Mimetic rivalry in shared virtual environments:

A study of conflict and imitation in *World of Warcraft*

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

Eli Goren

Brunel University London

October 2018

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my advisor Geoff King for his unswerving guidance, his undogmatic attitude and his exceptional ability to inspire and instruct. This thesis owes a lot to his attention which was never refused to me. I am also grateful to my second advisor Will Self, who was invariably thought-provoking and supported me more than once through what was not always an easy time.

I am indebted to those who constantly made me feel better about what I was doing: The Older Gamers metacorporation — tens of thousands of men and women from different countries and different walks of life, in their mid-thirties to their mid-seventies, humble, hardworking, able to engage with online video games like no one else I've met. Their presence was unseen, their influence — indirect, yet they are the best reason why this study should have been done.

Abstract

Mounting evidence from neuroscience, clinical psychology and human development points to significance of imitation in human behaviour, interpersonal relationships and collectively pursued activities. These group activities include participation in online multiplayer computer games, massively multiplayer online games or other kinds of socially situated gaming. However, despite the growing salience of either subject, a wide-scale research of imitation in collective play is yet to be carried out.

This study addresses this gap in knowledge by looking at imitative phenomena in massively multiplayer online gaming from the conceptual perspective of René Girard's mimetic hypothesis. The hypothesis proceeds from the following assumptions: goal commitment is activated by reflexive imitation and regulated by goal proximity; extrinsic goal value is reciprocally accrued within the goal pursuing group; competing motivations towards collectively pursued goals result in intra-group aggression. Mimetic impulse is, therefore, formally equivalent to conflictual imitation. This thesis seeks to register how conflictual imitation may be encouraged by the game and reproduced by the players.

The study applies a combination of formal and phenomenological approach to *World of Warcraft* player experience, specifically, that obtained at the highest difficulty of collective play. Subjective analytical outcomes are corroborated by evidence from fieldwork which took place over the period of two years and enabled the researcher to engage with the subject from the perspective of high competence and literacy. To offset the possible confirmation bias and support the analytical findings and field observations with quantitative data, the study introduces a comparative survey of *World of Warcraft* players. The 334 respondents include 164 Russian-speaking gamers: a representative sample for what is widely regarded as a hyper-competitive gamer community.

Contents

1 Introduction

‘If one ape observes another reach for an object, it is immediately tempted to imitate the gesture.’ René Girard means this figuratively, rather than factually, yet this illustrative example makes an apt introduction to the concept of mimetic desire. It is initially an acquisitive impulse which leads, as Girard then proceeds to elaborate, to antagonism between the parties involved: two apes cannot grab the same object without creating a potential for conflict. Neither can two people (Girard 1987b: 8). In human beings, this ‘appropriative mimicry’ (Girard 1996: 10) forms a triangle between someone who *has* the object — referred to as the *model* — someone who *wants* the object — referred to as the *subject* — and the object itself. In essence, what the subject is imitating is the model’s *desire* for the contested object. What the subject is motivated by, therefore, is *mimetic desire:* a desire to replicate the model’s desire in order to achieve the same state of being the subject perceives the model to have.

More than a decade after the utterance was made, it was found to be somewhat more in line with reality than its function as a literary device would suggest. A ground-breaking experiment on macaque monkeys was carried out at a neurophysiological laboratory in Parma, Italy. The Parma group, as they later became known, took readings of the monkey’s neural activity as it reached for a piece of food, and then, as it watched the experimenter reach for the object and hold it. On comparing the readings, the Parma group found that the same group of neurons discharged when the monkey took the object itself and watched the researcher take it. These previously unobserved neural agents were defined as *mirror neurons* (di Pellegrino, Fadiga, Fogassi, Gallese & Rizzolatti 1992; Rizzolatti, Fadiga, Gallese & Fogassi 1996; see also Rizzolatti 2005). Importantly, and well in line with Girard’s then fictitious analogy, mirror neurons did not come into action when the object was visible yet left alone. The only thing to cause the discharge was the subject taking the object or watching someone else take it (Iacoboni 2005: 79; see also Gallese 2005a: 108–111). A crucial expansion of the initial discovery resulted from a follow-up study, in which a researcher merely initiated a

motion towards the object and omitted or concealed the actual process of interacting with it. The results were similar to those obtained in the first experiment, suggesting that mirror neurons allow the purpose of goal-directed activity to be inferred from partial information as well as from the activity observed in full (Umiltà, Kohler, Gallese, Fogassi, Fadiga, Keysers & Rizzolatti 2001; see also Gallese 2005b: 33).

In other words, the mirror neuron system affords to reliably infer goal-motivated behaviour without having observed the actual event of possession. Perhaps, this had led Vittorio Gallese, of the Parma group fame, to engage with the mimetic theory. Girard's triangular desire is plausible, Gallese concludes, because the mechanism by which the subject can discern the model's intention towards object or goal exists (Gallese 2009). This mechanism is termed embodied simulation: a mental play-through of the observed or inferred activity, which alludes to the body-schema[1] that exists in the observer's own mind and proceeds automatically and pre-rationally (Gallese 2009: 35; see also Gallese 2005b: 41–42). While he endorses, in a sense, Girard's perspective on mimesis, Gallese shifts the focus of the discussion to empathy: the subject's aspiration to become the model stems from their ability to relate to the model through projecting the model onto their own body-schema (Gallese 2009: 37–39). Could it be that Girard was mistaken and the acquisitive aspect of imitation was secondary to its capacity to instantiate empathy?

Perhaps not. In 2012, a variation of the original Parma experiment was conducted by a research group led by Maël Lebreton. A sample of 116 people aged 18 to 39 were shown videos of various objects — food, clothing, toys and tools — both when static, and when reached for and held by the experimenter. In the process of this demonstration, the participants were asked if they liked the object that was shown to them and wanted to have it, as well as required to rate the desirability of the object on a scale of 0 to 10. Further to that, MRI scans were performed to see which brain structures were activated in response to the videos. The results were unambiguous:

[1] Here 'an unconscious body map, which enables us to program and monitor the execution of actions with the different body parts' (Gallese 2005b: 24).

objects pursued by the experimenter were seen as more desirable and motivated a stronger intention to possess them (Lebreton, Kawa, d'Arc, Daunizeau & Pessiglione 2012). Girard's notions of acquisitive imitation were shown to be highly plausible with regard to human beings. In 2016, Lebreton and colleagues' experiment was successfully reproduced using a sample of autistic participants. The findings supported the earlier study: the participants were significantly more interested in objects that were gestured towards or interacted with, than in objects that were left alone (d'Arc, Vinkier, Lebreton, Soulières, Mottron & Pessiglione 2016). In addition to validating the first study, the second study naturalised Girard's 'mimetic desire' in neuroscientific research by using it as a special term to describe 'the spontaneous propensity to pursue goals that others pursue' (d'Arc et. al. 2016: 1).

To reiterate, the appropriative focus of mimetic desire makes it inherently antagonistic. If the initial, pre-rational impulse that results from seeing an object in someone's hands is the desire to possess the same object, embodied simulation becomes rife with conflict 'which the convergence of two or several avid hands toward one and the same object cannot help but provoke' (Girard 1987: 8; see also Girard 1989: 146). However, if we are to align the theory better with contemporary people, we should make note of another crucial aspect of mimetic desire. It is not genuinely the concrete object that the subject aspires for and the model seeks to protect. Rather than that, it is the state of being the subject believes the object to grant. Something the model *is* and the subject desires to *be*.

While mimetic desire is addressed exhaustively in Chapter 2 of this thesis, we can see that since competition over objects per se proves to be competition over markers of status, the picture becomes altogether more believable than that painted by the first words of this chapter. In some sense, mimetic desire seems quite compatible with numerous social norms and mechanisms intended to prevent more violent forms of rivalry. The same mechanisms that keep competition under control by, among other things, situating it in domains which are, at least partially, designed as environments of socially and individually acceptable conflict.

1.1 Conflictual imitation in massively multiplayer online games

Virtual worlds, massively multiplayer online games (MMOs) in particular, include various modes of player versus environment (PvE) and player versus player (PvP) conflict that may be confidently described as socially and individually acceptable. The fact that MMO interactions are not performed by the players in person but mediated through their virtual representations makes acts of aggression less consequential than they would be if the players were physically present.[2] Mechanics of permanent death[3] or full-loot PvP[4] do have significant impact when they are enabled (which is not the case for the overwhelming majority of MMOs) but the risks connected to those mechanics are still lower than those represented by real-world aggression. In general, we would be justified to say that interpersonal conflict, aggressive appropriation inclusive, is something that MMOs have domesticated with such success that it has become, to a significant extent, safe and secure.

If we digress from Girard's special flavour of imitation and take another look at the more universally applicable mirror neuron system, we should make note of two interesting circumstances. Firstly, whenever the player is located[5] within a virtual world

---

[2] This does not mean that the effects of such aggressive acts are non-existent, unimportant, or easily trivialised. This is a complex issue which may, in some cases, lead to real-world outcomes or influence real-world outcomes indirectly. In general, however, it is not unreasonable to presume that presence within a virtual world and mediation through avatars lends a high degree of protection to the players' anonymity, dignity and safety (cf. Valtin, Pietschmann, Liebold & Ohler 2014: 54–55). It is my well-considered belief that this is a distinction we do want to make if we want to remain unbiased as scientists, unhampered as designers and unimprisoned as players.

[3] In which case an attacked player is liable to lose their avatar irrevocably.

[4] In which case a player may be irrevocably deprived of their virtual property.

[5] In the sense legitimised by Gordon Calleja, the term is used to describe a situation when a player-controlled avatar is placed within a virtual environment by which the player is spatially anchored to the same represented location (Calleja 2007: 247).

of a MMO game, they are normally surrounded by avatars controlled by other players. Moreover, with common MMO field of view at 120 to 150 degrees[6] and no variance of resolution across the field, the player will, in average, be able to clearly observe a number of player-characters greater than the number of people they would in average be able to observe in their real-world interactions. Secondly, while the animation sequences that regulate the virtual characters' 'motor behaviours' are, in general, many and various, they are still limited and restricted to similar representations of motion that are very frequently reproduced. Consequently, if a virtual representation of a moving body activates mirror neurons in a way not unlike a real-world moving body does, and there is some circumstantial evidence that it might (Huesmann 2005), we would not be wrong to say MMOs have increased capacity of mirror neuron stimulation and/or imitative learning — at least by virtue of showing more moving bodies with greater frequency and recognisability of motion.

Conceivably, if domesticated conflict and plentiful imitation are the opportunities provided by MMOs in their capacity of multi-user simulations, research on conflict and imitation in MMOs is something we would be likely to see a lot of. Surprisingly, this does not seem to be the case.

Where imitation in video games is concerned, the lack of wide-scale in-depth research is surprising. Mirror neurons were acknowledged by some leading experts in the field, although in a way that feels rather conservative and restrained. Ian Bogost brings the mirror neuron system (MNS) up in connection with non-narrative meaning-making, i.e. as a cognitive faculty which enables the player to make sense of game mechanics and events without their being explicitly described (Bogost 2006: 70). Richard Bartle focuses on the MNS being conducive of empathy towards virtual characters, both player and non-player, and, consequentially, increased believability of in-game characters and situations it can facilitate (Bartle 2016a: 472–473). Neither of the two scholars seems to pay much attention to the acquisitive mechanisms that underpinned the original experiment: the monkey sees the researcher reach for an apple and executes a mental

[6] Assuming a 16:9 screen ratio.

simulation of reaching for the apple itself. The implications addressed by Bogost and Bartle appear to be rather more viable in the context of videogames – if nothing else, acquisition of in-game objects is not always manifest, and not necessarily a prevalent activity. This does not mean, however, that the appropriative impulse is never in play: it may have its role, albeit not that as straightforward as one a simple extrapolation of the Parma experiment would suggest.

The theme of inter-player conflict in multiplayer online games does not appear to be too popular either. David Myers took on the subject by staging an experiment in the setting of *City of Heroes* (Cryptic Studios 2004) isolated collective player versus player gameplay (Myers 2008), yet the evidence that research produced was, arguably, inconclusive. The way the experiment interfered with the subjects' player experience by exploiting an ill-conceived game mechanic made its results extremely predictable and common-sensical rather than genuinely illuminating (cf. Bartle 2016b: 73). Apart from Myers' study, as well as a few isolated cases discussed further in this thesis, it does not seem that many video game scholars are too eager to engage with the subject of inter-player antagonism, certainly not in the sense that would satisfy Girard's theoretical foundations. We will see what makes mimetic antagonism so special if we consider a crude yet efficient analogy.

Let us imagine a mimetic game of football, which plays nothing like actual football does, but serves well to illustrate the situation. There are 22 individual agents in close proximity sharing a single object of acquisition. The object, in this case the ball, is intentionally pursued by the players on the field, which is to say some of them reach for the ball, some of them gain possession of it, some of them observe the others doing the above. By now we should know how appropriative mimicry is supposed to function: the moment the player sees the ball in possession of the opposite team player, their interest in the ball elevates and they[7] strive to get hold of the ball themselves. The problem,

[7] Throughout this thesis, singular 'they' is sometimes used as a gender-neutral pronoun. In case if the reader finds this stylistically objectionable, they are welcome to subsitute 'they' with a gender-neutral pronoun they prefer.

however, is that as long as another player has the ball *it does not matter what team they play for*, a teammate is a target as good as any.[8] In other words, a mimetic conflict is almost inevitably intra-communal: seeing the ball held by a teammate aggravates our hypothetical player no less than if the ball were controlled by an opponent (in fact, a teammate is likely to be even worse, as is discussed further in Chapter 2). As we can see the mimetic theory tends to view competitive antagonism, especially within a closed community, as a somewhat absolute value, which is something that is difficult to agree with, but we will have to bear with it for a while.

Implying an intra-communal inter-player conflict to such an extent may not necessarily concord with some previous directions of MMO research. There seems to be a benevolent, yet somewhat dewy-eyed tendency to assume an optimistic, perhaps slightly simplified perspective which frames MMOs as generally nice places, an idyll of sociality, communality and merriment that thrives unless something that falls in the purview of critical theory would happen. Mere possibility of antagonism is sometimes downplayed to foreground sociality, teamwork and camaraderie (e.g., Chen 2009) or heavily politicised to explain the lack of these qualities with extraneous ideological influences (e.g., Braithwaite 2018).

Mimetic desire, a concept grounded in imitation that is initially acquisitive and therefore eventually competitive, has never been applied in the context of MMO research and studies approaching imitation and conflict separately seem to be scarce or at least not too visible. We would be justified to conclude that the role of *conflictual imitation* in socially situated gaming experiences constitutes a gap in knowledge,[9] identifiable through lack of discussion in literature and absence of published research into the topic. Besides, this author's familiarity with the practice of online multiplayer

---

[8] To be fair, mirror neuron activity is not conditional on group identification (Gallese 2005a: 117) or shared intentionality (Pacerie & Dokic 2006). Controversial as it is, the notion of acquisitive mimesis remains consistent with the evidence, in the spirit, if not in the letter.

[9] In knowledge, but hardly in practice. The prevalent strategy of monetisation through cosmetics in current MMO products suggests that the industry has a very good grasp of how mimetic desire functions and can be applied. It is the academia that has to catch up on the idea.

gaming suggests a possibility of multiple phenomena being grounded in competitive imitation, as well as lacking satisfactory explanation that stems from some other theoretical source.

Why does this gap in knowledge exist, in other words, why was the issue not addressed earlier? I would be insincere if I did not start with the reason that is referred to, repeatedly, by Girard himself (Girard 1976: 15; Girard 1986: 21, 125; Girard 1987: 17; Palaver 2013: 67). One possible reason why any research on imitation is comparatively scarce is the social and cultural stigma attached to presumed lack of originality:

> Yes, we are obsessed with not imitating. During the whole twentieth century, imitation was out of fashion because it was despised as a behavior. You had to be original, singular. The world was becoming more uniform all around us, and the intellectual reaction was to deny this at the individual level. Everybody was for originality. It was already important in the nineteenth century, but in the twentieth century you had to be original at all costs. All the antics of the surrealists were about how to be original in a world where everything has been done before. Let's do anything—ridiculous, obscene, whatever—provided it is original. Culture changes in many ways as a result, but not always in a way that represents real progress. (Girard 2011: 235)

Notwithstanding Girard's customary grandiloquence, we might agree that this may be, on some rhetorical level, a problem. An author whose research project is based on the theory of universal imitation has no choice but to admit being an imitator themselves. In fact, the very condition of producing original contribution to knowledge which this thesis abides by, makes some points of the mimetic theory sound rather jarring in contrast. Which is something the study should be able to overcome, as long as the theory is not applied too obviously, and sufficient critical distance is preserved.

A more important issue to stem from the theory's central positions is its increased vulnerability to sweeping generalisations. Which is to say, if the study's theoretical framework is grounded in the idea of perpetual recursive imitation a significant degree of generalisation is unavoidably implied. In presence of a somewhat Rousseauist view of virtual worlds and their population mentioned earlier, it is slightly uncomfortable to propose that some players have less autonomy or individuality than they themselves, as

well as some researchers prefer to reveal. This limitation, happily, is very easy to overcome: it is perfectly possible to use a generalising theory without resorting to generalisation. I do not claim that all players imitate. I claim that the number of players that imitate is different from zero and that the impact of imitative phenomena is significant enough to affect player experience on a scale much wider than that delineated by imitators themselves.

