player can choose one of nineteen unique races that have their own culture, history, values, and story within the lore and game. That choice is the first of many that makes each player's experience within the story unique. Two friends may play the game together but still have different experiences. One example would be if one player chooses to play as a Tauren (a race of Minotaur like creatures) which would begin their narrative in a different area of the in-game world than that of their friend. NPCs, quest givers, and even enemies will differentiate the player by their race, and in some scenarios those differences can strongly change the player's perspective on the story.

Other decisions that can greatly alter the outlook of the story for the player are class and quest zone choices. For starters, the player's class is a fantasy aspect that affects direct gameplay and also differentiates the player in both role and story opportunities. There are currently twelve player classes within the game as of 2019, two of which are referred to as "Hero Classes" (a class that is introduced with new story and have a direct impact and role within the narrative when they are implemented). Each class has an associated lore and history that goes with it, and that history is referenced and occasionally told to the player as they go about experiencing the game and meeting characters who know about their respective classes. Like with races, their choice in class brings with it an unseen attitude and expectation of the player. A Paladin, a class that wields the power of light in order to fight demons and the void, has a prescribed history of being religious crusader like warriors who build churches and worship the light. They have many branches, heroes, and ultimately many stigmas and expectations that follow them. Each player class is similar in that there is an association that comes with that player choice. In the past *World of Warcraft* expansion *Legion*, the "class fantasy" was expanded upon. Each class was given a unique story line to pursue, and no other class would have access to that content. Because of this, the player's narrative was heavily influenced by their choice on class during the expansion.

Ultimately, *World of Warcraft* as a whole excels as creating anticipation. Anticipation is needed for the game to keep a large player base interested in its content, and *WoW's* ability to create it so well is the main reason that the game has lasted so long. Many games burn out or the player base move away from it when a better or newer game comes out. But with *WoW* it has always been the most popular and best designed MMORPG because it continues to build anticipation and it never stops. If a great story ends the Meta-Story ensures that there is another

great story in the works, and *WoW* continues to push new and invigorating content that keeps players committed to the game throughout all the cycles of expansions and story arcs. Yes, *WoW* does have a multitude of stories that are going on at one time and often jumble up and throw the player around in their different plot lines, but they make it work by allowing the player to choose which story they will pursue in their own player character's narrative.

Dream

The dream stage, as put forth by Booker, takes place following the anticipation stage, and it serves as an exploration period of the world first introduced through anticipation. Where the anticipation of the story was built prior, the dream stage is when any misconceptions or misunderstandings of what was anticipated begins to surface. As best said by Booker, "At first their exploration of this disconcerting new world may be exhilarating, because it is so puzzling and unfamiliar. But it is never a place in which they can feel at home" (Booker 105). The dream stage is dreamlike in how it operates to confuse and complicate the prescribed path set forth in the anticipation stage. In *World of Warcraft*, this stage acts to redirect the players towards different objectives or enemies that they believed they would face. The story gets more complicated than defeating a villain or another streamlined objective. This is the stage where complications, further objectives, and misconception rise within the story.

For example, in the expansion *Warlords Of Draenor*, the players were given a powerful artifact that boosted their abilities, a legendary item that provided each player character a talent that they could use, and they were directed towards an enemy who they could defeat and it would solve their problems. This enemy happened to be an Orc by the name of Blackhand. Blackhand is Warlord of the Blackrock clan, and is made out to be the main villain during this stage and the

player characters progress to a confrontation with the Orc before defeating him and achieving victory. Unbenounced to the players is that the character was a red herring that only gave the players a false sense of clarity and confidence. In later stages of the same story line, the true antagonist unveils themselves, but the initial confusion and complications that arise during the dream stage are what press the story onward into its later stages.

World of Warcraft is a game that uses quests to prompt the player into action and to give them direction. Quests are given in a variety of ways, but most commonly an NPC character will display a quest marker showing they have an available quest as shown below.