Another reason for this gap in knowledge to exist is less rhetorical, more practical and perhaps more relevant. Conventionally, imitation is linked to intersubjectivity and obtains in presence of a shared field thereof. There used to be an overwhelming consensus regarding the importance of eye contact and there is indeed a very strong consensus of imitation proceeding between physically present human being. Quite obviously, virtual worlds do not normally provide the opportunity of eye contact, and physical presence is not normally an option. In short, there does not seem to be an understanding of how imitation may or may not work in a virtual setting, which could have barred or at least postponed some possible directions a research of imitation in MMO may have taken.

My study proceeds from the argument that imitation in virtual setting is possible because, firstly, it was established that a mental simulation of goal-directed activity may be executed on the basis of fragmentary information (Umilta et al. 2001) and secondly, such simulation is very likely to be shaped by the actor's previous experiences (Gallese 2009: 37; cf. Gallese 2007: 662), which I think is sufficient to fill in the blanks that set a virtual model apart from a physical one. Besides, as we will see, mimetic desire in MMOs does not necessarily refer to activity that is observed, but rather includes activity that is inferred from signs and cues that constitute the virtual persona of the model.

I do not know if this initial assumption is correct and I am very unlikely to find out if it is. What it allows me, however, is to pursue the central purpose of this study, indeed its original contribution to knowledge, which is to apply the mimetic theory to the subject of massively multiplayer online games.

1.2 Statement of purpose

The purpose of the study is to carry out the first implementation of the mimetic theory in the field of MMO research. In doing so, this study aspires to produce original insights in how MMOs function and are played, specifically, to expand our knowledge of imitation in MMOs: if not in statistical accuracy, then at least in variety and detail. To that end, a theoretical framework derived from the mimetic theory was applied to *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004), in particular, the game's collective endgame[10] PvE activity.

Why *World of Warcraft* and why mimetic theory? The decision to focus on one of the most researched video games to ever have existed reflects the author's desire to synthesise rather than to break new ground, to create a connection between existent concepts rather than to discover something completely new, to sophisticate rather than to invent. *World of Warcraft* may be seen as a nexus of accumulated cultural data. With millions of people having played the game for more than a decade, and the game itself consistently expanding to accommodate the players' fictional and interactive needs, it seems safe to assume that most aspects of playable media were somehow, at some point, reflected or represented in it. Represented and indeed researched. Where research of MMOs is concerned, *World of Warcraft* is a veritable comfort zone; so much has been written on it that it is nigh impossible to put a foot wrong. On the other hand, the wealth of accumulated material is such that the requirements this study needs to meet are somewhat higher than those that could have sufficed for a less well-developed subject. In my view, *World of Warcraft* is the best choice I could make, since the game is, simultaneously, the most challenging and the safest subject for the application of an exotic and in many aspects contentious theory such as Girard's.

[10] Here: the game state the majority of the playerbase engages in after reaching the current maximum level allowed.

Initially, the possible link between mimetic crisis and *World of Warcraft* player experience occurred to me when I juxtaposed Girard's stereotypes of persecution (discussed further in 2.1.5) and scapegoat mechanism (discussed further in 2.1.6) with *World of Warcraft* endgame raid[11] mechanics. Girard's esoteric concept of ritualistic killing of one entity by many persecutors very obviously resonates with the situation where millions of players worldwide, perform an electronically mediated ritualistic killing of one entity by many, once every week. Ironically, the scapegoat mechanism was the very theme that proved to be absent, or at least dysfunctional in *World of Warcraft* and, in all probability, MMOs as a whole. The other notions, however, particularly those of mimetic rivalry and mimetic desire are exceptionally relevant and manifest in game mechanics, representations and procedures, as well as in player behaviours and inter-player interaction.[12] Mimetic phenomena in MMOs stood out in particular relief when Richard Bartle's work on player immersion and player motivation[13] was introduced by way of a gatekeeper theory. With that, the theoretical framework was complete, and the first mimetic study of virtual playable environment commenced.

Philosophically, the mimetic theory is extremely ambitious and, in many cases, quite persuasive. However, I want to make it perfectly clear at this point, that Girard's work is not presented as an incontrovertible doctrine. Some of the theory's key points make a lot of sense to me personally, some are less convincing, but I am, in any case, not a Girardian and I am not trying to encourage the reader to become one.

Rather than for its philosophical weight and cultural implications, the mimetic theory was chosen because of its outstanding heuristic potential. The concept of mimetic desire

---

[11] A central modality of collective PvE gameplay, characterised by significant group size and higher degree of game challenge.

[12] Despite their notional corroborative value these player behaviours or gameplay devices are not intended to 'prove' the mimetic theory nor to claim the mimetic theory is the only explanation that is feasible.

[13] Which was earlier used in conjunction with Campbell's template (Bartle 2004: 434–443) and seems remarkably compatible with literary metaphor.

was something Girard has developed, tested, polished and experimented with for almost 50 years. It often attracted criticisms, some of which I will address, but remains highly plausible, especially in a virtual setting, in which the decoupling of identity, as well as the removal of many physiological factors of human interaction allows for a picture much clearer than those Girard himself used to examine.

1.3 Research questions, aims and objectives

The research question for this study is somewhat austere; this author's long-time experience in entertainment software development suggests it is usually better to promise less and deliver more than the other way around:

> **Research question:** Is René Girard's mimetic theory relevant in massively multiplayer online game analysis?

More specifically, the declared objectives of this study are to find out whether the mimetic theory can be a productive framework of critical analysis in multiplayer gaming and whether approaches and models approximated from the mimetic theory can be of value for practical game design. The first objective refers to the theory's expected capacity to produce novel insight when it is applied to MMO fictions, mechanics and representations, particularly, those concerning identity, competition and player incentives. The second objective reflects my contention that concepts and schemas derived from the mimetic theory can be used to compose practical design heuristics – approximate guidelines which may or may not work on a case to case basis but will, in most cases, save time and streamline gameplay production.

As its less formal, yet more ambitious aim, however, this study seeks to answer a much more general question proposed by Ian Bogost:

> What are the habits or practices that game(s) demand or encourage? (Bogost 2015: 16).

It is important to note that in such formulation the question does not concern real-world social habits or material practices that are developed *by* playing *World of Warcraft*, but refers, precisely, to in-game behaviours that are a factor of *World of Warcraft*'s current design or may be disproportionately stimulated by it. As the title of my work implies, I contend that a habit that MMOs demand and encourages is the habit of competitive imitation. To support this contention, the central objective of my research is to address two limitations of Richard Bartle's player types theory, two specific constraints that Bartle himself formulates as follows:

> It [player types theory] doesn't account for players who appear to play one style while actually playing another. [. . .] It assumes that players are independent. (Bartle 2004: 140)

Its key points and the general thrust of its argument make the mimetic theory a perfect interlocutor in the conversation concerning the two problems above. From the mimetic standpoint, players will play whatever styles they believe their models are playing, as long as the models themselves do not remain static. As regards independence of players, the mimetic perspective would always assume *the opposite*: if player choices and behaviours are imitated and suggested, independent players do not exist. The intention to introduce the mimetic theory as a productive tool in solving these kinds of practical game design problems is the driving force for the study's secondary objective: to produce a succinct yet comprehensive overview of the mimetic theory that could be referred to by a video games expert with no previous knowledge of Girard's work.

The limited scope of my study speaks to the modesty of my contribution, but not to the importance of its central theme. I think imitation in video games is a subject of haunting magnitude which was not yet uncovered. If nothing else, raising awareness of it makes my research well worth the effort. Besides, I believe that the mimetic theory has a fruitful career in video games ahead of it. I hope that this doctoral thesis sets it off to a good start.

2 Theoretical framework

The following chapter introduces the theoretical framework of this study. It is of significant volume, which is to be expected from a theory driven study and reflects the author's belief that in-depth explanations are essential for anything that claims to be of any practical consequence.

This is a thesis in the field of game studies, so some specialist knowledge on behalf of the reader is assumed. René Girard's mimetic theory, however, is both comparatively unknown and distinctly remote from video games. It is instructive, therefore to provide a brief yet comprehensive overview of its central concepts as well as to outline the overall argument it makes. This task is addressed in section 1 of the chapter.

Section 2 of the chapter proceeds to acknowledge some common criticisms directed at the mimetic theory, as well as possible risks and limitations that have to do with the cross-disciplinary nature of this research.

Section 3 of the theoretical framework combines the mimetic approach with Richard Bartle's player types theory and proposes an evaluation of imitative/conflictual potential each of the type may have — both in general terms and specifically in *World of Warcraft*.

2.1 Mimetic theory: A concise summary

'Mimetic theory', Michael Kirwan writes, 'grapples with three very simple questions. What causes social groups and societies to come together and cohere successfully? What causes those groups to disintegrate? What is the function of religion in these two processes?' (Kirwan 2009: 20). This overview of the theory's three focal concerns makes it clear why it is somewhat traditional to distinguish three separate yet

interconnected *notions* that correlate, if loosely, to three different phases of how Girard's thought had developed (Williams 1996: vii; Kirwan 2000: xiii–xv; Kirwan 2009: 21; Palaver 2013: viii). The first notion — *mimetic desire* — refers to the understanding that human desire is not autonomous but acquired by means of reflexive imitation. In other words, whenever a desire exceeds that grounded in most basic physiological needs — it is a non-conscious mirroring of someone else's desire; the reason we want something, in Girard's view, is our awareness of someone else wanting the same thing (Girard 1976; Girard 1987: 7–10; Palaver 2013: 45–46).

The second notion — *the scapegoat process* — describes the mechanism by which a community is able to redirect its own violent impulses onto an unanimously assigned target; a ritualistic collective act that quells the intra-communal conflict and in so doing secures the survival of the community in throes of internal aggression (Girard 1986; Girard 1989; Kirwan 2009: 25–27).

The third notion — *the revelation* — addresses the way in which Judeo-Christian scriptures make both notions above clearly visible; what Girard posits as the unique capacity Judeo-Christian theology has to reveal both the workings of the scapegoat mechanism and its ultimate function of keeping mimetic rivalry under control (Girard 1987; Girard 2001a; Kirwan 2009: 27; Williams 2001: xvii–xix).

Whereas this study incorporates Girard's thought of the revelation/post-revelation stage, it also consciously eschews any discussion of the latter insight. This thesis makes no attempt to assess the implications of religious knowledge and practice on exclusively software-enabled interactions that constitute the subject of this enquiry. Research that frames video game play as religious experience exists (e.g., Geraci 2014) yet seems to be scarce, highly debatable and courting controversy. The topic of religion is entirely beyond the scope of this study which focuses on the manifest, overt phenomena of gameplay mechanics and play-related behaviours and is ill-equipped to address the possible dependencies between player experience and religious beliefs, or the ways in which the combined play/religious experience may be affected by the telemediated nature of MMO play.

The central reference points of this investigation, therefore, are imitation and conflict, the mechanism that constitutes the link between the two and the way in which imitation and conflict function together. These themes were the ones Girard based his own summary of the mimetic theory on, saying that the discovery of imitation, violence[14] and the way they are connected 'basically completed the mimetic theory' (Girard 1996: 262). It is also indicative that the two preeminent researchers of Girard's thought define the mimetic theory either as a theory of imitation (Kirwan 2009: 7) or a theory of conflict (Palaver 2013: 33). Both scholars seem to be equally accurate in their descriptions, and the way each of them shifts the balance of their argument towards either notion suggests that imitation and conflict are indeed the two phenomena the theory speaks about and is based on (cf. Hurlbut 2011: 176–177).

It is crucial to keep in mind that the mimetic theory leans very heavily on literary/imaginative text. Initially, it was derived from the author's extensive research of the five novelists, namely Cervantes, Proust, Flaubert, Stendhal and Dostoevsky (Girard 1976) to which Girard later added a separate treatise on Shakespeare (Girard 2000). His primary sources are almost exclusively works of fiction or texts that may be seen as at least partially imaginative. In other words, Girard uses literature as evidence with which he not merely supports, but also 'proves' his theory. As Robert Doran's succinctly explains: 'what Girard offers us is not a theory of literature or a theory that makes use of literature for some other end, but literature as theory' (Doran 2008: xiv; emphasis in original).

The worrying consequences of this approach are brought into focus by Girard's anthropology, exemplified by Violence and the Sacred (Girard 1989), where recourses to objective ethnography or field data are markedly scarce and seem uncomfortably superfluous and one-dimensional when present (see e.g., Girard 1989: 25–28). The preferred source on which Girard bases his conclusions is folklore and mythic texts which sometimes seem to be carefully selected. The core 'mechanics' of his framework,

[14] Even though the concepts of violence and conflict are not interchangeable, the entirely virtual nature of the experience being examined suggests that the latter term is more applicable.

however, are elucidated through Greek tragedy, a literary source Girard examines by application of anthropological methods, and then collates with data he derives from ethnography, myth and folklore. The bilateral conflict such amalgamation creates is something Girard is fully aware of, yet it is the methodological choice that he passionately advocates:

> It is essential to make it clear, once and for all, that to draw on tragic literature does not mean to relinquish scholarly standards of research; nor does it constitute a purely "esthetic" approach to the subject. At the same time, we must manage to appease the men of letters who tremble at the thought of applying scientific methods of any kind to literature, convinced as they are that such methods can only lead to facile "reductionism" of the works of art, to sterile analyses that dis-regard the spirit of the literature. The conflict between the "two cultures," science and literature, rests on a common failure, a negative complicity shared by literary critics and religious specialists. Neither group perceives the underlying principle on which their objects are based. The tragedians seem to have labored in vain to make this principle manifest. They never achieve more than partial success, and their efforts are perpetually undone by the differentiations imposed on their work by literary critics and social scientists. (Girard 1989: 55)

Girard's professed distrust of social scientists is, in some sense, compromised by him being a kind of a social scientist himself. What makes the mimetic theory particularly controversial is not so much its unconventional sources or unorthodox methodology, but its claims of universal and incontestable social applicability that seem to greatly overreach the conceivable boundaries of its framework. Mimetic desire, for instance, is declared to be the only non-instinctual desire possible, its plausibility significantly undermined by its alleged omnipresence. Mimetic constructions that rely on absolute dissolution of difference are very difficult to place in reality and suggest a figurative, if not metaphorical reading, yet Girard insists on these highly hypothetical probabilities being objectively, if not axiomatically salient. What started as comparative analysis of literary texts is currently postulated as a universal theory of real-world human behaviours, relationships and interactions.

This study does not support any claims to the theory's universal validity in real-life circumstances. Girard's concepts, categorisations and schemas may be exceptionally

productive, provided they are used purposefully, in the context of mediated/fictitious/make-believe situations such as those the mimetic theory originally emerged from. However, the whole elaborate framework becomes flawed if applied too obviously, especially if its interpretive capacities are deployed in a sweeping fashion, with little regard of historical, social, cultural and behavioural factors that are very likely to resonate with different formulas in different ways, yet will always remain too complex, divergent and nuanced to be subject of any universally reliable description.

2.1.1 Primary imitation, acquisitive mimesis and triangular desire

Perhaps, the best way to capture the essence of mimetic desire is by means of comparison. Let us address a traditional view of human imitation that was proposed by Edward Thorndike more than a century ago and still proves to be valid and productive in the context of scientific studies (see e.g., Rizzolatti 2005: 55). It may be summarised as follows: 'If one can from an act witnessed learn to do the act, he in some way makes use of the sequence seen, transfers the process to himself in the common human sense of the word, he imitates' (Thorndike 1898: 50; cf. Decety and Chaminade 2005: 123–124). The sequence Thorndike uses to illustrate the concept involves a water tap: someone who may have never used it before will turn the faucet when thirsty, as long as they witnessed someone else turn the faucet and procure a drink for themselves. In other words, the imitation is preexisted by conscious desire to drink; it is the imitator's feeling of thirst that sets the following activity off. Mimetic desire, however, is imitation that is neither consciously apprehended nor caused by a self-acknowledged necessity. In reversal of Thorndike's formula, Girard's imitation does not originate from autonomous desire, but itself creates the need to be satisfied (cf. Dupuy 2011: 197–199).

Spelling this acquisitive imitation out in a more schematic manner, Girard maintains that the direct, straight-line relationship between desiring subject and object being

desired does not exist. Instead, the desire is triangular, as it includes a third entity: the *model* whose desire for — or indeed possession of — this desirable object serves as a prototype for the acquisitive impulse the subject feels (Girard 1976: 2, 83).

In other words, people desire to acquire something that they know someone else to have had acquired. Every time a subject desires an object — which could be animate or inanimate, could be a physical entity, some perceived state of affairs, or a process actually carried out — this motivative impulse is copied from, or *modelled* on, the desire exhibited by someone else: 'In the birth of desire another is always present' (Girard 1976: 21, emphasis added; cf. Girard 2001a: 8) is an overreaching maxima Girard uses to emphasise the non-autonomous origins of acquisitive motivation. The non-autonomous, or mediated nature of desire makes the suggesting model the 'mediator' (Girard 1976: 2) of the acquisitive impulse suggested to the one desiring.[15]

It has to be stressed, that mimetic desire is, in essence, immaterial and not straightforwardly pragmatic (Girard 1976: 53–82; Girard 1987: 295–297). The object, physical or otherwise, which the desiring entity pursues not necessarily has the value that would objectively justify the intensity of the impulse (cf. Girard 1976: 13–14, 61) because this impulse is not directed at something in the mediator's possession but at the mediator themselves.