(All pictures are taken from my personal copy of the game and display my player character *Bluford-Dalaran*)

There are currently more than 15,000 quests in *World of Warcraft*, and that number continues to grow with each new content patch, and sometimes at the rate of new quests every day. These are completely optional opportunities for the player to pursue rewards, earn reputation, and gain experience. It is possible to reach the max level without ever turning in a quest, though that would be extremely time consuming and difficult. To have a Story-Plus experience, the game must allow for the player to be in control of which quests they take on and when they do so. Giving the player control over what they do and when means that they player ultimately has a choice in what their character will participate in. Linear games make objectives mandatory to move forward in the game, and although a player in *WoW* would have to complete the quest to move on with that story line, they can pursue another story, or no story, instead. A Story-Plus experience is a story somewhat in control of the person experiencing it. The player may not be

able to decide what the objective of the quest may be, but it is their decision if they pursue that story or not.

For a story to be Story-Plus, the Meta-Story must continue, and it is the dream stage that advances the story and continues it beyond a simple solution. A Story-Plus story has continual additions to its content that keeps expanding upon itself. Player progression and achievement in *World of Warcraft* depends on the story to allow for moments of accomplishment and achievement. Players will earn achievements (game account badges that show display and record their exploits) by completing content and various challenges. The badges signify the accomplishment so that as a story, the game can move on while still satisfying the player that their effort mattered. In the dream stage, many of the game's achievements are discovered and it is the initial stage in which a player can begin pursuing those various challenges. A challenge was presented during the anticipation stage, and the player gets their chance to complete it during the dream stage. After one challenge is completed, another takes its place and so on. The players, so long as there is content to complete, will always be in pursuit of some sort of accomplishment while playing the game. Whether personally set or challenged by the game, the player is able to see and seek accomplishment during this stage.

Frustration

The frustration stage is one of the more interesting stages of Booker's common story structure because it is often when the conflict within the story begins to build. There is a shift in the tone and mood of the story as something key changes in the story. Whether that is the mentality of the character, a new found antagonist, or any other complication that was discovered during the dream stage, it is the frustration stage where those discoveries become obstacles that

come into direct conflict with the story. As Booker defines it, the frustration stage is when "Gradually the mood of the adventure changes to one of frustration, difficulty and oppression. A shadow begins to intrude, which becomes increasingly alarming." (Booker, 106). If anything, this is where the story begins to get interesting as the story is now in a state of conflict or change. The "shadow" can be any number of things within a story, but it can best be described as a challenge to the stories path or direction. Consider a trip to the store. The simple build of that trip would be the anticipation: the need to go to the store, the dream: leaving for the store, where the frustration would be the complication along the way such as a closed down road, traffic, or car issues.

World of Warcraft does not shy away from touchy themes or statements, and those aspects of the game help to create the Story-Plus experience by encouraging diversity, discussion, and ultimately conflict within the frustration stage of the story. In fact, the politics within WoW often cause rifts among the player base that are the subject of debate and discussion within the community. The inhabitants of the game, specifically the NPC characters written into the game, have specific political ideologies that are the result of their relationship to other characters and the lore. Elements such as economy, gender, profession, race, and history factor into the politics in the game in much the same way they do in our society. Moreover, the established ideological structures of Azeroth and the ideology of the player drive an essential element of World of Warcraft's plot: conflict.

World of Warcraft's story reaches its frustration stage most often when a new enemy is revealed in the story of an expansion. In the Legion expansion, the story is going smoothly until a character by the name of Kil'Jaeden makes an appearance and the player characters are thrown into a struggle that lasted much longer than they originally expected it to. The frustration phase

in *WoW* occurs when the conflict is at its peak, and when the story appears to reach a climax or an end to the conflict, a new enemy or threat redirects the conflict and intensifies it. For example, in the expansion *Battle For Azeroth*, after a raid in which the story reaches a climax where the Alliance kill one of the Horde leaders, the story appears to have reached a conclusion of sorts and the NPCs in game discuss the possible end of the war. However, the war continues as the death only intensifies the Horde's war efforts, and a new villain is introduced to keep the pressure on the player character. The frustration phase during a *WoW* expansion is the largest part of an expansion as a climax of sorts is reached and yet the story and the conflict continues.