> Once his basic needs are satisfied (indeed, sometimes even before), man is subject to intense desires, though he may not know precisely for what. The reason is that he desires *being*, something he himself lacks and which some other person seems to possess. The subject thus looks to that other person to inform him of what he should desire in order to acquire that being. If the model who is apparently already endowed with superior being, desires some object, that object must surely be capable of conferring an even greater plenitude of being. It is not through words, therefore, but by the example of his own desire that the model conveys to the subject the supreme desirability of the object. (Girard 1989: 146, emphasis in the original; cf. Girard 1976: 11, 54, 83)

[15] Certain kinds of desires, namely, those grounded in most basic physiological needs, are neither imitated nor suggested (Girard 1976: 3; Kirwan 2000: xiii).

The value of the object, therefore, is ethereal, imaginary, defined by the perceived value someone else invests it with (Girard 1976: 6, 104, 223). The appropriation of the object — or some quality or state of affairs that the imitator perceives as desirable — is merely a reflection of the project intended to emulate someone else as precisely as possible. This derogates the perceived (and likewise intuited) distinctions between ego and other, making the relationship between the subject and the model '*interdividual*' (Girard 1987: 35, emphasis in the original) and not an individual-centric dynamic that takes place between fully autonomous individuals as some more or less traditional views would suggest. The consequence of human interdividuality is perfectly summarised by Williams: 'as human beings we are not the other or model, but on the other hand, we are constituted by the other or model, and so the self is a set of mimetic relationships operative in the individual, both in the present and the past' (Williams 1996: 291).

This overwhelming, if often unacknowledged, inclination to copy whoever someone has chosen as their model may account for highly distinct phenomena, such as the imitation of a celebrity by a devoted fan, exemplified by the custom some football enthusiasts have of wearing shirts displaying their favourite player's name and team number — exact copies of the garment worn by the actual player during the match — or the jealousy an expert may feel towards their supposedly more accomplished colleague. Barring the proverbial — and perhaps apocryphal — relationship between Mozart and Salieri, it would be difficult to give a popular example of the second phenomenon. The reverence of the partisan is almost always ostentatiously displayed, but the envy of the candidate is often seen as morally reprehensible and is therefore concealed or even repressed (cf. Girard 2017: 43). This latter situation that is, at least ostensibly, more unstable, more inherently problematic than the former, is characterised by one specific variable: *proximity*, physical or otherwise, between the *model* and the desiring *subject* (which Girard also refers to as disciple).

2.1.2 Mimetic proximity, external and internal mediation

The factor of proximity — not necessarily or always physical — is of vital importance, as it allows us to distinguish between the two kinds of desires; namely, *externally* and *internally* mediated mimetic desire. Girard speaks of 'the two spheres of possibilities of which the mediator and the subject occupy the respective centers' (Girard 1976: 9, emphasis in original) and of how these two areas are positioned in relation to each other. An intersection between the subject sphere and the mediator sphere constitutes an intrusion, a breach of the mediator's personal space (cf. Kirwan 2009: 24; Girard 2008a: 56–57) by the subject. In the mimetic framework, this situation is a lot more likely to escalate into rivalry than that where the model and the subject did not intersect.

It is instructive that Girard refers to possibilities as the boundary that separate the subject from the model. Understood as such, the physical distance between the two is not definitive or decisive; rather than that, the mediator's position within society, community, or even family is what counts. A child may be physically proximate to their parent yet have significantly lower possibilities. By the same token, a hypothetical dictatorship may afford a single person a sphere of possibilities vastly superior to those surrounding them. These two are examples of situations that favour external mediation. The more egalitarian, democratic societies, however, may be especially prone to internal mediation (cf. Girard 1976: 136–137; Girard 2000: 332–333; Girard 2013: 55) because the supposed dissolution of social differences, the equal possibilities that members of such societies are believed to enjoy, stimulate competition, in effect, pursuit of one object by many, a modality of social interaction that Girard defines as 'the desire to imitate the other in order to obtain the same thing he or she has, by violence if need be' (Girard 2001b: para 2; cf. Girard 1987: 307; Palaver 2013: 61–62).

The concept of external mediation — the kind of imitation that takes place outside the subject's and the mediator's respective spheres of possibility — foregrounds the uniqueness of Girard's approach. Whilst more traditional views of imitation as learning process require the emulated action to be clearly observable and the goal of this action

consciously acknowledged (cf. e.g., Decety and Chaminade 2005: 123–126), Girard's mimetic relationship involves the imitation of desire that is not necessarily or always manifest and is therefore inferred rather than directly observed.[16] Coming back to Thorndike's water tap example (Thorndike 1898: 50), what we observe is the person using the faucet to pour themselves a drink, from which we conjecture that they are thirsty. The goals of such imitation, then, are both suppositional and adaptable, insofar as the imitating subject bases them on whatever current aspirations they believe their model to have. This adoration from insuperable distance may very well be benign, if not beneficial. An evocative, if trite, example would be a celebrity athlete or a popular music artist that serves as a role model for the proverbial younger generation. There is no threat of conflict as long as the gap separating the subject from the model remains sufficient to prevent them from directly competing with each other:

> The Sun King is the mediator for all who surround him, and this mediator remains *sepa-rated from his faithful followers by an immense spiritual distance*. The King cannot become the rival of his own subjects. (Girard 1976: 117–118, emphasis added; see also Girard 1976: 200)

However, as the proximity between the subject and the model increases and the imitation falls within the intersecting spheres that the subject and the model occupy, the relationship between them becomes, in this schema, one of internal mediation. The basis for competition, jealousy and conflict, perchance in its most violent forms, is established (cf. Girard 1976: 73). A rival that is proximate is liable to encourage acute antagonism simply by virtue of being close at hand. However, since the distance that situates the rivalry is not necessarily physical, close proximity should also be understood as low level of distinction between the rivals, their relative similarity.

To some extent, the phenomenology of internal mediation is reminiscent of Freud's narcissism of minor differences (e.g. Freud 1949: 54–56) that describes a tendency of neighbouring communities that conceivably have much in common to be particularly antagonistic towards each other (cf. Girard 1987: 85–86; Palaver 2013: 62–65). While

[16] Which, as we discussed earlier, is a plausible situation insofar as the miror neuron system provides the 'technical' means of making such inference.

Freud seems to attribute this tendency to an intrinsic hostility that becomes less repressible in case of prolonged exposure to another person or social group, one example he gives does indeed focus on differences, actual or perceived: 'Every time two families become connected by a marriage, each of them thinks themselves superior to or of better birth than the other' (Freud 1949: 55). In this situation, even though close proximity would conceivably alleviate the actual differences between the participants, their perceived differences increase out of proportion and to probable detriment of the relationship.[17] The same mechanism is referred to by Girard, who describes the peak states of internal mediation as '*a minimum difference producing a maximum affectation*' (Girard 1976: 86, emphasis in the original), and this desire made stronger by similarity is, in his view, no less problematic than animosity intensified by cohabitation is in Freud's.

Why does proximity, metaphysical or otherwise, determine the kind of mediation emerging between the subject and the model, as well as its possible conflictual outcome? The reason is twofold. Firstly, as the triangular configuration of mimetic impulse illustrates so well, once the subject approaches the supposed object of their desire, he or she would inevitably get closer to the mediator behind it. The closer the subject and the model get to each other, the more their possibilities intersect, and the more intense the competition becomes: ostensibly over the object in question but in reality, over a contested state of existence the subject ascribes to the model. Secondly, since the perceived value of the sought object is not intrinsic to the object but elevated by the 'arbitrary prestige' (Girard 1976: 14) attached to whoever is in possession of it, the subject shifts their attention towards the mediator, the idol that tempts them with the treasure they refuse to share.

In other words, the *model* becomes the *obstacle*.

---

[17] Perhaps, the example offered by Freud in support of his hypotheses is no less speculative than many examples Girard provides to illustrate his. However, this should not be our main concern right now, since our current intention is to figure the mimetic theory out, not prove it.

2.1.3 Mimetic rivalry and model-obstacle relationship

'If you love the same thing as your best friend he becomes your best enemy' (Girard 2011: 217–218; cf. Girard 2000: 8–20). Girard's apparently metaphorical, yet remarkably lucid description of mimetic rivalry calls forth two separate questions: why are we attracted to something our best friend loves and why would we have to become enemies with them, once such attraction is born?

The answer to the first question is in what Girard sees as the intrinsically imitative nature of human desire. If our preferences were instinctual or had some other non-imitative genesis, Girard points out, we would be permanently fixated on immutable objects, our desires would never change (Girard 2001a: 15). The axiomatic nature of his initial assumption aside, Girard may be right to imply that absolute stability is not a regular case where human desires are concerned. This seems to be of particular relevance in 'modern' societies, where lack of stability is witnessed, to an extent, by the ever-changing fashion that subjects a vast variety of desirable objects to constant reconsideration. This does not merely refer to the manner people dress, though this primary manifestation of fashion is, perhaps, offering the most literal expression of its imitative mechanics, geared towards, to borrow Ian McEwan's turn of phrase '*like-minded hordes* desperate to express their *individuality*' (McEwan 2013: 43, emphasis added). It may also cause or reproduce various degrees of fascination with things as different as music or literature on the one hand and personal transportation or dietary regime on the other. The way fashion disseminates itself across contemporary communities is, most obviously, through various kinds of advertising, commercial or otherwise, which tends, in Girard's view, to focus on how much *someone else* finds the object enjoyable, rather than on the object's inherent desirable qualities, 'not . . . to convince that a product is superior but that it is desired by Others' (Girard 1976: 104; cf. Girard 1986: 142; 2011: 235; Haug 1986: 39–44, 52–54).[18]

[18] The same would often apply to word of mouth dissemination of non-commercial kind as well: the way our neighbour tells us about a new movie is by saying *she* saw it and *she* found it to her liking.

In other words, the perceived value we assign to something we are interested in is determined by our assumption of how much value *someone else* invests the object with. And who but our best friend, someone we are bound to have very high physical and spiritual proximity with, would we rather entrust with our choice? By that logic, an 'affective transfer' (Fishbach, Shah & Kruglanski 2004: 723) is likely to take place, in which our positive attitude towards our best friend can lead us to believe something that he or she has, or does, or prefers, must be just as good as they themselves are (cf. Girard 2011: 236). In other words, it seems highly plausible, in some circumstances, that we may end up liking the same thing our best friend likes inasmuch as we like our best friend themselves.

What makes this imitation potentially conflictual, then? We are also likely, at some point, to set our sights on an object that cannot be mutually possessed. Speaking of archaic communities, Girard refers to 'women, food, weapons, the best dwelling-sites, etc.' (Girard 1987: 19) as such 'unsharable' objects. For present times, however, he offers much more pertinent examples: we cannot share an employment position, a research grant, a sexual partner and so forth (Girard 2011: 217). These objects are something our best friend is neither able — nor indeed willing — to let us make use of, so they will do their utmost to prevent us from getting hold of them. The moment we make a move towards the object our best friend has pinpointed for us, we initiate competition (cf. Girard 1986: 128). We become *rivals over something we cannot both possess*; therefore, we are quite likely to become enemies.

It would be ill-advised to approach this phenomenon in a universalist manner proposed by Girard himself. Mimetic rivalry is clearly problematic in how it seems to eradicate all manner of gradation, nuance and situational complexity characteristic of human relationships. However, the logic of it, however reductive, is not at all implausible,and the hypothetical case above makes a very good illustration of how extreme proximity *may* exacerbate mimetic rivalry. To develop the concept further, we would do well to revert to the general categories of the subject and the model, to which we must add one

more category, the *obstacle*, which is what the model becomes for the subject once the rivalry between them has ensued.

Having illuminated the object for the subject, the mediator now *blocks their path* towards it (see e.g., Girard 1976: 84–85). The greater the resistance the more desirable the object becomes: it must indeed be of supreme value if it is guarded this well (cf. Girard 1976: 13–14; Girard 1987: 295; Girard 1989: 170–175). In turn, the subject's desire is copied by the model themselves, which aggravates their own desire for the contested object, and makes the confrontation more intense (cf. Girard 1986: 130). From the point of view of the subject, this constitutes the 'mimetic *double bind*' (Girard 1987: 291, emphasis in the original; cf. Girard 1989: 147, 177–178) which is to say, a self-contradictory message in which the model both *commands them towards the object* and becomes the obstacle *forbidding its acquisition*. This model-obstacle transaction produces a paradoxical combination of worship and hatred:

> Only someone who prevents us from satisfying a desire which he himself has inspired in us is truly an object of hatred. The person who hates first hates himself for the secret admiration concealed by his hatred. In an effort to hide this desperate admiration from others, and from him-self, he no longer wants to see in his mediator anything but an obstacle. The secondary role of the mediator thus becomes primary, concealing his original function of a model scrupulously imitated. (Girard 1976: 11)

The possible hatred the subject feels for themselves is crucial for our understanding of both internal mediation and mimetic rivalry. Acute self-revulsion is evident both from the perspective of choosing a model, which probably would not have happened if the subject was perfectly content with themselves, and the perspective of desiring an object, which suggests, ineluctably, some kind of lack (cf. Girard 1976: 54, 67, 73; Girard 1987: 296; 1989: 175; Girard 2001a: 11). At the same time, the soaring prestige of the object being disputed reinforces the initial admiration felt towards the model: the fact he or she is in possession of something this valuable proves their immense magnificence (cf. Girard 1976: 177). The constantly escalating hatred-worship fascination elicited by

the model results in the *dissolution of the object*,[19] whose prestige was illusory in any case, and the entirety of subject's attention shifts onto the mediator, and the conflict caused by his or her resistance: 'it is violence that bestows value on the violent man's possessions' (Girard 1989: 144; cf. Girard 1986: 130). In some cases, the idolatry of the model becomes so complete, that the subject positions them as the obstacle that may not be surmounted, lest the model's divinity is compromised. In Williams's most accurate summary 'the subject will not allow himself to defeat the modelobstacle [sic], for to achieve that would be to lose the model' (Williams 1996: 291, emphasis in original).

The extremities of the model-obstacle dynamic described above may lead to pseudo-narcissism (Girard 1987: 367–382; see also Dupuy 2011: 198–199) in the model and masochism (Girard 1976: 176–192) in the subject. However, such deep levels of internal mediation are best discussed at the point of their immediate application, so we would do well to retrace our steps and return to the point at which the model had just apprehended the subject's gesture towards the object in his or her possession, and imitated their desire for it by means of preventing the subject from acquiring it. Allowed to proceed, this mirroring may initiate what Girard terms *reciprocal* or *double* mediation (Girard 1976: 101–104) which is to say a symmetrical imitation of the subject's desire by the model that transforms the initial subject/model relationship into a subject-model/model-subject dynamic (cf. Girard 1987: 299–305; Girard 2000: 12–13). One important implication of the subject becoming a mediator for their model while the model still retains their status is the different role both rivals assign to the object: 'In double mediation it is not that one wants the object but that one does not want to see it in someone else's hands' (Girard 1976: 102). Subsequently, the object disappears as the opponents focus, in this case symmetrically, on each other (Girard 2001a: 22). As a

[19] Recall the original mirror neurons experiment. Once the monkey had seen the researcher's interaction with food, and the neurophysiological reaction took place, *similar neurophysiological effect was produced in response to the researcher's interaction with an inedible object* (Rizzolatti 2005: 57). In other words, it was not the object the monkey was focused on, but the model. The value of this circumstance is at most metaphorical, yet the mechanism of switching the focus is formally similar to that present in Girard's mimetic rivalry.

consequence, the psychotic potentiality of the model-obstacle relationship is substituted for a violent potentiality of overtly competitive reciprocal rivalry (cf. Girard 1987: 300).

Reciprocal violence, in Girard's view, is not so much a random occurrence as a kind of mechanic necessity: in double mediation every aggressive gesture is immediately and with great precision reflected by the opponent, every violent act is immediately and proportionately returned (cf. e.g., Girard 1989: 44–45, 158–160). The metaphysical overtone of this literal 'trading of blows' is the startling similarity between the rivals. In double mediation the distinction between the model and the subject is no longer a salient factor and therefore, every meaningful difference that used to exist between them is dissolved.

2.1.4 Mimetic crisis, group symmetry and elimination of differences

The precarious interaction between two people in a state of double mediation is, first and foremost, symmetrical. The constant reciprocal copying of desires makes the opponents similar to each other. The social risk this violent similarity presents has to do with two factors. Firstly, the mechanism functions in the same way for groups of people as it does for separate human beings (cf. e.g., Girard 200: 340–341). Secondly, it has the capacity of spreading over these groups like an airborne disease.

In Girard's conception, mimetic desire is *contagious*, which frames it, fundamentally, as simultaneously inter-individual and socially situated phenomenon. Girard marks the shared phenomenology of proximity and contagion and asserts that an ongoing metaphysical rivalry between two people is spontaneously transmitted to someone positioned close enough, whereupon it spreads further, to a point where 'everyone can become his neighbour's mediator without ever understanding the role he is playing' (Girard 1976: 99; see also Girard 1976: 104; Girard 2008a: 61–62). The groups that constitute the community and are delineated by a set of pre-existent distinctions then

become subject to the same mimetic phenomena: interdividuality, model-obstacle relationship, double mediation and loss of differences.

To provide an illustrative example of such symmetrical intergroup dynamics, Girard refers to the mimetic relationship between aristocracy and bourgeoisie in the 19th century France (Girard 1976: 115–128). Having its privileges physically withdrawn, the noble class has no choice but to acknowledge their entirely arbitrary nature, in other words, the lack of some immanent metaphysical distinction that separates them from the affluent bourgeoisie. The aristocracy then sets out to prove these privileges were rightfully *earned* and in so doing 'borrows its code of ethics from the class which is competing for those same privileges' (Girard 1976: 123).[20] In turn, the bourgeoisie 'secretly longs only for aristocracy' (Girard 1976: 204), they are as jealous of their rivals' prestigious nobility as the rivals themselves are envious of their commercial aptitude. The relationship between the two social groups is therefore interdividual, insofar as the former identify themselves by means of constant comparison with the latter and vice versa. It is symmetrical/double since each of the two groups believes it is lacking something the other group has and strives to appropriate it. Finally, the mimetic interaction between the two social groups is escalating against the background of gradually diminishing differences.

How does this transfer to a more egalitarian society, in which the differences of possibility, sometimes the range of opportunities are, at least ostensibly, evened out? As was discussed earlier, a high degree of equality among community members would unavoidably lead to greater proximity between them, both formally and practically. What close proximity enables is more widespread competition. It also substitutes what could have been a safer incident of external mediation for internal mediation of one's peers: 'Who is there left to imitate after the tyrant? Henceforth men shall copy each

[20] It is interesting to note, how this kind of cross-class appropriation of *ethics* resonates with the contemporary appropriation of *aesthetics*, evident in the borrowing of upper-class stylistic conventions by working-class youth (cf. Clarke, Hall, Jefferson & Roberts 1991: 47–48; Jefferson 1991: 83–86; Hebdige 2005: 52) and, on the other hand, in the usage of ostensibly rural clothing as means of expressing socio-political views (Stallabrass 1996: 181).

other; idolatry of one person is replaced by hatred of a hundred thousand rivals' (Girard 1976: 119; see also Girard 1976: 14, 65, 70, 220; Girard 1989: 238–239). The consequences of such prodigious imitation are no less dramatic than those of internal imitation between individuals. Allowed to proceed in its course, mass internal mediation leads to gradual disintegration of distinctions,[21] derogation of communal, familial and moral structures (cf. e.g., Girard 1986: 14; Girard 1989: 51). It then culminates in a vast outbreak of mutual aggression that Girard conceptualises as '[immediate] reciprocity of negative rather than positive exchanges' (Girard 1986: 13; cf. Girard 1986: 85–86).

The peak point of 'mimetic crisis' (Girard 1987: 78) in the context of a whole society may be described as similar to the culmination of individual mimetic rivalry. The contested object — in this case the very differences that ostensibly exist between the warring groups — melds into the background and the focus is switched onto the mediator (who is, at this stage, everyone and everywhere) and the process of violent confrontation, 'the shift from the mimesis of *fighting over objects* to the mimesis of *fighting against someone*' (Girard 2011: 223, emphasis added; cf. Girard 1989: 144–145, 152–153).

Where do the initial aggressive inclinations come from, which is to say, are people intrinsically violent? Wolfgang Palaver warns from what he believes are inadequate interpretations of the mimetic theory, stressing that it 'rejects any natural aggressive drive and argues that human beings can overcome their violent nature' (Palaver 2013: 35).[22] In Girard's own words, however, the issue is rather less clear-cut: to reduce the proliferation of violence, human beings would have to 'give up forms of conduct that have always seemed to be natural and legitimate' (Girard 1987: 198). Besides, though he does disagree with the Freudian concept of death drive (Girard 1989: 145), he also

---

[21] Girard's proposed absolute elimination of distinctions is difficult to imagine in reality, past or present. Certain distinctions — financial security comes to mind — seem to remain a salient factor regardless of how catastrophic the situation is.

[22] Palaver's formulation may itself seem a little self-contradictory: if *any* natural drive for violence is rejected, what is this violent *nature* which human beings can overcome?

states that human beings lack the mechanical safeguards against violence that animals possess and therefore have to replace these biological restrictions with something they invent (Girard 1989: 221; cf. Girard 1987: 85–89; Girard 2011: 221–222, 244–245).

With the mimetic theory being, as earlier discussed, a theory of violence, it is not entirely within the scope of this thesis and certainly beyond its scale to fully address the somewhat controversial stance the theory takes towards violence as part of human behaviour and the way it affects the general fabric of human relationships. But it remains pertinent that the human society apprehends the idea of violence exhaustively, it is simultaneously fascinated by it and reliant on it (cf. e.g., Girard 1987: 255). In particular, human communities are exceedingly well aware of the risks that uncurbed violent impulse represents and the possible catastrophic consequences it may have if it is not kept in check. To prevent the violent elimination of differences from destroying themselves, the community has two layers of protection in place, two mechanisms of defence.

The first layer of protection involves intra-communal differences, social distinctions and cultural divisions inclusive, being established, maintained and protected by the community itself. Importantly, the range of differences thus supported is much wider than to include those defined by the limitations of class, wealth or social status.[23] Judicial system, to give an instance, is seen as a systematised complex of divisions and prohibitions, that makes the penal function exclusive to the state, and in so doing preserves the distinction between the criminal and the victim which would not have been possible in case of a blood feud, a lynching, or any other form of emergent reciprocal violence (cf. Girard 1989: 16; Girard 2008a: 36–37). Socio-economical

[23] Although the protected status of such immediate distinctions may also be observable in some cases: ‘Parents who refuse, as a few still do, to allow their children to take up scholarhips are not always thinking of the fact that they would have to be fed and clothed for much longer; at the back is this vaguely formulated but strong doubt of the value of education. That doubt acquires some of its force from the group-sense itself: for the group seeks to conserve and may impede an inclination in any of its members to make a change, to leave the group, to be different’ (Hoggart 2009: 67).

divisions, including the royalty, the aristocracy, the whole set of tiers into which the community is vertically stratified, are not merely supported by the upper class themselves, but also those positioned lower on the society ladder (cf. e.g., Girard 1976: 117–118). In other words, the more expansive the spectrum of difference in a society is, the safer its subjects and anything that stands in the way of all-encompassing similarity is an important barrier of protection. It is crucial to add that difference and diversity[24] are not merely dissimilar, but corrosive to each other. Understood in terms of cultural or social variety, diversity as such does not affect the possibilities of the community members, nor therefore their proximity. Moreover, Girard posits, diversity does little else but conceals the actual state of *overwhelming sameness*, effectively aggravating the crisis even further:

> Double mediation is a melting-pot in which differences among classes and individuals gradually dissolve. It functions all the more efficiently because it does not even appear to affect diversity. In fact, the latter is even given a fresh though deceptive brilliance: *the opposition of the Same to the Same*, which flourishes everywhere, will hide itself for a long time to come behind traditional diversity, sheltering new conflicts behind the shadow of old ones and nourishing belief in the integral survival of the past. (Girard 1976: 122, emphasis added; cf. Girard 1976: 70; Girard 1989: 56)

The necessity to preserve these dissolving differences even when they are causally linked to relative inequality, or rather to avoid the loss of them or face an existential threat is a leitmotif of *Violence and the Sacred* (1972) that permeates the entire mimetic theory: ‘Order, peace, and fecundity depend on cultural distinctions; it is not these distinctions but the loss of them that gives birth to fierce rivalries and sets members of the same family or social group at one another’s throats’ (Girard 1989: 49; cf. Girard 2000: 160–163; Girard 2011: 226).

---

[24] It may be helpful to keep in mind that ‘diversity’ was, arguably, a much less loaded term in 1966 when *Deceit Desire and the Novel was* originally published in English. In fact, the word itself was not nearly as popular back then: Google Ngram word usage statistics show a frequency increase of about 1000% from 1960 to 2008, with only 300% of the growth attributed to the period from 1960 to 1990. Circumstantial, but suggestive.

The second layer of protection, that comes into play once the first had failed, is the 'victimage mechanism' (Girard 1987: 3; cf. Girard 1986: 113; Girard 1987: 95–96), that commences the scapegoat process and begins with a very particular modality of collective persecution that is worthy of a separate examination.

2.1.5 Stereotypes of persecution and magical thought

The kind of persecution the mimetic theory is concerned with is an act of violence that may be pursued directly or indirectly but invariably, collectively[25]. In Girard's definition, direct collective persecution refers to 'acts of violence committed directly by a mob of murderers' and indirect collective persecution means 'acts of violence, such as witch-hunts, that are legal in form but stimulated by the extremes of public opinion' (Girard 1986: 12). Whenever a text[26] refers to an instance of collective violence, Girard's methodology suggests that we look for 'stereotypes of persecution' (Girard 1986: 8).

These characteristic signs represent a separate analytical pattern that we apply to literary, mythical or historical texts that feature a collective act of violence[27] in order to find out whether or not these texts may be qualified as 'texts of persecution' (Girard 1987: 126) and if they therefore have evidential or epistemic consequences that are not necessarily or always considered (see Girard 1986: 24–25; 1987: 130; cf. Girard 1996: 15; Mäkelä 2014: 89–97). There are three stereotypes that expose a text as an account of

---

[25] Within the mimetic theory a single person cannot persecute. Persecution is always a group phenomenon.

[26] We should use the word 'text' here as liberally as we may; unpicking the minutiae of terminology is not necessarily conducive of the subjectivist perspective this study adopts, our purpose is not to discuss what kinds of texts should or should not be called texts and why, but to analyse the textual and textualisable data this study engages with.

[27] Which was, perhaps, the earliest line of thought behind the inception of this study.

actual persecution composed from the perspective of persecutors themselves and subject to specific constraints of the persecutor's mindset (Girard 1986: 6, 26).

The **first stereotype** concerns the event that is described. A text of persecution will refer to a catastrophic loss of distinctions and in so doing reveal to us its mimetic genesis. It will refer to a community seized by uncontrollable sameness, a situation in which the gradations of class or social hierarchy become less meaningful, familial ties no longer hold and judicially legitimised violence is no longer different from emergent outbursts of aggression. Keeping in mind at least partially imaginative nature of texts Girard bases his analysis on, a natural disaster or an epidemic seem to be prevalent examples of such crises. Their essence, however, regardless of what exact kind of catastrophe they represent is always the same: overwhelming dissolution of differences (Girard 1986: 12–16, 24, 13–16; cf. Girard 1989: 49, 55; Girard 2000: 119).[28]

The **second stereotype** comes into focus when the community picks out *a single person or a small group of people* that it believes to be guilty of causing whatever calamity it suffers. This sign has to do with the kinds of crimes the suspect minority is accused of — the crimes that are seen as attack on the differences that constitute the very fabric of society. These often may include incestuous relationships that eliminate the distinctions between family and non-family, infanticide that is seen as a transgression of the difference between optional and forbidden object of violence, bestiality that breaches the boundary between a human being and an animal, violation of religious or confessional distinctions that is viewed as profanation or sacrilege and so forth (Girard 1986: 15–17). Ethnic or religious minorities are a somewhat regular target (Girard 1986: 6, 17).

The **third stereotype**, finally, spells out one of the most paradoxical notions of Girard's theory: a persecution text will carry a clear indication that the group which is accused, at least ostensibly, of being criminally different is, simultaneously, blamed for not being

[28] If approached politically, this is very likely to become a fraught area. This is not a political study at all, so the concept of 'elimination of distinctions' should be approached as pure mechanic heuristic: when differences are decreased, spheres of individual possibilities intersect.

different enough (Girard 1986: 22). This self-contradictory ‘persecutive dissonance’ may be difficult to comprehend, so I will try to illustrate it with a real-world example. From the perspective of the mimetic theory it would be ambivalent to compliment a foreign-looking person on their command of the local language, because the compliment is based on the premise that an foreign-looking person should not be able to speak the local language well. In other words, a foreign-looking person is expected to conform to expectations of being different in terms of not speaking the local language passably — they have no right *not* to be different in this regard. Simultaneously, the same person may be suspected or even openly accused of being different on account of being a foreigner: ‘different’ in the sense of ‘ill-mannered’, ‘barbaric’, ‘socially incompatible’, etc.

As few as two of the three stereotypes listed above would suffice to conclude that the text they are found in may be linked to an actual event of violent persecution (Girard 1986: 24)[29]. It may refer to a witch-hunt, where the criminals, or rather the victims, were accused almost exclusively on the grounds of the community’s capability to ‘convince themselves that a small number of people, or even a single individual, despite his relative weakness, is extremely harmful to the whole of society’ (Girard 1986: 15). This recurrent ‘persecutor’s fallacy’ is at least partially enabled by magical thinking, which is the concept of particular importance in the context of both the mimetic theory and this study as its application.

Magical thinking, which Girard elsewhere refers to as ‘ritualistic imagination’ (Girard 1989: 99) may very broadly be summarised as conviction that random events have a concrete cause on the social or moral level of being and may therefore be subject to ‘corrective intervention’ (Girard 1986: 53), again on the social or moral level of being (see Girard 1986: 52–54, 96, 103, 204). The historical examples Girard gives vary from accusations of witchcraft (Girard 1986: 9–10) and ‘the ordinary “evil eye” which is used to attribute almost any evil to almost any person’ (Girard 1986: 17) to the more

[29] Of dubious relevance in contemporary context: myth or medieval literature may have resonances with real-world events, but we can hardly expect it from, say, modern cinema, let alone a video game.

'scientific' and 'rational' belief that an outbreak of plague was caused by the Jews who had poisoned the local rivers (Girard 1986: 1–3, 6–7, 16–17).

An apt contemporary example of magical thought are the cases in which natural disasters were, allegedly, blamed on the affected area's homosexual population (Chrisafis 2005). If worked through, the accusation implies that these contingent events are manageable by corrective intervention on the social level, i.e. that the hurricanes will cease if the homosexual community is correctively acted upon, perforce physically destroyed. Admittedly, these cases are conspicuous by their absurdity, yet the same magical mindset may be the primary driving force behind some much less controversial and, arguably, much more widespread beliefs, such as the somewhat popular conviction that a small group of people who share some non-native nationality[30] are single-handedly responsible for the productivity/infrastructure issues a local society may face, and that all local problems would immediately cease once the foreigners are removed.

Our main takeaway from both examples should be the magical idea of *controlled contingency*, i.e. the understanding that random events fit within a narrow scope of anthropogenic causality and can therefore be socially influenced, or a belief that intrinsically random outcomes can be made determinate by a narrowly focused anthropogenic effort. This constitutes the first necessary component of ritualistic imagination. The second component is its moral dimension, the set of assumptions and beliefs that finalise the transformation of the accused into a monster and completes the scapegoat process.

[30] Taking into account the denominative ambiguity of the term, I am still comfortable using it insofar as my sources use it and since it seems especially relevant today, when a significant proportion of prejudice and discrimination is based exclusively on nationality or statehood.

2.1.6 Monstrous transformation, single victim mechanism

‘If a witch is accused of causing a drought, and if she dies for it, we can be sure that her death will be credited with the return of the rain, provided of course, that the account comes from true believers’ (Girard 1996: 126). As soon as the ‘guilty party’ is established and apprehended, persecution resolves in a sometimes spontaneous yet always ritualistic process in which the immense intra-communal conflict caused by mimetic loss of distinctions is collectively displaced onto an isolated and, in some sense, externalised subject. The scapegoat, who is originally perceived as a human being undergoes a monstrous transformation (cf. e.g. Girard 2001a: 49–51). It becomes ultimately indisputable that it is him, or her, or they, who have caused the community’s present misfortunes and in so doing originated the uncontrolled reciprocal violence that threatens to implode the community from within. As soon as the monster is destroyed or expelled, peace and order is restored, the mutually violent society is reconciled[31] and the crisis of lost differences is, for the time being, averted (cf. Girard 1986: 54–56; Girard 1989: 79–85, 103; Girard 2011: 224–225).

How does the monster come into existence? Girard points out the three conditions that are likely to be in place. The first condition presumes that the victim is categorically ‘sacrificeable’ (Girard 1989: 4). Secondly, the victim may bear objectively discernible ‘preferential signs of a victim’ (Girard 1986: 61). Finally, the transformation is activated by a separate layer of magical thinking, an idea that may be described as some kind of monstrous essentialism. We will examine the three conditions in greater detail.

The first condition locates the victim in relation to the community. The scapegoat would always be found at some fringe position: they are not entirely alien with regard to the community — at least not directly and immediately so — but sufficiently differentiated

[31] This is a point that Girard makes in a somewhat axiomatic manner: the scapegoat process is supposed to cause this result and therefore it does. This does not seem to be a plausibly universal situation, however, and is the very reason why the scapegoat process did not reproduce within the setting of a MMO: some kind of collaboration is a factor, but intra-communal conflicts are not affected.

from it. They are, in Girard's exact words 'neither outside nor inside the community, but mar-ginal to it' (Girard 1989: 271). We may recall the third stereotype of persecution discussed above: the accused entity is both very different and not different enough, which works towards aggravating the persecutor's anguish and also frames the victim as inherently distinct and therefore less not belonging (cf. Girard 1989: 12). In most cases the primary consequence of such marginal status is the lack of collective protection; the violence against the scapegoat is not expected to be reciprocated. The scapegoat's liminal position and their inherent vulnerability makes them into what Girard terms 'a surrogate victim' (Girard 1989: 2), in other words, *a target capable of diverting to itself the violent impulses the community originally intended for each other* (cf. Girard 1986: 60–61; Girard 1989: 269–270; Kirwan 2009: 25)

The second condition articulates and amplifies the first and is not necessarily or always present. The scapegoat may exhibit some objectively distinctive features, some visible incongruences that set them apart from the majority. Not uncommonly and well within the canon of socially imagined monstrosity, the victim is somehow visibly deformed: 'a crowd will tend to move against victims that are easy to spot, which have some physical defect or something else that makes them noticeable' (Girard 2011: 228; cf. Girard 1986: 48). Because of that a person or a group of people with a physical disability may be just as likely to become a target as someone belonging to an ethnic or religious minority. Moreover, an apparent fluctuation from the average social status is a preferential sign as well: being too poor (or too affluent), ill-adjusted or otherwise distinct (Girard 1986: 18) is sometimes enough to set the community against a single person or a small group of people, at which point another aspect of magical logic comes into play.