Due to the nature of the development cycle of *WoW*, each major patch brings new story, and that cycle creates many moments of conflict that follow all the stages of Booker's story, yet the frustration stage is the most content rich portion of an expansion's content. This is due to how each patch of a *WoW* expansion builds on one another, and the majority of that build up is done by creating a struggle in the story between the player and some greater force than them. In the expansion *Legion*, the entire expansion supported a tense and stressful story where the player was always against great odds. The frustration point of that struggle came when patch 7.2 of *Legion* went live and the raid *The Tomb of Sargeras* opened up. The story up until that point followed a pattern of success and measurable odds being overcome. *The Tomb of Sargeras* brought with it more conflict, but more importantly a look at the endless battle that still awaited the player. At the end of the raid the players get a glimpse of their great enemy, and the battle to come not only looks endless, but unwinnable. Frustration in *WoW* acts as a promise to the players that the major conflict of the expansion is still yet to come, and within the story the major characters will address the coming battles with feelings of doubt and worry that serve to create a

feeling of uneasiness and tension. It is essentially the point in the story where an obstacle is between the player character and what they want to achieve.

Nightmare

The nightmare stage of Booker's common story structure is the stage in which the shadow discovered in the frustration stage becomes so overwhelming or concerning that there is a clear and likely chance of failure. Booker describes the "shadow" during the nightmare stage as "so dominating that it seems to pose a serious threat to the hero or heroine's survival." (Booker, 106). It is the point in the story when it is clear that there is no return to normality, and there is only an option of success or failure respectively. Once the nightmare stage is reached, it is no longer about the decision to achieve something, it is the thought and pursuit of failure. Frustration can lead to a multitude of different nightmare situations, and depending on the direction and purpose of the story, the nightmare stage can easily be the most significant stage. This is due to how the "shadow" can take hold of the story line and its characters, as the nightmare stage is the struggle at its most difficult and contested point.

The nightmare stage of a *World of Warcraft* story arc typically includes the death of a major character, but in some cases, it is the stage where the true antagonist or a greater power changes the outlook of the story. This can be done through an attempt and failure to defeat the antagonist or through the antagonist nearly achieving their own goal(s) at the expense of the player character. To reference the *WoW* expansion *Legion*, it is during this stage that the player and the story characters learn that one of their allies, the Titans (the creators of many of the races and powerful beings that are written as good), have been turned against them against their will. Hope is lost due to the sheer overwhelming power that has to be overcome, and each expansion

will make this stage of the story feel unwinnable so that the challenge that the players will overcome to reach a resolution feels dire, stressful, and ultimately has a feeling of impossibility that is only overcome by bravery, skill, and heroics. The nightmare stage is the stress of a story and gives it its gravity. All the other stages build to this point for the player to feel like there is a real chance of failure. This is ultimately because, although a game with a well written story, *World of Warcraft* is still a game that must present a challenge that both feels and sounds as challenging as it actually is to the players.

In the current story arc of *World of Warcraft, Battle For Azeroth*, a cold war reminiscent environment erupted into a world war surrounding the discovery of a powerful new resource. Players then were tasked with fighting in the war as commanders for their respective faction, either Horde or Alliance, which serves to further divide the player base. As a member of the Grand Alliance, my player character was on the front lines during the Burning of Teldrassil, a battle that pitched my faction against the Horde, and a battle that the Alliance lost. What followed was an unprecedented event in the game where an entire race was nearly wiped out as their ancestral home burned. Players on the Horde, whether they liked it or not, had a hand in the victory over the Alliance and indirectly helped destroy an entire people's heritage. Some players on the Horde may have supported those actions due to past grievances and feelings that are like fanaticism for the Warchief, but a majority of the player base expressed grievance and even outcry against the actions of their faction. On my character's end, I had been forced out of my home and forced to run as it and my people burned, while on a simithetic Horde player's end, they were forced to participate in the annex that would lead to the burning of Teldrassil. Whether the Horde player is directly responsible or not, the story pitched us against each other, and a resolution to that conflict has yet to be reached.

Dividing the player base in the narrative allows the narrative of the game to have multiple points of view, and that differentiation creates an interesting interaction when considering Booker's nightmare stage. You could be the Horde soldier who forsakes their honor in the burning of Teldrassil or you could be the refugee fleeing a war-torn homeland, and each player will experience that event differently. The nightmare is the player's lack of control, inability to contest, and the struggle they are taking part of, and it is different for different players depending on what side of the narrative they stand on. My experience of the Burning of Teldrassil contrasts that of someone of the other faction, and as a result our interactions and actions within the game reflect our experiences. While a Horde player helped lead an assault on Teldrassil, my player character was given the objective of saving as many civilians as I could before their home went up in flames. The quest to save all the civilians was purposefully impossible as I had only three minutes to save over a thousand NPCs. I saved fewer than a hundred of them. From my point of view, I knew the NPCs of Teldrassil and I had struggled with having to choose who to save. During my player character's journey, I had met them and spent hours of time around them. For a player on the opposite side of the spectrum, they could not even know there were more than a handful of NPCs in Teldrassil. The faction system creates conflict, but it also serves as a narrative tool that pulls the player base into the politics of the world and impacts their experiences in the game.