The third condition implies that as collective persecution reaches its peak, the distinctions of the scapegoat that the persecutors can objectively acknowledge are complemented with non-discernible yet adamantly presumed inner wickedness. The 'formal' monstrosity of being marginal to the community; or marginal and culturally different; or marginal, culturally different and physically distinctive is perceived as a

sign indicating the moral monstrosity of the victim. The physical/objective/formal factors and the supposed moral qualities produce a holistic amalgamation of monstrosity, in which the physical or formal is equated with the moral and neither of the two prefigures the other (cf. Girard 1986: 33–35). As then the image of the monster is complete, their guilt may no longer be doubted: 'Everything shrivels under his feet and the grass does not grow again. He produces disasters as easily as a fig tree produces figs' (Girard 1986: 36).

How does the monster reconcile the community? The scapegoat mechanism is made possible by the emergence of 'violent unanimity' (Girard 1986: 83), that stems from the victim being seen as monstrous enough to 'polarize' (Girard 1986: 18) the community against themselves and therefore unite the persecutors mimetically (cf. Girard 1986: 165, 177; Girard 1989: 79; Girard 1996: 13–14; Girard 2011: 233, 246). Recall the crisis of collective and symmetrical mimetic rivalry: members of the community are engaged in symmetrical conflicts over the objects that they cannot or are no longer willing to share. The resolution afforded by the scapegoat entails, in Girard's formulation, the ability of antagonists to share a common antagonist in lieu of an object they cannot share and are therefore antagonistic over, effecting 'the shift from the mimesis of fighting over objects to the mimesis of fighting against someone' (Girard 2011: 223). Building on the initial loss of differences, the unanimity of the persecutors is so absolute that peace, order and harmony, the community cohesion as we might say these days, is fully restored.[32] In this way, the aggressive transference of both collective guilt and collective violence onto the surrogate victim that is initially thought to have caused the crisis, is succeeded by the affective transference of adoration onto the same surrogate victim post-mortem, seen, perhaps paradoxically, as the resolution of the crisis (see e.g. Girard 1987: 99–100; Girard 1996: 118).

The scapegoat mechanism, then, is comprised of the 'magically monstrous' nature of the victim, the persecutor's unfaltering belief that the victim is both guilty and

[32] Which is again somewhat doubtful both in terms of common sense and in the light of the findings of this particular study of virtual collaborations of somewhat similar kind.

extremely dangerous, the unanimous collective action the community takes against the victim and the alleviation of acute intra-communal conflicts that follows. Two particularities that may be described as formal or ritualistic aspects of the process are worthy of separate notice:[33]

The phenomena that may be loosely grouped under the heading of 'the first stone effect' account for the initial reluctance of the persecutors to engage with the scapegoat. At the stage where the actual collective murder takes place, the monstrosity of the victim is so strongly perceived that a physical contact with them implies contamination (Girard 1986: 176–177). Further to that, the mimetic nature of the event stipulates that a single representative of the group would have to serve as the model for the rest of the persecutors, i.e. to cast the first stone (cf. Girard 1986: 152–153; Girard 2001a: 54–59; Girard 2011: 27). In other words, an act of collective violence requires a single person to accept the responsibility by making the first move and encouraging the rest of the group to follow their example.

The phenomenon that may be formally designated as 'diasparagmos' refers to cases where body parts of the scapegoat, or at least their personal belongings are split among the persecutors due to the magical status the second transference, which is to say, glorification of the dead scapegoat, imbues these now sacred objects with (see Girard 1986: 89–90; Girard 1989: 250–251; cf. Girard 1976: 83). In his discussion of such phenomena, Girard stresses the point that this 'metamorphosis of remains into relics' (Girard 1986: 90) remained an aspect of race-linked collective violence for centuries after they appeared in mythical or biblical texts. The recurrence of this motif suggests that in cases where it coincides with an act of collective violence, the scapegoat mechanism is likely to be present.

This somewhat scant approximation of the scapegoat process concludes the outline of the mimetic theory. Brief by necessity, it hopefully would suffice to make the following application of Girard's concepts as clear and coherent as the format of this thesis would

---

[33] Because of their fascinating similarity to certain core mechanics of *World of Warcraft*.

allow. Before we set out to implement the theory, however, we need to intellectually secure ourselves from the theory's sweeping scale and disproportionate claims it makes. To that end, we should address at least some of the most salient criticisms directed at Girard's legacy and in so doing assess what possible issues the mimetic theory may cause and what its potential limitations may be.

2.2 Mimetic theory: Issues and limitations

Hayden White challenges the scientific validity, or at least scientific respectability of Girard's work, suggesting, among other things, that Girard's claim of scientific approach may be the only thing that 'separates him from such French anti-scientistic thinkers as Foucault, Deleuze, and Lévi-Strauss, who otherwise share his bleak perspective on modern civilization and anticipate its imminent demise with varying degrees of delight' (White 1978: 3). This borderline epithetic characterisation seems to be, as we will see, at least partially justified, yet it assists us in placing Girard's thought in more or less appropriate context. The company that White finds Girard in, one he further completes with Marx and Freud (White 1978: 7), can be seen as an indication that both the method and the potential productivity of Girard's thought are best judged on more or less the same grounds as those represented by his allegedly pessimistic colleagues: he is probably no more scientistic or anti-scientistic than they are.

With that in mind we should address some specific flaws that the mimetic theory has from the point of view as stringently scientistic as that of its critics. Importantly, the purpose of this exercise is not so much to defend the theory as to ascertain its viability in the context of this particular research. What we need to do is to ensure that the method is proportionate to the problems being addressed and capable of producing appreciable value without being compromised by the scientific risks that seem to be relatively high.

2.2.1 General considerations

The first such risk is, perhaps, the most immediately obvious one: the mimetic theory cannot be falsified and is, therefore, guilty of unscientific universalism. By White's astute observation, there is hardly anything it cannot explain or predict (White 1978: 7; see also Girard 1996: 277; Landy 2012: 17).

Indeed, the mimetic theory cannot be refuted, at least not by conventional means of falsification. However, it has become almost traditional, in such cases, to evoke Darwin's theory of evolution that is likewise not falsifiable, and yet definitely productive. With both theories, the sweeping scale seems to come with the territory: authors who theorise the origin of species as Darwin does and the origin of human culture as does Girard, seem to have a tendency for speculation and various degrees of universalism. This study, however, approaches no such monumental subjects and makes no such sweeping claims. For the most part, this study is slightly external to the subject of human culture and academic debates this subject informs. It is hardly controversial that interactive media users' online experiences affect their real-world existence and vice versa, yet the connection between the two is not something this study seeks to explore. The players' offline cultural preferences and real-world behaviours are, in general, neither directly engaged with, nor speculated about.

Further to that, a quantitative study of *World of Warcraft* players — for all the limitations of comparably small self-selected sample — affords this research a degree of falsifiability per se. Although its findings generally support the initial assumption that high competence/high intensity players have motivations of possibly mimetic origin, the data also contains a negative correlation represented by players who report *not* being mimetically motivated. It bears repeating that my study does not claim to be the one and only truth possible. This is very important because some aspects of the mimetic theory are somewhat easy to overfit, in particular, conveniently formulaic ones. However, my research does not inherit the overarching monism of its main theoretical tool but uses

this tool to explore new leads and possibilities in what is currently a relatively inchoate field.

What may exacerbate the issue, however, is Girard's notoriously unorthodox choice of evidence. The mimetic theory, as was discussed earlier, places extreme emphasis on evidential usage of texts that are at least partially imaginative. The crucial fault of this approach, in White's opinion, is unscientific extrapolation: Girard projects his literary 'proof' onto actual cultural and social phenomena and does so with little regard for the inavoidably mediated, subjective nature of his evidence (White 1978: 9; cf. Kofman 1980: 42).

The way this study negates this risk is by looking, *a priori*, at mediated evidence. Its primary focus is the medium and the mediated experience this medium affords. Whenever 'real world' social and cultural phenomena have to be addressed, this study appeals to secondary, much less controversial sources and the conclusions based on its primary sources imply a suggestion, rather than hard extrapolation. And although the same 'literary' approach was successfully applied elsewhere — Lilian Furst's work on psychosomatic disorders (Furst 2003) is an excellent example — it seems instructive to point out that Girard himself seems to have to toned down the pathos of his argument with the passage of time. His later comments on the mimetic theory delineate the general purview of his method with greater clarity:

> If science could find a way to translate imitation into foolproof equations and operations, I would be all for that. I think quantifying these matters is very important. And indeed, there is something very scientific in what we have been doing. But ultimately, I'm more interested in insights than organized research—overall insights that demand extensive commentary and interpretation and that are not the result of experiments. (Girard 2011: 238–239, emphasis added)

If literature, in Girard's view, is a reliable source of these kinds of insights, it makes perfect sense to interrogate the source with a tool which is most capable of extracting this kind of data. This aligns well with the remarkable breadth of the theory's potential applicability, particularly with regard to media and mediated experiences whether it is, in Gil Bailie's words 'a piece of literature, an ancient myth, a historical event, or the

morning newspaper' (Bailie 1995, cited in Williams 1996: ix; see also Kirwan 2009: 30–32; Garrels 2011: 13). And since MMOs are, in many obvious ways, a mediated experience, they may be expected to be a rich source of insights of their own. In other words, the subject itself makes for a very suitable deployment of the mimetic theory and its much-lauded generative power.

Having said that, the very generativity of Girard's thought seems to be the primary target of Joshua Landy's paper, which is critical not merely critical of the theory itself, but also targets whoever decides to apply it. 'Such people,' Landy contends, 'Do not care whether a given theory is true or false; all they care about is whether it spawns "interesting" readings' (Landy 2012: 19). I am prepared to meet this accusation halfway: I do use the mimetic theory in hopes to produce unusual findings. But that being said, I do not think the theory is entirely false and I definitely do not believe it is universally true. To be frank, I do not see how an interpretive literature-based theory of any kind can be anything more than highly plausible within the limited context of its application. I do not care if the mimetic theory is true or false because I do not think these two categories apply. Having made my position clear on that particular point, I would like to address Landy's remarkably sober assessment of concrete methodological risks connected to the mimetic theory and its usage.

The first characteristic error of procedure that Landy ascribes to the mimetic theory and its adherents is a tendency to generate 'false positives' (Landy 2012: 13), i.e. to discover mimetic phenomena where there are none to be found. Indeed, with 'comprehensive' theories such as Girard's — recall White's reference to Marx and Freud above — every problem encountered is very likely to resonate with whatever set of analytical tools the theory provides the investigator with. The risk of developing a confirmation bias is quite real and Landy is right to underscore the issue. What is debatable, however, is the very possibility of reliably finding out whether or not imitation is present or absent. Looking at the opposition between often unacknowledged mimetic desire and desire that is thought of as consciously autonomous, it is doubtful that we will be able to 'prove' the existence of either. The difference between conscious

and non-conscious behaviours is often blurred and liable to evade clinical observation (cf. Girard 1989: 176; Strawson 2004: 443), let alone participant observation carried out in a virtual setting. However, if some phenomenon includes themes and patterns of possibly mimetic nature and at the same time seems to evade a non-mimetic explanation, we would not be wrong to conclude that the mimetic theory is capable of providing, if not the most viable interpretation then a helpful analogy through which the phenomenon can be investigated further. This is the approach that offers sufficient protection from the false positives fallacy and the approach that this study supports.

Another possible error Landy attributes to the mimetic method is selective picking of evidence that supports mimetic assumptions performed alongside omission of evidence that does not support the theory (Landy 2012: 14). By way of a response, it has to be said once again, that in most cases it would not be possible to entirely 'support' or 'not support' the occurrence of imitation. It is still less possible to universally establish or reliably refute its presence in an electronically mediated experience this study is concerned with. Subsequently, any data that has no conceivable connection to imitation and conflict that are the main themes of this study can be disregarded insofar as its inclusion would not have any decisive bearing on the development of the hypothesis. Conversely, no relevant material is withheld, which is particularly evident in how the study incorporates, rather than disregards the existent categorisations of player motivation (Bartle 1996; Bartle 2004; Bartle 2014; Yee 2005, etc.) which seem to proceed from the assumption of individual autonomy and are therefore in direct contradiction to Girard's mediated desire.

An inclination to interpret contrary evidence as one that supports the claim is yet another mistake Landy believes to be present in Girard's reasoning. To illustrate that, he refers to Girard's assertion that in order to function as myths, myths have to conceal the exact mechanics of their functioning, and therefore the fact these mechanics are not present overtly present signifies that (Landy 2012: 15). Indeed, the statement may appear controversial when represented in deliberate isolation from its immediate context. However, if we recall the phenomenology of persecution (discussed earlier in

2.1.5) we will see that Girard's argument is often a lot less contradictory and a good deal more straightforward than Landy would have it. Recall the specific contemporary example of persecution that we have addressed: when a homosexual person is accused of causing a hurricane, we have no doubt that the person in question is innocent. However, the persecutor makes no such admission, the accusation does not allow for as little as a remote possibility of the victim being not guilty. The lack of such evidence, in this case, is indicative of the persecutor's intention to incriminate, it suggests that we are dealing with a case of persecution, i.e. supports the claim that persecution took place.

A case can be made that such slightly idiosyncratic approach to evidence analysis seems to be recurrent in works that address any phenomena the researcher posits as pre-conscious, non-conscious or sub-conscious. Freudian psychoanalysis comes to mind, in which presence of repression may be suggested by its absence, i.e. by repression having been successfully repressed. From the Girardian perspective, by the same token, claims of no imitation taking place may indicate the opposite — inasmuch as desire for originality is in itself an imitation of originality someone else is believed to possess. This constitutes a problematic area this study escapes by approaching its tasks dialectically: it does not take self-reported or openly professed data at face value nor does it gloss over viable contradictions. And while antagonistic reflexive imitation — or 'conflictual mimesis' (Girard 1989: 148) — remains the focus of this research, no data is withheld, and no alternative explanation is suppressed.

Having addressed, for the most part, the criticisms directed at Girard's methodology, we should conclude that scientific risks posed by the mimetic theory may be real but are unlikely to fundamentally compromise this particular study. However, while the procedural flaws of the mimetic hypothesis are indeed many and rather pointless to debate, attempts at the theory's conceptual foundations often end up as superficial and hardly justifiable on their own terms. Referring to Landy's paper yet again, the strategy he opts for in order to 'debunk' the mimetic theory is, at the very least, surprising: to suggest that Girard must be wrong because a lot of people are perfectly capable of not

mugging each other for their cell phones (Landy 2012: 6) is akin to saying Freud must be wrong because a lot of people are perfectly capable of not having sex with their mothers. Both statements herald an intention to trivialise a largely theoretical concept as much as possible, as well as ignorance, affected or actual, of how the concept functions within the constraints of the theory it represents.

2.2.2 Gender[34] bias of the theory

> …Girard's mimetic hypothesis is completely free of sexual bias in the sense of attaching mimesis to genetic heritage, anything biologically preordained, or a universal family structure or situation. The only thing that is universal and already given in the human condition is the mimetic structure and capacity of human beings, which require human others as models or mediators and objects to desire according to the model's desire — but which humans and which objects are not predetermined. This in spite of the frequent feminist charge that the mimetic theory is thoroughly "androcentric" or "patriarchal"! This conclusion is not based on thorough engagement with Girard's concept of mimesis in order to understand it, but a politically influenced version of "affirmative action," or, as the British aptly put it, "positive discrimination": instances of male and female examples are counted from the texts and other data cited and the totals indicate whether the thinker is "politically correct." (Williams 1996: 226–227, emphasis in the original)

Regardless of Williams's excessively opinionated rhetoric, this diatribe makes an apt introduction to the following section since it foregrounds the important aspect of how the mimetic theory views women. It is absolutely crucial to take on board that in Girard's framework women are 'mechanically' similar to men insofar as mimetic desire is neither gender-specific nor gender-exclusive. However, the excerpt above it also

---

34 This study prefers the term 'gender' rather than 'sex' and uses it to describe differences that are not necessarily or always biologically influenced (cf. Caplan & Caplan 2005: 25–27). The terminological dichotomy was criticised, persuasively, by authors who argue for a unified 'biopsychosocial model' (Halpern et al. 2007: 3). However, the virtualised and pre-designed nature of software-mediated experience may reduce, or at least obscure the impact of biological aspects of sex, while simultaneously increasing the salience of what may be described as its constructed aspects. The focus on socially or environmentally perpetuated differences does not imply that biological distinctions do not exist or may not be a factor. It also does not imply that all gender differences are, necessarily, socially and environmentally perpetuated.

throws light on what seems to be a problem somewhat characteristic of some ostensibly anti-feminist positions, which is to say formal equality does not presume actual parity. This may be a contradiction in Williams's reasoning: if men and women are mimetically one and the same, sex ratio of data being cited becomes an issue of reliability and comprehensiveness, and not that linked to a political or ideological agenda. Further to that, the kind of labelling Williams sees fit to resort to is indicative of his intent to stifle the debate rather than further it. This is, judging by conversations and discussions Girard himself took part in, a very un-Girardian thing to do.

Subsequently, as we examine the actual criticisms directed at the mimetic theory's representative capacity, we will have no choice but to concur that Toril Moi is justified to point out Girard's preoccupation with — almost exclusively — male literary characters, as well as his reluctance to include any novelistic works by female authors in his primary sources (Moi 1982: 23–24). This is a questionable decision that does constitute a bias and is likely to compromise the reliability of a theory predicated upon non-exclusionary psychic mechanisms. It has to be said, however, that the first criticism seems to have been partially redressed in *A Theatre of Envy* (2001, originally published in 1991), Girard's exhaustive monograph on Shakespeare that shows a ratio of male and female characters that is much more balanced both in numbers and the relative importance.[35] The non-inclusion of female authors is likewise a major omission that did not, however, prove detrimental to the theory's applicability. William Johnsen's study of Virginia Woolf (Johnsen 2003: 108–138) and Hanna Mäkelä's mimetic analysis of Toni Morrison, Muriel Spark, Donna Tartt and Siri Hustvedt (Mäkelä 2014) confirm that even if the theory's creator has sadly neglected to engage with the novelistic legacy of women sufficiently, the theory itself is a critical tool that is quite fit for purpose. In other words, there does not seem to be a crippling restriction that makes the analysis of

[35] A lot more balanced, but still somewhat constrained by Shakespeare's own distribution of characters, positions and roles. Conceivably, Girard's lack of focus on women may be, in certain ways and up to some extent, linked to the attitudes his primary sources had as well as gender distribution choices made by their authors.

female participation or feminine interest impossible, even though this is something some critics of the mimetic theory explicitly propose.

In some such cases, Girard's argument is not so much disputed as squarely misconstrued, exemplified by Moi's observation that 'for Girard the desiring subject is always male, and that so is the rival, whereas (tiens!) the object is female' (Moi 1982: 23; see also Jacobus 1982: 130). Simply stated, this is not the way it is for Girard at all. In case of sexual desire — which is the desire that Moi is referring to here — the paradigm of relationship consists of the lover, the rival, and the beloved. The function of the rival is often assumed by the beloved, which leaves us, essentially, with a lover-beloved dynamic in which the position of the object is occupied by the body of the beloved (Girard 1976: 105). The absolutely crucial aspect of this triangular relationship is that the actors are not pre-gendered, and the roles are not gender-exclusive. In other words, the positions are not defined by gender, but by positions themselves: whoever is the lover is always the subject; whoever is the beloved is always the model, the possessor of the object, and in some cases the rival.

How is the difference between the two established? The mimetic procedure is rather simple for something this complex:[36] the party who takes initiative, i.e. exposes his or her own desire towards another person is the subject in relation to that other person who is, automatically, the object (cf. e.g, Girard 2013: 53). In other words, if a woman desires a man and believes there is another woman desiring the same man — this relationship comprises female subject, female rival and male object,[37] which is the exact opposite of the situation Moi postulates as universal and axiomatic.

How does this dynamic function? It works mimetically: once sexual desire or romantic interest is displayed it is immediately imitated by the object. When one of the actors,

---

[36] Borderline reductive, perhaps.

[37] There may therefore be relationships with female subject, female object and female rival, as well as triangles formed by male subject, female rival and female object and other possible permutations. The lover-beloved dynamic is explicitly gender neutral and applies to different kinds of sexes and sexualities.

male or female, says ‘I love you’, the other actor, male or female, may respond with ‘I love *myself* too’ and the mimetic rivalry will ensue. This is, in part, reminiscent, of Freud’s phenomenology of object-directed and self-directed (narcissistic) desire with the difference that Freud attributes narcissistic desire exclusively to women. For Girard these positions are fully interchangeable: a woman may be as ‘selfless’ as any man and a man may be as narcissistic — coquettish is the term Girard might use — as any woman (cf. e.g., Girard 1976: 109; Girard 2001a: 80–81, 93–94, 106–111; Palaver 2013: 146–147). This is, somewhat remarkably, a point of concern for Sarah Kofman, who sees such equalisation as counter-productive inasmuch as it deprives women of self-sufficiency afforded by Freud’s — formally sexist — notion of exclusively feminine narcissism (Kofman 1980: 41–43; see also Jacobus 1982: 136). This seems to be a bit of a ‘damned if you do, damned if you don’t’ situation which is markedly above my competence to unpick, so the most feasible thing we can do is account for another possible limitation of the mimetic theory, the risk that it ‘cannot account for feminine desire’ (Moi 1982: 21).

The question of whether or not Girard offers a suitable explanation of feminine desire is in many ways beyond the scope of this research, however it is easy to see why the mimetic theory may have little appeal for scholars who seem to gravitate towards the more essentialist notions of cultural feminism. In this case, *similarity of desires* — and this is something the mimetic theory is profoundly invested in — becomes unacceptable insofar as feminine desire is thought of as radically different from male desire, or even superior to it as Kofman’s argument may imply (cf. Kofman 1980: 40–41). On the other hand, as Mäkelä astutely observes, the same similarity of desires may offer additional means of reinforcing equality:

> Girard takes the ontological equality between the sexes for granted, which, as feminism is quite right to point out, is not something that the patriarchal system does. Far from undermining feminism, mimetic theory could be considered one of its greatest allies, if only feminism is understood in the essentially egalitarian vein, with similarities, not differences, foregrounded. (Mäkelä 2014: 16–17)

The latter is the position this study sides with, insofar as it views virtual worlds and MMOs in particular as potentially gender-neutral environment and, as is discussed later in this section, an important tool of female empowerment. The risk to misunderstand or misrepresent specific instances of software-mediated feminine desire exists but is regrettably impossible to compensate for because of the virtual nature of the subject. A possible compromise this study proposes is to classify the kinds of desire it investigates as gender-universal, which is to say those that seem to be correspondent to masculine desires and which, at the same time, may or may not correspond to feminine ones.[38]

Having addressed the theory's bias in terms of its representative capacity we hopefully can agree that while some kind of bias exists it does not result in gender exclusion. We should now proceed to an instance of gender exclusion that the theory does perpetuate rather deliberately and that seems to have somehow evaded the attention of the critics we have engaged with above. This striking disparity stems from a simple premise: as we have earlier discussed, the mimetic theory is a theory of violence, specifically, violence in its archaic or traditional understanding. The way it excludes women is by framing violence as essentially and dogmatically masculine, an exclusive sexual trait, no less. Remarkably, this kind of gender-linked bias is something Girard is only too happy to confess:

> I find it strange that women so badly want participation in the male power of archaic societies, for it is precisely their real superiority that women don't appear, for the most part, as the primary agents of violence. If they want now to join the power games of the males, and that is understandable, are they not losing their real moral superiority? . . . If anything, my hypothesis is pro-woman. It is peculiar how people moved by new ideologies want to be part of the power structure even retrospectively, and to be seen as responsible for some of the horrors that have left their mark on us. This greed to participate in the violence of men is incomprehensible to me. (Girard 1996: 275–276)

[38] Feminine desire is something I am ill-equipped to account for because of the fact that the overwhelming majority of players I encountered through fieldwork, as well as roughly 85% of my survey respondents were male. Whatever information I have on female MMO playing preferences and approaches, I do not believe it to be sufficiently representative.

Girard's prejudice, for want of better word, seems to be sufficiently archaic in and of itself. For instance, some traditional societies may still perceive women as the 'instrumental opposite' of violence as is suggested by Joshua Akong'a's description of the Kitui ritual of eviction in which a persecuted outsider is expelled from the community by a group of women, which may be seen as means to ensure his or her physical safety (Akong'a 1987: 75). It does not seem to be discursively isolated either — criticising Girards mimetic theory for its exclusively masculine conception of violence, Nancy Jay points out that Walter Burkert's Theory of the Hunt is guilty of the same reductive approach (Jay 1992: 130). However, the notion of women being intrinsically non-violent is rooted in archaic social norms and codified behaviours and therefore puts the mimetic theory at risk of becoming, in some vital aspects, not quite up to date. It also forms the basis of Jennifer Rike's poignant criticism of Girard's work, in which she argues that the emergence of feminist selfhood depends on understanding, as well as accepting the fact that 'women participate in these processes [of cyclical violence] in ways both like and unlike men' (Rike 1996: 22), in other words, of women being both capable of violence and perpetrating it:

> To claim that only women are victims and only men—and the women they have co-opted—are perpetrators may be politically correct, but that claim ignores some hard but ultimately helpful truths about what women must do to bring about the changes necessary for revolutionizing our society by transforming its violent ways into peaceful ones. (Rike 1996: 22)

This perspective — 'to deny violence in women by seeing them simply as its victims is to see them as powerless' (Rike 1996: 35) — is of particular relevance for this study, the subject of which is characterised by its extreme, if entirely fictional, virtual and telemediated, violence. Perhaps paradoxically, the skewed interpretation of femininity that the mimetic theory may have inherited from the socio-historical and cultural environments it thrives on, makes it exceptionally valuable in the context. Johnsen points out, with elegance, that in some cases 'Girard is personally blamed for excluding women, instead of being credited for analyzing a system which excludes women' (Johnsen 2003: 144, emphasis added) and the enormous industry of interactive digital

entertainment is, in some aspects and to a certain extent, correspondent to such a system.

2.2.3 Gender bias in the subject

It is interesting to note that some limitations thought to be imposed on the relationship between women and interactive entertainment software may be described as *aesthetically* archaic. These formally 'magical' restrictions are linked to arbitrary stereotyping of men as intrinsically superior at playing computer games, which leads, importantly, to self-marginalisation of women (Schott & Horrell 2000: 41–42, 47–48). There are also 'territorial boundaries' that have to do with the physical access to the hardware: in some cases, the computer may be situated in the 'male space' of the household and thought of as owned or controlled by men (Crawford & Gosling 2005; Bryce, Rutter & Sullivan 2006: 194). There are, finally, considerations of propriety: indulgence in technology-enabled entertainment is not seen as consistent with the woman's prescribed role in the household, in other words, any engagement with this kind of entertainment does not necessarily constitute an 'appropriate' form of her leisure (see e.g., Green 2001: 143–145).

In practical terms, this translates into a disproportionate lack of female participation in computer gaming. However, this very disparity and the archaic structure behind it may be obfuscated, perhaps unintentionally, by the popular media, that seems to be eager to insist on relatively balanced gender participation ratio (cf. e.g. Prebble 2014; Jayanth 2014).[39] In some cases, these apparently implausible figures are derived from statistics produced by the Electronic Software Association that were numerously challenged on the grounds of their entirely opaque origins (see e.g., Schut 2006: 107) as well as their being non-descriptive to the point of being useless (cf. Yee 2017). At the same time,

[39] Meg Jayanth is not a journalist, but an industry professional, and her argument is a lot more calculated than the sensationalist heading of '52% of gamers are women' may lead us to expect.

quantitative studies whose methodology is sufficiently transparent and whose categorisations are sufficiently specific, point to a very different sex ratio among computer game players. With multiplayer online gaming, for example, most player surveys I came across referred to no less than 80% male respondents. More specifically, the quantitative study conducted as a part of this thesis registered only 15% female respondents from the sample of 334 online gamers. Finally, the study by Nick Yee, perhaps the most authoritative and accomplished researcher of online gaming demographics, quotes the number of 18.5% female respondents from the sample of 272,743 gamers (Yee 2017).

To be sure, these numbers do not necessarily imply that women make 20% or less of actively playing online gamers. They do, however, suggest that women may be reluctant or unwilling to take part in computer game surveys, which resonates with the phenomenology of female self-exclusion (cf. Schott & Horrell 2000: 42; Michaelson & Pohl 2001: 24). The question we should be asking ourselves is whether archaic propriety forms an impetus of such power that some women may be inclined to file themselves as men and in so doing skew the data even further but answering that is a task for a separate study. What we are interested in, nevertheless, is the kind of a feedback loop these data may produce when assessed by the industry. Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins, for example, quote a spokesperson for Nintendo as saying:

> Boys are the market. Nintendo has always taken their core consumers very seriously. As girls get into that core group, we will look for ways to meet their needs. (Cassel & Jenkins 1998: 14)

This quote originates in 1994 and is of questionable applicability today. Nevertheless, we should make note of the industry's apparent eagerness to refuse women a segment of the market instead of trying to increase its consumer base. It is itself a rationally controversial approach that suggests that inclusion of women may be thought of as capable of making the core audience so uncomfortable as to cause significant commercial risk; a possible hint at deeply traditional, if not archaic undercurrents of such strategy. We should also consider the routine alienation of feminine needs which seems to proceed from the baseline assumption that feminine interests and desires are

extremely different from those attributed to men and that the two may not be compatible with each other.

Do men and women genuinely have incompatibly different preferences? Yee's latest study of gamer demographics is instructive, because it reveals which videogame genres female respondents play the most as well as genres least played by them. The extremities of the preference scale are somewhat predictable: games most played by women belong to the match 3 puzzle genre, where 69% of players are female and games women play the least are classified as sports, where 2% of players are female, tactical shooter, racing and first-person shooter — 4%, 6% and 7% respectively (Yee 2017). A range this explicit appears to support the notion of feminine needs being radically different, but it is absolutely crucial to consider two factors that may not immediately meet the eye:

The first factor is **hardware-related**: tactical shooters, first person shooters and racing games — the kinds of games women reportedly play the least — are often rather intense in terms of both processing demand and visual fidelity. More often than not, these kinds of games would require a stationary console, or a powerful desktop PC optimised for gaming. In contrast, match 3 puzzle games are predominantly played on cell phones, the necessary hardware is therefore portable, mobile, and not as singularly purposed as a gaming computer.

The second factor is **content-related**: while puzzle games represent, arguably, the least violent form of software-enabled entertainment, first person shooters, let alone tactical shooters are probably the most violent kind of videogames people can play.

What are the possible implications of these factors? The hardware aspect is an overwhelmingly suggestive (if circumstantial) evidence in favour of the territorial/access control observations referred to above: a mobile phone is the hardware that a female gamer would likely own and have unrestricted continuous access to. Further to that, the usage of a mobile phone for whatever purpose is *incomparably easier to conceal* than the usage of a stationary gaming machine. In other words, the

mobile phone would afford a woman the possibility to play without being critically observed — which would be her understandable desire if the notion of computer gaming contradicting her archaically/traditionally prescribed gender role was true.

With the violence aspect of preference distribution, we arrive at the same structural differentiation that we started our discussion of gender and entertainment software with. Archaic power dynamics exclude women from violence by framing it as fundamentally masculine phenomenon and denying women access to it. While the seemingly obvious explanation that presumes some kind of aversion women have towards violent content and participation in mediated violent activity is often held implicit rather than proven or even properly argued for, there is a mounting body of evidence that suggests the opposite may be true. A focused study by Tilo Hartmann and Christoph Klimt investigated the relevance of commonly assumed female gamers *dislikes*, namely lack of social interaction, excessive focus on violent content or aggressive activity and sexualisation of female characters. The study had found that the negative appeal of violence is disproportionally lower than that of the other two factors (Hartmann & Klimt 2006: 917–920). Conversely, a paper by Jeanne Funk and Debra Buchman reveals a very telling phenomenon of a different kind: male respondents tend to insist that violent games are inappropriate for women and female respondents show strong disagreement with such division:

> The most striking gender differences occurred in statements specifically referencing "fighting games." When aggressive content was specified, girls were more likely than boys to view these games as being appropriate for girls. This may not be entirely positive [. . .] playing violent electronic games may increase the likelihood that girls will adopt ruthlessly competitive "male" tactics in everyday interactions. (Funk & Buchman 1996: 227–228; see also Funk, Buchman & Germann 2000: 235)

So, is this 'nature' or 'nurture' we are dealing with here? In other words, are women themselves disinterested in violent computer games or are they deliberately excluded from them lest they *imitate* some supposedly masculine behaviours? The powerful mimetic undertones of feminine participation are indicative, in the context of a Girardian study, of such motivation being plausible. Moreover, there is some evidence

of violent computer gaming being the quintessential simulation of violence that is remarkably accessible for them and very probably desirable to them, both on deeply personal level, as witnessed by Marsha-Levy Warren's observation of a female player using her participation in a violent online game to recuperate from a childhood trauma (Levy-Warren 2008: 79) and in manifestly collective social interactions, where representatives of the self-styled girl gamer subculture challenge the notion of female non-violence by proclaiming, unambiguously, that 'under every floral print dress lies a lady wearing black garters, carrying a big fucking gun' (Cassell & Jenkins 1998: 33).