However, the world politics do not always drive the player base apart. There have been many times in the past within the narrative of the game in which the player characters of both factions and even times in which the factions themselves have teamed up for one reason or another. In these scenarios, the writers of the plot must consider how they can push the player base back together while still acknowledging the grievances each side may hold. The nightmare

stage is different for each player depending on their personal story, and those differentiations are quite unique to *World of Warcraft* due to the sheer size and quality of the game's content.

The Meta-Story of *World of Warcraft* is powerful in how it can strain the player through difficult choices and by placing them in uncomfortable situations, yet players still ultimately get a choice. Sometimes the choices in *WoW* can be extremely jarring, and some of the decisions the player character makes will influence major portions of the story they experience. An example of this comes from the Blizzard development team, "I was expecting for there to be some way to tell the guy who gave you the quest that no, actually I don't want to torture a prisoner, but there didn't seem to be any way to do that. Worse, the quest is part of a chain . . . So, either you play along and zap the guy, or you don't get to go to the Nexus." (*World of Warcraft and Philosophy*, 8). What this quote references is a quest in the zone Borean Tundra on the continent of Northrend within the *WoW* world. That questline takes the player through some basic preparatory quests before placing the player character in front of a choice in which they have to zap an NPC. If they do it, the next quest will take them to the Nexus, a zone in the game where there are several dungeons and a raid for the players to do, and the NPC will die. If they decide to not do it, they will not get to go to the Nexus as the quest line would end there. They are not presented with an alternative, and the gravity of that decision is purposefully heavy. This experience will be different for every player based on their background and state of mind about the game. For me, I was shocked by this quest when I came across it when leveling years ago. I will always remember that quest because, although it is just a game, I questioned my own personal story within the game and what my own morals are. Throughout the massive *World of Warcraft* there are countless enemies to slay, and by the time a player reaches level cap they will have killed thousands on their journey. So why would one quest for the life of one character feel so heavy

when the game is filled with so much killing? It depends on the player. For me it was because I could not personally ration killing someone who could not hit me back, while a friend I leveled with and did that quest chain with, he zapped the NPC without thinking about it. A player character's narrative adds to the Meta-Story by how the story affects them and by the choices they make.

A player's personal ethics depend on their attitude towards the Meta-Story of *World of Warcraft*, and the game designers of *WoW* play heavily into player ethics when creating the game world. As to why there is a focus on player ethics by the game designers, Dr. Luke Cuddy explains this choice in *World of Warcraft and Philosophy*,

> A player's personal ethics in world will depend on two things: how much the player is emotionally or socially invested in that world, and whether the world is viewed as part of the player's real life or not. Only then can we start looking at whether traditional real world systems of ethics apply to MMORPGs, and the ways in which real world issues are transformed by the gamespace. (*World of Warcraft and Philosophy*, 8)

A game world has a consistent set of rules. For *WoW*, those rules are that the player can use certain abilities to do a limited (although large) amount of quests and objectives. To make the high fantasy aspect of the game more than just a fictional world, and to make the Meta-Story have weight and real emotion to it, the developers of *WoW* brought in real world ethics and integrated it into the storytelling of *WoW*. The story tends to get as complicated and high stakes as real-life major events do, and the writers do their best to make each character, event, and death feel impactful, meaningful, and real, which is all part of Booker's concept of the nightmare stage.

Resolution

The final stage of Booker's common story structure, the resolution stage, can be considered a conclusion in that the story has reached some sort of resolution to the challenges of the previous nightmare stage. This stage does not mean that the story is over, it just suggests that the buildup over the prior four stages will be resolved. The resolution stage is where questions are asked such as "how far have they learned or gained anything from their experience? Have they been fundamentally changed, or was it all `just a dream'?" (Booker, 106). The answers to these questions differ based on what transpired during the previous stages, but the purpose of the resolution stage is for there to be a change from where the story started in some capacity.

A Story-Plus world is an environment that sees constant change, and the most notable changes occur during the resolution stage of the story during one of *WoW's* expansions. Although there is never a full conclusion or end to the Meta-Story within *WoW*, there is meaningful change in the story. Characters in the narrative will die, betray the player, push their agendas, and as a result the world will change as the story progresses. Conclusions to story and quest lines allow the player to feel like they have reached the end of something, although not the game itself. With each new expansion the is a new level cap, more quests, and new characters to push forward the story. Like a sequel for a book or a show, an expansion is a sequel for the unfinished story of *World of Warcraft*. What resolution is made is through the defeat of many enemies that had stood against the player character and the game world would change in some way. For example, each expansion ends with their respective main antagonists defeated. Ragnaros was defeated in *Vanilla WoW* (the game during the time before any expansions were released), Illidan was defeated during *The Burning Crusade*, the Litch King was killed during *Wrath of the Litch King*, Deathwing was killed during *Cataclysm*, Hellscream was overthrown

and captured during *Mists of Pandaria,* Archemond was killed during *Warlords of Draenor*, and Sargeras was imprisoned during *Legion*. In each expansion the antagonist was dealt with is some way, whether through their capture or their death, their demise and the player character's victory is the resolution to each expansion.

Although *WoW* is a game with player driven narrative, the Meta-Story continues with or without the player's participation, as will there be a new anticipation stage to accompany every resolution stage. The game is now fifteen years old, and this is not including the time it took for Blizzard Entertainment to develop the MMORPG. For fifteen years the game has lived, grown, and changed regardless of the individual player's contribution, and yet the game still depends on the involvement of the player for it to keep going. This is because the game world of *WoW* is a persistent living environment, and so long as there are players inhabiting the *World of Warcraft*, there will be story to keep them invested. Game designers and writers create frequent story updates called content patches that come to the game every seventy-seven days or so, and about every two years Blizzard Entertainment releases new story arcs in the form of expansion to the game's content. The addition of new content is driven by the player base, because they are the ones who inhabit the world created by the developers. A player has no say over how the greater story will ultimately play out, but they influence it through their play, response, and discussion over the story as it progresses. Players interact with each other within the living game space of *WoW,* and that interaction gives life and meaning to the game through shared experience. At any point in time that a player character exists within the game world the story is persisting. Their participation through their personal narrative continues throughout the cycle of story stages within the Meta-Story, and so long as there is a player with desires and objectives within *WoW's*

game world, there will be no complete resolution to the story because the story is the player's own making within the game world.

The progression of a story is almost as important as the conclusion itself, but within a Story-Plus narrative, progression means something more than an aspect of the story. Within *WoW*, progression means working to achieve something in stages. For example, raids within the game are made up of many boss encounters, considered the most mechanically challenging content in the game, and there is a large community build around the best players taking those bosses down quickly. Each boss is a step in the completion of the raid, and when the final boss falls the raid is finished. The progression happens through the many trial and error attempts at killing each boss that occur. In one such world first race, the guild Method attempted to kill the final boss of a raid 346 times before finally killing the boss, and they did this over the course of one week with each attempt taking anywhere from five to fifteen minutes. To any person who does not play the game, this may seem like an insane and unreasonable resolve to be the first players to complete a new raid.

The community of *World of Warcraft* is one that supports these committed and hard core players. The reason the community supports these players so much is that they are playing at the highest level that the game provides. At the time of each Mythic Race, there is no content in the game that could be considered as challenging as the raid, and each raid is considered the chapter endings to each chapter of *WoW*'s Meta-Story. There is a long history of raids in *WoW* supporting essential plot elements and events that players cannot experience outside of that raid. For instance, at the end of the raid *Antorus, The Burning Throne* from the *World of Warcraft: Legion* expansion, the greatest threat to the player characters in the known universe of *WoW*, Sargeras, reveals himself and is bound by the champion players along with the other Titans of

the universe after defeating the final boss on Mythic difficulty. What the players see when they

defeat the final boss, another Titan by the name of Argus the Unmaker, is Sargeras revealing

himself fully for the first time ever in front of a player character. He is massive, planet sized, and

once revealed attempts to destroy the planet Azeroth (the home world of the player characters)

before getting trapped inside of the Titan Pantheon by the other Titans and the players who

defeated Argus (the Titans are inspired by Greek mythological gods, although they are planet

sized and cosmic). Players who did not complete the raid would not see the images taken from

the ending cinematic below that revealed Sargeras's capture.