Far from being inherently inaccessible to her, researchers argue, online gaming provides a female player with a much-desired possibility to be violently competitive, i.e. to transcend the traditional boundaries of femininity (see e.g., Taylor 2003: 27; Kennedy 2007: 133; Nardi 2010: 171–172). In Henry Jenkins's opinion, the opportunity afforded by computer games is unique as it allows younger girls to circumvent both possible biologically determined physical differences and socially prescribed imperatives and be aggressive 'without the ripped clothes and or black eyes that [tell] parents they had done something "unladylike"' (Jenkins 2007: 211; cf. Taylor 2006: 97). If this is the case, why is the relationship between women and entertainment software so complicated? Perhaps awkwardly, the logical inconsistency of Girard's take on feminine violence makes the groundwork mechanism of his theory even more manifest and persuasive: from the mimetic perspective, the denial of female interest in violent interactive media qualifies as a model-obstacle relationship. When one group of people flaunts its 'privilege' of engaging with violent entertainment it encourages another group of people to accomplish the same and simultaneously prohibits such acquisition by proclaiming exclusive rights to the object. As often is the case, mimetic rivalry is both entirely transparent here and deliberately concealed.[40]

Ironically, such concealment seems to benefit a lot from a peculiar 'collaboration' represented by various trends in both science and popular media that end up furthering

[40] This is not meant to say this is only reason why female MMO participants are so few. It is, however, a plausible explanation of the industry's apparent reluctance to double its customer base.

the goals of archaic/traditional forces that they, at least ostensibly, profess to oppose. More specifically, the exclusion of women from virtual violent interactions may be greatly reinforced by *framing the medium as intrinsically hostile towards women* and, by implication, exclusively masculine. One example of such bias is afforded by the relatively early but widely cited video game content examination study conducted by Tracy Dietz. In the course of the study 'games were reviewed to determine whether or not aggression or violence was part of the game and if so, if it was a socially acceptable or normal form of aggression such as that found in sports, or if it was directed specifically at women' (Dietz 1998: 436). Whilst Dietz's research aims may be merely ill-phrased, they seem representative of the general thrust of her argument, that seems to posit violence against women as a necessary aspect of the medium. The fact that the medium is almost fully predicated upon violence against men, is something that Dietz seems inclined not to notice, even though her own findings suggest that aggression directed at women is hardly the central theme of the products that were examined (Dietz 1998: 425). The outcome, however, of disproportionate focus on violence against women is the creation of 'magically' demarcated forbidden territory highly reminiscent of Bluebeard's secret room: the place no woman should dare invading lest she discovers the bleeding corpse of her sister.

There appears to be a consensus among game scholars that computer games have to cease being seen as such place, i.e. that they should be relieved of their attributes as an archaic, gender exclusive system. This author is entirely convinced, that were it to happen, a massive influx of female players into MMO games would have immensely rejuvenated and evolved them. The mimetic theory that was, as stated above, applied to investigate these exact kinds of systems and phenomena, both in terms of their inner mechanics and the means by which these mechanics are obscured, may prove to be an efficient tool of achieving relative gender parity in MMO — both by means of unique analytic perspective it offers and its persuasive and generative potential.

2.2.4 Interdisciplinarity of approach

Girard's apparent unwillingness to confine his theory within a single field of study, a trait that Kirwan describes as his 'multidisciplinary promiscuity' (Kirwan 2009: 5) is a separate cause for concern and the basis of numerous criticisms directed at the author, both explicitly and otherwise. A trained historian, Girard defended two doctoral theses in paleography, yet his first major contribution (Girard 1976 [1961]) was in the field of literary studies. From literary studies, Girard ventured into anthropology (Girard 1989 [1972]) a new discipline for him that was, by his own admission, self-taught (Girard 2008a: 24–28). What followed was a collection of insights related to psychology and psychoanalysis (Girard 1987 [1978]) produced with the help of psychologist Jean-Michel Oghourlian and psychiatrist Guy Lefort and assembled with a strong focus on myth and religion. The next major work (Girard: 1986 [1982]) prioritised religion yet introduced what may be called Girard's native research perspective and was at least partially grounded in literary analysis of historical texts and events.

And so on, and so forth. It would not be an overstatement to say that every salient piece of Girard's legacy (if not the entirety of his research) is, to some extent, multidisciplinary. The possible consequence of having so broad a focus is superficial, if not perfunctory understanding of areas being covered. Girard's lack of deep expertise in various fields he operated in is both pointed out explicitly (e.g. Moi 1982: 26; cf. Palaver 2013: 4–5) and may be surmised from the peculiar position of the mimetic theory that situated itself, at least formally, in the purview of cultural anthropology and was emphatically ignored by some of its most prominent scholars (Girard 2008a: 35). It does contribute to the controversial status of the theory and is a problem that goes with every case of its application. This may be especially true with regard to this thesis, since the field of game studies is known to have grappled with similar difficulties for years after its inception.

The issue of possible ineptitude, so to speak, seems to have formed the implicit pretext for the proverbial Ludologists versus Narratologists debate, in which a number of

scholars who focused exclusively on computer games expressed their concern with the 'intrusions and colonisations' (Eskelinen 2004: 36) into the discipline by researchers from neighbouring fields, i.e. literature, film studies, media studies and so forth. A brief overview of the debate risks trivialising the elaborate and profound argument presented by either side, yet the crux of the methodological disagreement may be broadly summarised as follows: Ludologists were inclined to view computer games as inherently less compatible with conventional understanding of storytelling and therefore less fit for textual modalities of analysis (see e.g., Aarseth 1997; 2003; Eskelinen 2001; Juul 2001; Frasca 2003, etc.). Narratologists, on the other hand, argued that although interactive media may lack the formal prerequisites of traditional narratology, many computer games include a significant proportion of textual content and are, in and of themselves capable of telling stories, both directly and in a more implicit, interpretative way (see e.g., Murray 1997; King & Krzywinska 2006; Jenkins 2004; Krzywinska 2006, 2007; Ryan 2007, etc.).

Without doubt, such long-standing, animated debate introduces a plethora of contradictions and complications (discussed further in 3.1.1). To address the issue of interdisciplinarity, however, we may make note of a simple, yet practically feasible factor of this confrontation that may have a factor then and that may become a factor in present. It sometimes seems that there may exist a certain surplus of academics who hold a 'traditional' humanities degree in a field which may be somewhat overpopulated. Conceivably, some traditional humanities scholars whom their native disciplines lack the space to accommodate may choose to assume a stance of interdisciplinarity and move into the new area of computer games research, even if it would mean, that games will have to be, in Espen Aarseth's terms 'analyzed willy-nilly, with tools that happen to be at hand, such as film theory or narratology, from Aristotle onwards' (Aarseth 2003: 1).

The resulting conflict of interest, perhaps, led Aspen Aarseth to propose a compromise in the way of a 'segregation matrix' that matched a researcher's home discipline to problem areas best suited for his or her critical method. Briefly summarised below, the

classification (Aarseth 2003: 2–3) includes the elements present in most computer games as well as the recommended perspectives from which they may be addressed:

> **Area:** Play
> **Includes:** The players' actions, strategies and motives.
> Research Perspectives: sociological, ethnological, psychological etc.
>
> **Area:** Rules
> **Includes:** The rules of the game, including the simulation rules.
> **Research Perspectives:** Game design, business, law, computer science/AI
>
> **Area:** World
> **Includes:** Fictional content, topology/level design, textures etc.
> **Research Perspectives:** Art, aesthetics, history, cultural/media studies, economics.

Working through the practical implementation of these categorisations, Aarseth suggests that 'combinations of the above could define more narrowly defined research areas, such as avatar-rights (rules&world), player-strategy or hacking (play&rules) or roleplaying (play&world)' (Aarseth 2003: 3).[41] Hardly a framework Girard would be happy with, the suggested demarcation of research interest may run uncomfortably close to what Thomas Malaby describes as 'the tendency toward unsustainable formalism and exceptionalism' (Malaby 2007: 95). Whilst the categories above are indeed reflective of what video games consist of, it is an open question whether or not they are as mutually exclusive as the above classification suggests. The problem area of this very study, to give an instance, falls within all three categories. It would not be possible to research competitive imitation in MMOs unless play, rules and world are all addressed, by whatever critical means necessary. It is also worthy of note that Aarseth's distribution seems to externalise (if not altogether leave out) the actual games researcher, which seems to be somewhat reminiscent of the situation with literary

[41] It seems somewhat probable that Aarseth's actual purpose here was not so much to *invite* the specialists of proximate fields to examine respective aspects of computer games as to bar them from applying their conceivably limited perspectives to games as a whole.

studies in the 1960s, whose conflicted status Girard was inclined to question on these very grounds:

> If professional psychologists alone are competent to deal with the psychological aspects of literature, professional sociologists with the sociological aspects, anthropologists with the mythical and ritual aspects, and so on, the specialist of literature is left empty-handed. [. . .] One cannot talk about literature without becoming at least minimally involved with literary interpretation in the wider sense. One cannot discuss a novel or a play without touching upon the "psychology" of the characters. One cannot present Balzac or Dickens and say nothing of their views of modern society or of the relationships between rich and poor in nineteenth century Europe. One cannot be a literary historian, in other words, without being a little bit of everything. And this is what a good literary historian is—an interdisciplinary scholar *avant la lettre*. (Girard 2008b: 196–197)

Acknowledging the challenges imposed by interdisciplinary shallowness, this study quite consciously aspires to be 'a little bit of everything', which may well be an optimal strategy with a field this emergent and a subject this multi-faceted and compound. It therefore sides with productive pluralism proposed by Tanya Krzywinska, who advocates 'a combination of a formal and phenomenological approach as a means of exploring the complex relationship between game text and player' (Krzywinska 2006: 119). However, the more significant risk that interdisciplinary attitude may introduce is, perhaps paradoxically, extreme narrowness of scope. Such is the consequence, precisely, of too broad an area being covered. An interdisciplinarian's necessarily brief sojourn in the field they 'invade' would not allow them to acquire and develop the deeper toolset of its cornerstone disciplines. They are, therefore, condemned to perpetually apply the only tool they are proficient in which is very likely to be grounded in their native methodology that is, perhaps, the only one they have at their disposal. Girard's tendency to explain a vast variety of phenomena through mimesis alone has been noted by his critics as well as his allies and even, ironically, the author himself. Setting aside the fact that a diverse assortment of events observed through the prism of different research fields is extremely unlikely to be interpretable by means of one single schema, we should also make note that the field of game studies may be, in a sense, particularly prone to theoretically and functionally limited approaches resulting from

interdisciplinary method having been deployed. Games scholar Jesper Juul gives a striking example of this very issue:

> The narrative turn of the last 20 years has seen the concept of narrative emerge as a privileged master concept in the description of all aspects of human society and sign-production. Expanding a concept can in many cases be useful, but the expansion process is also one that blurs boundaries and muddles concepts, be this is desirable or not. With any sufficiently broad definition of x, everything will be x. This rapidly expands the possible uses of a theory but also brings the danger of exhaustion, the kind of exhaustion that eventually closes departments and feeds indifference: Having established that everything is x, there is nothing else to do than to repeat the statement. (Juul 2001)

A critical application of the mimetic theory may be very vulnerable to such flatness of scope because of Girard's unyielding insistence that mimetic desire is indeed the 'privileged master concept' underpinning each and every aspect of human interaction. This study avoids this particular pitfall because neither its purpose nor its the structure of its argument relies on explaining everything via mimetic theory — as Girard sometimes does. Rather than that, the thesis at hand focuses on specific separate phenomena that may be explainable through mimetic concepts. In other words, the task is not to assert that everything related to socially situated gaming is inherently mimetic, but to distinguish concrete aspects of the activity that are likely to be mimetic in certain contexts.

To that end, it may be reassuring to point out that the mimetic theory seems to function quite well in the interdisciplinary setting, insofar as it resonates with contemporary hypotheses entirely outside it, which is not to say these intersections prove the theory's viability, but merely to stress that some aspects of mimetic approach to imitation may be used in combination with the findings and insights acquired elsewhere. Keeping in mind the above, this study supports Jean-Pierre Dupuy's appeal for productive interdisciplinarity, which is 'a matter of dialogue and listening to multiple resonances that exist [. . .] and trying to do something with those resonances and harmonies, compose a symphony, for instance' (Dupuy 2011: 195). The first dialogue that the mimetic theory will have in its MMO research debute is with the existent theories of

MMO player motivation that constitute the other crucial component of this study's theoretical framework.

2.3 Mimetic desire and player motivation

The link between player motivation and mimetic desire is two-fold. Firstly, existent notions of player motivation articulate the concept of mimetic desire that was not previously applied to video game mechanics and therefore lacks clarity of definition in this context. Player motives — the reasons for playing video games — may be reformulated as specific desires players seek to satisfy by playing. Consequently, while the mimetic theory proposes an explanation of why people act in a particular way in real life, it may also be used to elaborate on player behaviours and approaches. For this purpose, desire and motivation are equivalent and we can substitute 'mimetic desire' with 'mimetic motivation' without perversion of meaning or loss of nuance.[42]

Secondly, the notion of mimetic desire complicates the traditional understanding of player motivations. Seen through the lens of the mimetic theory, dominant player motives are likely to be imitated or suggested: for Girard, independent, self-produced desire is impossible, therefore autonomous player motivation may not exist. It is interesting to note that while conventional MMO player motivation typologies do not address this probability directly, they do refer to phenomena which imply its presence, be it multiple motivations per player (Yee 2005) or motivation adjustment over time (Bartle 2004: 165–174). If player motivations are indeed autonomous and individual,

[42] Girard tends to acknowledge that desire is formally adjacent to a motive drive (see e.g., Girard 1996: 2) and remarks that 'mimetic drive' is a possible substitution for mimetic desire (Girard 2000: 268). There is a degree of situational complexity as Girardian desire often incorporates the goal state it is intended to achieve, e.g., 'a desire to be Another' (Girard 1976: 83). In most cases, however, it would not be wrong to undestand desire as a reference to the motivational impulse, the force that compels the desiring subject to behave in particular way or produces certain kinds of beliefs.

what is the exact mechanism through which additional dominant motives are acquired or current motives replaced?

One answer to that may be gradual changes in how the player is positioned within the MMO environment, and as a consequence, their scope of possibilities. In other words, the player may develop a different dominant motive insofar as goals or goal states attached to this motive become accessible to them. A more comprehensive assessment, however, should take into account the fact that in a MMO game the player is consistently influenced by other players, their motivations and behaviours inclusive. The player's exposure to other players would at the very least serve to inform them of different goals being attainable and worthy of pursuit. In other words, the new (or secondary) player motivation will be, in many cases, learned from other players, acknowledged and then imitated.

Recall the mirror neurons research discussed earlier. The connection between motivation and mimetic desire is something the Lebreton group spells out with absolute clarity: 'beyond automatic elicitation of action representations, MNS activation may affect the observer's own motivational system, increasing the desirability of objects pursued by others' (Lebreton et. al. 2012: 7146). In other words, the mirror neuron reaction motivates the observer towards the object they perceive the others to be motivated by. In virtual worlds, *motivation itself is the object* that the observer infers from the others' actions, pre-designed rules and objectives, as well as numerous readable cues that we will address later. To link this phenomenology to MMO player motivations, the following section proposes the quality of 'mimetic potential' a particular motivation may or may not have.

The extent of this potential depends on two factors: whether or not the motivation in question is highly *imitable* (because of increased visibility of the goal state, conventional expectations, promotion by gameplay mechanics and so forth) and whether or not it is highly *conflictual* (because of being prevalent in gameplay situations that decrease the proximity between the players and so forth). What follows,

is an overview of some motivation typologies that exist in the field as well as their possible resonances with the mimetic theory as the theoretical framework of this study.

2.3.1 Richard Bartle's player types theory

The importance of player motivation for video game research is, in a sense, outlined by the extent of possible extrapolations. Richard Bartle's groundbreaking player types theory (Bartle: 1996) not merely proposes a spectrum of player motivations, but seeks to answer the question of all questions: what video games are? (Bartle 1996: 1–2, 23–24; Bartle 2004: 137) The theory achieves this by spelling out four distinct goal-defined modalities of play, from which four different types of affective involvement are derived.

The four approaches result from combining four factors: two modes of instrumental behaviour — acting [on] or interacting [with] — and two areas of in which goals are situated — the game world or the other players. In various combinations, these factors produce the following play styles: Achiever[43] players, who *act on the world* by acting on the challenges the game presents them with; Explorer players, who *interact with the world* by learning as much as they can about game mechanics and game 'geography'; Socializer players, who *interact with other players*, by communicating with them, building relationships and networks; Killer players, who *act on other players* in order to impose on them, dominate them and assert their own superiority (see Bartle 1996: 2–7; Bartle 2004: 130–133; Bartle 2014: 12–13; Bartle 2016a: 456–457).[44]

---

[43] For the sake of legibility, player types are capitalised throughout the thesis and sometimes referred to as 'player motivations' for the sake of expedience. This is not consistent with Bartle's more precise formulations but communicates the meaning of the terms adequately.

[44] Subsequently, Bartle introduced a clarification to player types, suggesting that either of the four approaches may be carried out in a spontaneous or premeditated manner, thus making eight possible permutations (Bartle 2004: 165–174). This study prefers the original four types, the most obvious reason being the problematic status of both proposed adjustments within the mimetic framework. In the mimetic paradigm, a motive impulse is never truly spontaneous

The reason why player types is the player motivation theory which is most suitable for this study may be seen as threefold. Firstly, the player types model is conceptualised as exhaustive. It claims to account for choices and behaviours of every player who uses a virtual interactive environment for entertainment purposes (Bartle 2014: 13; Bartle 2016a: 463; Bartle 2017). The latter is a vital qualification: motivations not directly related to player experience (however liberally understood), e.g. playing to accomplish a financial, educational or investigative goal, are not the subject the theory is concerned with (Bartle 1996: 3; Bartle 2014: 14–15, 17–18; Bartle 2016a: 479).

Secondly, the mimetic theory which is the basis of this study was chosen because of its outstanding heuristic potential. Because of this, it is important to note that player types theory is known to have been applied heuristically in practical game design — see Bartle's own heuristics for virtual world architecture and balance (e.g., Bartle 1996: 10–11; Bartle 2004: 133–137). Two theories that share this characteristic are likely to work well together.