The fact that the game as content that is skill and time gated is an essential part of the Story-Plus

experience that *WoW* provides. Not all of the content can be accessed by everyone. Some

content, like raiding, takes a lot of time and dedication by the individual player and they must

work with others who are just as committed as they are to complete the content. The Mythic

World First Race in February 2019 for the raid *Battle of Dazar A'lor* (the "one such" world first

race mentioned previously) included twenty players throughout the entire raid progression period

actively playing the game for a week straight with minimal breaks. Surrounding those players

were other players of the same group ready to sub in and take the place of another at any point during the progression. While this progression was going on, millions of players around the world tuned in on Twitch and other platforms to watch the players complete the raid. At any given time throughout the entire week, there could be anywhere from fifty to seventy-five thousand people watching the race live unanimously. The players wanted to see the content that they couldn't participate in, and they wanted to support the players who they look to as being the best of the best.

The Story-Plus experience here is the shared experience of the player base as they watch, talk about, and support the players who were actively raiding day in and day out to complete the most difficult content first. The story was being experienced by those raiders, but it was being streamed and shared to others who were not present with the raiders. A Story-Plus experience is a story with an active community that experiences content together, and there is no story that does this better that *World of Warcraft*.

World of Warcraft is a game designed around giving players incentives to progress through the story, and for any progression to be made it is up to the player to pursue their own goals. This ideology of the game designers at Blizzard is conceived around the idea that, not only should a game be fun and difficult, but it should be competitive and rewarding. People spend hundreds, thousands, and even full years of their lives playing *World of Warcraft* (I have been playing it since 2007) and there always appears for there to still be something to do, explore, and achieve within the game. For most players, the primary incentive to play the game is obtaining loot, gear, and collectables through questing, raids, and other in game activities. Over time, player characters will gain strength and renown by completing story missions, participating in challenging content, and through experiencing the story. Some such rewards include items such

as rings, artifacts, and suits of armor. These are all items that the player pursues in order to gain strength and be able to complete more challenging content. The progression of the game is not the progression of the story for these types of players. Instead, the growth of the player character is their primary focus and drive. Better gear and stronger weapons leads to the player's character to become stronger, and players are constantly in the pursuit of stronger equipment.

Wow's story allows for players to build themselves up within it, and the mechanics that are built into much of the story driven content are affected by the player's power and skill. Some story lines cannot be seen unless a powerful character or group of characters complete challenging content, and that design choice by the developers allows for the game to lock players out of story and content through a skill and item wall; it can feel like reading a book but not being allowed to read the last chapter until you get stronger. A majority of players are casual in that they play the game for the sake of the fun the game provides, and that choice in approach to how they play the game directly affects how much of the game story they will be able to experience. For some that fun is discovering the story while for others it may be collecting or gathering achievements (I even have one friend who will go and fish in game for hours at a time because that is what he enjoys about the game). Other players, who are commonly known as "hard core" players in the community, dedicate their time to becoming the best player in the game. Still however, no one person has experienced all of what the game has to offer regardless of the choices they have made within the game.

The larger story of *WoW*, what has been referred to here as the Meta-Story, is the overarching and set narrative of the game's world and major characters, and that Meta-Story works to encourage players on their variety of adventures. Each expansion of *World of Warcraft* has a 'big bad' antagonist that pushes the story forward, but that antagonist is not always a cut-

and-paste villain who the players must take down. The Old Gods, the greatest threat to the player characters in the game, are Lovecraft inspired all powerful being who seek to enslave or destroy all of Azeroth, and their presence has kept the player and NPC characters on edge since the game's beginning. However, regardless of the clear threat he presents, the players never encounter and defeat all of them. They are cosmic entities who can devour a planet, so their presence acts as a reminder to the players that there is greater things beyond the smaller creatures they encounter that threatens their world. For *WoW* to continue to succeed, there must always be a threat for the character to encounter.

There must be pressure and struggle within the Meta-Story of the game that keeps the players motivated and on their toes. Conflict is a constant for *WoW*, and a universal story trait as best stated by David Bordwell as the second rule of storytelling, "In the course of this struggle, the characters enter into conflict with others or with external circumstances." (Bordwell, 18). Without conflict there would be no developing plot or player agency. For the game to succeed, players must get stronger to face stronger enemies, and the player must also want to get stronger to face those threats. Player agency is a difficult balance between conflict and reward that *WoW* has both done well and poorly on in the past. But for there to be any continuation of the story there must always be a harbinger of conflict in the story, hence the reference to Sargeras. Sargeras never directly attacks the players, but his presence influences the story they make for themselves within the game as extensions of the Dark Titan's rule that constantly threaten and pursue the players on their journeys. Characters like Kil'jaeden the Deceiver, Archimonde the Defiler, and Gul'dan become direct encounters for the player respectively as they act in place of the greater threat of Sargeras. By continuing to push forward new threats while keeping the overwhelming ones at bay, *WoW* is a story that is never finished and always dangerous. Players

will always have a role within the plot as champions chosen to face any and all threats, but that constant, looming, and powerful threat is always there as motivation. There is no resolution in *WoW*. Only momentary victories while the next antagonist gathers their strength.

The Meta-Story of *WoW* never has and never will have a full conclusion, but there momentarily times when the player character has progressed to end of all the content the game has to offer, and times when the Meta-Story reaches lulls or moments of the current story arc being wrapped up while the next story arc develops. This process also can be referred to as the patch cycle. Each content patch in the game (every Tuesday morning) brings potential new content for the players to complete. There is no conclusion to the story so long as the game keeps bringing new stories into the mix and while players are still adventuring and developing their own personal narratives. However, there will be conclusions to certain story arcs, which in turn allows for a cyclical nature of content to develop within *WoW* of Booker's common story structure, almost like that of the water cycle but with story. There is constantly story being played, told, and developed, and I believe this cycle will continue for a long time within *World of Warcraft's* game world due to its popularity and size. The Meta-Story does not depend on the addition of more content, but a Story-Plus experience does, but there is still moments of accomplishment and closure. To reference Bordwell again, his final rule of storytelling is that there will be "a decisive victory or defeat, a resolution of the problem and a clear achievement or non-achievement of the goals." (Bordwell, 18). For this reason, there are clear and defined stages within the game story that allow for achievement to take place and for players to achieve their goals. However, there will always be room within the game world and story for there to be new challenges to overcome and goals to reach.

Community

I have discussed how *World of Warcraft* has a story that follows Booker's common story structure and explained each stage as it functions for the *WoW* Meta-Story, but I have yet to touch on the other half of the Story-Plus experience: community. I will not be diving into each community support fully as each could be a fully developed discussion of their own, but it is important to mention them in order to understand their effect on a story. The community supports that will be evaluated within the context of *WoW's* Meta-Story are guilds and shared experiences.

A guild in *WoW* is a player organization in the game that consists of the player characters and that is created and run by players in game. Below are a couple examples of guilds gathered together in game:

These player built organizations exist for likeminded communities to work through and play the game together. They host events, share quests, complete raids, and much more together, and ultimately guilds in *WoW* often become small or large family units within the game. This is because the game allows for them to experience it together, and over time, a player's guild can become a central part of their player character's narrative. I personally do almost everything I can in *World of Warcraft* with my guild, named Dead Raiders Society, when I play because they are my good friends and adventuring companions. When something happens in the story, like the Burning of Teldrassil mentioned previously, it is not an event that I experienced alone. My guild talked about that event for weeks after all joining up together in game to complete the questline together. When a player is mentioned in the narrative, often times they are referred to as the "Heroes," "Champions," and other general terms that allude to a collective rather than a sole player. Guilds are an essential part of *World of Warcraft's* story because the game is designed around player interaction and cooperation to achieve their own personal goals. A player's own

character narrative becomes influenced by those they play with, and guilds are at the forefront of those community influences on the narrative experience of *World of Warcraft*.

Sharing a fantasy world with other real people, is part of what makes the Meta-Story of *WoW* a Story-Plus experience. Human beings are complex and no one person is the same, yet within *World of Warcraft* players all share in their experiences together. The game is not just a game and the story is not just a story, because rational people exist within the gamespace together. There may not be lasting effects of a player's action on the game world or an NPC, but a player could have a lifelong impact on another player as a result of their actions. I will never forget the time a random player came across me in the game world as I was struggling to complete a quest that required me to kill a boss. Not only did they stop to help me, but we adventured together for hours and have since become lifelong friends. Interaction between player characters is like the interaction between people outside of the game, yet they exist within the same shared fantasy game world. The *WoW* community is special in that people treat each other with respect because

> human beings should always be treated as ends, not just as means, and with the respect that all rational beings deserve. This certainly applies to players who have achieved their personal goals halfway into a dungeon instance, but stay with the party until the final boss has been downed. Even players that clearly consider *World of Warcraft* to be "just a game" rarely desert their group, understanding that each avatar has a human behind it who is worthy respect. (*World of Warcraft and Philosophy*, 10)

Video games are not typically as focused as *World of Warcraft* is on its in game community, but the players themselves are the biggest advocates for community supports because the game is seen as a community oriented game. Players in many cases must work together to get what they

want, and there is a mutual understanding between the players that they need each other to accomplish their goals in many cases.

Conclusion

The Meta-Story of the game is widely known by the player base, but all of the unique individual stories of those players that started when they first made their character are the stories that entwine to create the plus experience of the story. *World of Warcraft* is a shared story as much as it is an individuals, and the game is a communal experience driven by a persisting world and direct immediate responses to the game content. Each journey is unique, and the player has to work to get stronger and search for knowledge about the world through their gameplay. It is not a disadvantage that a player's experience can so greatly differ than another's. Rather, it is unique to *WoW* in that the player's knowledge of the game is a gathered knowledge. The lore is the player's to discover, and some aspects of those stories may greatly affect one player on their journey while another player may never hear of it. There are players in the game today who have seen killed both Archimonde and Kil'jaeden, the two most formidable bosses in the game, and just as many players who have never even seen them. Each of these unique player experiences, their journeys and paths through the game's various stories, are what compose the unique personal narrative element of the Story-Plus experience.

The simple fact is, *World of Warcraft* excites me. Every time I log into the game there is a multitude of objectives to complete, story to explore, and people to meet. If I get bored doing one thing there is always something else I can do in game. If I get bored of the game there are books, comics, and even a film that I can dive into that are about the *Warcraft* universe, and I gladly dive in every chance I get because of how invested I have become in the story. The story

is massive, and it fills me with wonder. If I get bored of the game and the game story, I have friends to go join in another game or even that I can just chat with, friends from my guild, that I know outside of gaming, or even ones that I met while playing. Perhaps my favorite thing about *WoW*, and why I love the game so much, is how it can bring people together. I am never alone when I get on the game if I don't want to be. Whether there is content to push through, story to discover, or a friend's challenge to help conquer, there is a plethora of experiences to be had within *World of Warcraft*. After years of playing *WoW*, twelve years as of 2019, I have grown attached to the game story, the characters, the people I have met, and my player character. I have played *WoW* for so long consistently because it is so much more than a story or a game to me and millions of other players. *World of Warcraft* is an experience, a story that has seen me through my teenage years and early twenties, and a place where I met several lifelong friends. What makes *WoW* relevant is the player experience within the game. It is an experience that allows the player to decide what they do and what they care about, and an experience that will challenge the player at every turn. Every person who plays the game is looking for a meaningful experience, and what makes *WoW* special is that so many people can find it in the game.

Works Cited

Booker, Christopher. *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories*. London: Continuum, 2004.

> Print.

Bordwell, David, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson. *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film*

> *Style & Mode of Production to 1960*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1985. Print.

Cuddy, Luke, and John Nordlinger. *World of Warcraft and Philosophy*. [Electronic Resource].

> Chicago : Open Court, c2009., 2009. EBSCOhost,

> login.proxy006.nclive.org/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true

> &db=cat04042a&AN=app.b5574401&site=eds-live&scope=site.

Lauro C. *MMO mechanics: lowering the barriers to entry*.

> http://massively.joystiq.com/2014/01/08/mmo-mechanicslowering-the-barriers-to-entry/

> (accessed January 22, 2019). Print.

Laird, A. (2001). *"Ringing the Changes on Gyges: Philosophy and the Formation of Fiction in*

> *Plato's Republic"*. Journal of Hellenic Studies. 121: 12–29. Print.

Stickney, Anne. *"What Is World of Warcraft?"* Engadget. AOL Inc. 3 Jan. 2014. Web. 3 Mar.

> 2016. http://www.engadget.com/2014/01/03/what-is-world-of-warcraft/

World of Warcraft, For PC and Mac Blizzard Entertainment, 2004.