Thirdly, although Bartle's player types are described as processes of acting or interacting, those processes are overarching categories that contextualise concrete gameplay activities that become, in a sense, processes within processes. Acting on the world, or interacting with other players are not so much behaviours as goal states, and the intention towards either of the four desirable states shapes and defines the process it results in. For instance, the process of working as a group can be motivated by acting on the world, insofar as some gameplay challenges can only be dealt with collectively. It can be motivated by interacting with the world since collective gameplay can involve content or mechanics that cannot be experienced solo. Working as a group can reflect, straightforwardly, a desirable state of interacting with other players. Finally, the same process can be carried out in service of acting on other players – because one needs other players in order to act on them and this is what being in a group provides. In other words, the process itself is not central for player types theory; in Bartle's view it is the

---

(since every desire is suggested externally) nor truly premeditated (since imitation of desire is not acknowledged and therefore not planned for).

intention behind game-related choices that matters the most, not the specifics of choices themselves (Bartle 2004: 154; Bartle 2014: 13, 17; Bartle 2016a: 485, 490, 497).[45]

Consequently, it seems feasible to view Bartle types as goal systems that include separate goals which are attainable through gameplay processes motivated by either of the four motivations and which the player incrementally fulfils. Achiever players act on the world, by means of, among other things, increasing the game metrics available to them. In Bartle's own words 'Achievers regard points-gathering and rising in levels as their main goal, and all is ultimately subserviant to this' (Bartle 1996: 3). Explorer players interact with the world; in particular they work towards the goal of maximizing their knowledge and understanding of what game worlds include, how game mechanics work and what the combination of the two allows. Socialiser types pursue the goal of expanding their environment of communicative interactions as well as (conceivably) their social influence. Killer types 'wish only to demonstrate their superiority over fellow humans' (Bartle 1996: 7) which — inasmuch as such demonstration is often carried out by performing finite operations — may be seen as a chain of incremental episodes of *having been* superior, rather than a cumulative state of *being* superior.[46]

Once understood like that, player types seem to be in relative alignment with the mimetic theory, which is markedly object-centric and which, at its most uncompromising iteration, rejects any notion of intrinsic motivation or behaviour whose only purpose is behaviour itself. A good way to test the compatibility further is to assess each player type for its possible mimetic potential, specifically, how potentially imitable, and how potentially conflictual it is.

---

[45] In contrary, Nick Yee's (2005; 2006) MMO player motivation categories seem to be more straightforwardly autotelic: the motivation of Teamwork is described as 'deriving satisfaction from being part of a group effort' (Yee 2006: 773) regardless of what the group is and what the effort entails; the motivation of Escapism is a process in and of itself, etc.

[46] To say Killer players enjoy fighting other players may be reductive because what many of them enjoy more is the outcome.

2.3.1.1 Achiever type

What is the mimetic potential of Achiever motivation, in other words, how possibly imitable is it? With *World of Warcraft*, this player approach is, perhaps, the most mimetic out of four. In the context of MMO analysis, imitability is positively influenced by goal visibility, or, more specifically, availability of evidence allowing the players to perceive a goal state as having been successfully accomplished by other players.

The metrics that constitute an Achiever's goal environment — item level, achievement points and so forth — are extremely visible, accessible externally and are used, almost invariably, as the most urgent marker of one's proficiency as a player. The ways in which multiple in-game and ancillary external mechanics are streamlined to perpetuate this comparison are referred to later in the thesis. At this stage, it seems sufficient to point out that an average player of an Achiever persuasion, i.e. someone interested in metrics and points of accomplishment, is *perpetually exposed to metrics greatly surpassing their own*. To use a mimetic term, for an Achiever, a model is always readily available.

Is the Achiever motivation possibly conflictual, in the sense of being capable of causing direct or implicit antagonism between the players? Proximity, a major predictor of mimetic rivalry, is definitely in place. In *World of Warcraft*, points and metrics are universal: it is impossible for a player to *not* have an item level, for example. The game also does not allow the players to conceal their metrics. Regardless of personal preference, the players are equal, or rather equalised by the shared condition of having highly visible, universally accessible criteria by which a player — Achiever or not — will be judged with regard to their competence. In addition to overall visibility, *exposure* is a crucial factor. A situation in which an Achiever is exposed to a significant number of other Achievers is conflictual because of the ever-increasing pressure to keep up.

Speculatively, the mimetic potential of Achiever motivation is extremely high both in terms of imitability and conflict.

2.3.1.2 Explorer type

Is Explorer motivation mimetic? It is, to a much lesser extent than the Achiever approach, although the frequent conflation of the two is an outstanding issue. In many contemporary MMOs the motivation also seems to be complicated by the under-articulated divide between game exploration which is *instrumental* in the context of gameplay — theorycrafting, speedrunning exploits and the like or, generally, '[virtual world] physics' (Bartle 1996: 3) — and game exploration of a *substantive* kind — exploration of game geography, lorebooks collection and such or, generally, '[virtual world] topology' (Bartle 1996: 3).[47]

But having said that, in *World of Warcraft* there is no persistent in-game indication of Explorer approach successfully pursued, so there is no in-built cue for imitation such as the Achiever metrics discussed above. Moreover, some forms of substantive exploration are mechanically solipsistic: there is no conventional way to read an in-game lorebook collectively, for example. This further reduces the mimetic potential this motivation has — no witnesses mean fewer possible imitators.

However, as soon as an Explorer's activity — instrumental or substantive — is made public, either for purposes of validation — 'Look what I found, isn't that cool?' — or model signalling — 'Look what I've found, wouldn't you want to have been the one who found that?' the mimetic process is likely to be initiated, because yes it is cool, and yes, we would want to be the ones to have made the discovery.

Further to that, a particularly accomplished instrumental Explorer is likely to become a highly visible expert which, in turn, brings about rivalry with other Explorers, elevating both imitability and intensity of potential conflict. Regarding the latter, Bartle observes that 'flame wars between different cliques of socialisers and achievers may break out,

---

[47] In terms, relevant for the mimetic perspective it is extremely important to make the distinction between the two. Mimetically, substantive and instrumental exploration may represent two opposite playstyles. A substantive Explorer is likely to have no audience at all. A successful instrumental Explorer is no less likely to be followed by *hundreds of thousands.*

and these can be among the worst to stop' (Bartle 1996: 13). From personal experience, altercations between two Explorers (and their respective cliques!) are nowhere less ferocious.

Speculatively, the mimetic potential of Explorer motivation is moderate, yet conditional on whether an Explorer player is engaged in instrumental or substantive exploration and whether or not they are socially visible.

2.3.1.3 Socializer type

How mimetic can Socializer motivation be? A Socializer player, invariably, has company and/or audience to communicate with, so goal visibility is very high (if too obvious). However, where *World of Warcraft* is concerned, socialization seems to be, in general, at the lowest end of practical desirability. I do not think Douglas Brown and Tanya Krzywinska meant to say quite that when they observed 'We might have characters of entirely the same class, race and faction in that game while you raid high level dungeons and I just chat with my mates and meander around making potions' (Brown & Krzywinska 2009: 96), but it is often an either-or situation. One may play the game conventionally, or one may meander around.[48] Regardless of high imitability, Socializer players are less likely to initiate mimetic relationships. Having plenty of virtual friends may be enviable, to an extent, but having plenty of virtual friends while being an accomplished Achiever or Explorer is far more lucrative. In other words, a Socializer can become someone's model if they also excel in behaviours related to either of the three other types. However, in this case Socializer type becomes suspect as their primary motivation.

[48] In fact, one does not even have to meander. I cannot say I have met a lot of players who seemed to belong to Socializer type in *World of Warcraft*, but the very few I did meet often stopped short of logging into the game: The Battle.Net launcher application allowed them to access their friend list and enabled messaging. The game itself was a lot less associated with their goals.

There are at least two important exceptions. The first one is collective role-playing[49] which is a practice so marginal and counterproductive (see e.g., Mortensen 2008: 209–210; MacCallum-Stewart 2011: 72) that it would not be too much of an overstatement to describe it as playing some other game entirely (albeit most likely mimetic). Another conspicuous exception, the one that seems to be almost always occurrent in a well-functioning MMO community (which here refers to an active stable, well-populated *World of Warcraft* server): an exceptionally visible, exceedingly eccentric (invariably) player who is the most recognisable, if markedly anonymous, presence on the server's global chat channel.[50] These highly publicised personae are both imitable and conflictual because of their uncommon notoriety in the game and the meta-game as well as their tendency to polarise player opinions; they are often both hated and admired and represent a distinct phenomenon of MMO mimeticism.

Speculatively, the mimetic potential of Socializer motivation is comparably low, yet conditional on the context and consistency of how the Socializer play style is actualised.

2.3.1.4 Killer type

Predictably, Killer motivation is a very good fit for the mimetic framework: both because of its innately aggressive stance and its dependence on the notions of difference and similarity. The motivation that seems to be overtly and directly competitive, it is, at its core, an establishment of distinction. This is something Girard is exceedingly clear

---

[49] The accent is on 'collective'. Role-playing in MMORPGs is a complex and multi-dimensional subject. There is certainly more than one way to interpret the term. This usage refers to role-playing that involves groups of people co-located in the same spot within a virtual world and holding conversations and pantomimic interactions from their characters' perspectives. As a rule, no conventional gameplay is undertaken in the process.

[50] From personal experience, I would name Selma (EU Defias Brotherhood, active 2005–2007) or Zizzkka (EU Deathwing, active 2010–2017). A typical meta-game description of the latter goes as follows: 'I still don't understand that person... Was (s)he mentally ill, disturbed, misunderstood, or just really odd? Zizzka always talked in trade chat, and was an undead female warlock. . . . I don't remember what the rambling was about anymore... I remember when I logged on Deathwing for the last time before I changed I saw Zizzka in the trade chat telling people "you don't get it, do you, people are so stupid these days, " or something...' (Anonymous, WoW community reddit 2017)

about, an assertion of superiority is effected by means of juxtaposition: ‘A comparison is necessary to discover that one is superior to others: comparison means bringing closer together, putting on the same level, and, to a certain extent, treating the things compared in the same way. The equality of man cannot be denied unless it is first posited, however briefly’ (Girard 1976: 116). Rather than following a model, which is something that players of other types may do semi-consciously, an epitome of a Killer player would seek to convince the world (and themselves) that they do not have a model: every opponent dominated is an obstacle transcended and therefore, by definition, not a model for the one who has had transcended it. The Killer’s conviction is wrong (because everyone has a model), but the presence of such conviction is necessary, I believe, to describe a player as such.

Again, by its very nature, the Killer type is easy to link to Girardian notions of mimetic contagion and reciprocal violence. Bartle observes that ‘nascent or wannabe killers are often put off their chosen particular career path because they themselves are attacked by more experienced killers and soundly thrashed’ (Bartle 1996: 18). Surprisingly, the opposite situation is not mentioned: a case in which a player with (supposedly) no pre-existent Killer inclinations would start to exhibit Killer behaviours in response to becoming a victim of one earlier in their ‘career’. From the mimetic standpoint, this would be a highly probable outcome, insofar as *not* becoming a Killer would require a much larger investment in a different model, a fascination disproportionate enough to outweigh the demonstrable efficiency of Killer desire. It seems instructive, however, to distinguish between behaviours that become stable and consistent and impulsive one-off activities which may correspond to Killer type formally, but do not necessarily point to motivation being firmly acquired.

In other words, even though Killer type goal state is not as ubiquitous as that consistent with the Achiever type, it is still somewhat manifest. Whenever a Killer kills, the victim learns of this motivation experientially. Besides, reciprocal violence — commonly enacted by a group of non-Killers in response Killer type aggression — is not

uncommon, which further increases the social visibility of the type as well as its conflictual component.

2.3.2 Nick Yee's motivations to play

A helpful commentary on the claimed exhaustiveness of player types would be taking a look at an alternative set of motivation categories. Nick Yee's empirical model of player motivations is based on quantitative research with a sample of 3200 respondents as well as a number of private and consists of three non-exclusive overarching factors: Achievement, Social and Immersion, which then include the subcomponents of Advancement, Mechanics and Competition; Socializing, Relationship and Teamwork; Discovery, Role-playing, Customization and Escapism (Yee 2005: 3–8, 2006: 773–774). The principal difference of Yee's categorisation from Bartle's is the much-stressed non-exclusivity of components, i.e. the player may be motivated by several factors simultaneously (Yee 2005: 8). According to player types, the player would have one primary motivation from which he or she could migrate to another, still dominant one (Bartle 2004: 171–174).

Non-exclusivity seems to be the key point on which most meaningful differences between the two theories are based. With this factor out of the picture, Yee's classification seems to fractionalise and rearrange player types rather than genuinely supplant them. The areas of Achievement and Social, with their subcomponents of Advancement, Mechanics, Competition, Socializing, Relationship and Teamwork are interpretable via the acting/interacting; world/players dependency and therefore easily correlated to a dominant motivation from either quadrant (see also Bartle 2016a: 572). Player approaches likely to result from either categorisation seem to be largely similar; it is only their potential to be combined without limitation and with arbitrary emergent salience that sets Yee's motivations apart.

The area of Immersion is slightly different from the other two. Apart from Discovery — read: 'Exploration, Lore, Finding Hidden Things' (Yee 2006: 773) — which very obviously corresponds to Explorer type, the placement of Role-Playing, Customization and Escapism is not immediately obvious. Within Bartle's model, however, immersion is not a separate motivation, but an invariable goal state that constitutes an inherent part of engagement with the medium, regardless of what particular player type is engaging with it. All player types are immersion-seeking and pursue immersion alongside following whatever primary style of play they currently prefer (Bartle 2014: 18; Bartle 2016a: 572; see also Bartle 2004: 154-155, 239).

As soon as we consider this crucial distinction, it would be somewhat easier to place role-playing within the player types framework. In case if the player is role-playing alone, with no audience being present, their playstyle does not seem to detach itself from the overarching goal state of being immersed (discussed further in 4.1.1), which is in Bartle's system, not a separate category. A solitary Explorer, to give an instance, may choose specific means of transportation, gameplay decisions and self-assigned restrictions that fictionalise the process of their *interaction with the world*. At the same time, as soon as role-playing becomes 'communication of shared ideals' (MacCallum Stewart 2011: 74), or indeed 'interacting with other players to create an improvised story' (Yee 2006: 773) — it aligns well with Socializer type players and their preferred modality of *interacting with people*.

Avatar customisation, or, more specifically, a response to the player's desire to either look *similar to* someone else or *different from* someone else, is a separate subject worthy of a separate thesis. At this point suffice it to say it seems highly likely that avatar customisation is not a separate motivation, but a possible function of either core player type in Bartle's system.

As regards Escapism, it does not seem to be possible to place it squarely within Bartle's model, which is not surprising, because the escapist motivation to play does not represent a separate playstyle. In his discussion of affective involvement in video games, Gordon Calleja defines escapism as 'a shift from one environment or emotional

state to another one that is perceived as being more favourable' (Calleja 2011a: 136) and clarifies, that emotions that constitute this desirable state are produced by in-game experiences (Calleja 2011a: 137). For instance, Calleja's example of in-game competitive interactions from which emotional affect may result adheres to the Killer playstyle. To this we can add a number of emotion-producing experiences that are likely to occur when one of the four Bartle playstyles is pursued — a difficult achievement accomplished, a supremely effective character build researched and so forth. It is important that mere presence in the virtual world does not alone satisfy the intention of escapism: in Calleja's view, 'activities described as escapist have the particular quality of occurring within aesthetically pleasing environments' (Calleja 2011a: 138) with *activities* being actually escapist and the environment only a setting that may be conducive to the affective response.[51]

In other words, Yee's motivation of Escapism neither maps onto Bartle's model directly nor contradicts it. In Calleja's elaboration of the concept, escapism seems to share some characteristics with Bartle's understanding of immersion (discussed further in 4.1.1). An important circumstance that both underscores those shared aspects and reveals the aspects in which immersion and escapism are distinct is that escapism may result from 'first order' imitation[52] and immersion may not.

By way of a thought experiment and to further elucidate 'the mimetic paradigm', let us look at how the motivation of escapism can be acquired mimetically. At surface level, imitability is unlikely. Dong-Mo Koo describes escapism as one of 'multi-dimensional intrinsic experiential motives' (Koo 2009: 472) and groups it with perceived enjoyment. Something both intrinsic and experiential is never a good sign for the mimetic theory, a likely complication would be a goal state that is neither sufficiently visible, nor well enough defined. I argue, however, that escapism can be a product of imitation that

---

[51] This is crucial for understanding the escapist potential that MMOs may have: they are not a virtual Zen garden.

[52] Which is to say, escapism can be the primary goal state sought by the imitator and not a consequence of another goal state successfully accomplished. On the contrary, immersion is a result of some other imitative project being successful, and not the primary purpose of imitation.

obtains externally — in the sense that the goal state is acquired remotely, and the model for the imitation is located outside the game.

The possible mimetic phenomenology of escapist motivation becomes apparent if escapism is seen as not merely an effort to block out undesirable reality, 'to avoid thinking about real life problems' (Yee 2006: 774), but rather to substitute it with an imaginary idea of reality that is desirable, yet unaccessible. In some cases, this state perceived as desirable may be situated entirely outside the game and evoked by the players real-world circumstances. More specifically, MMO playing may be intended to compensate for real-world unavailability of highly desirable states that may have nothing to do with the game itself. One player's commentary 'Since we can't golf, we WoW' (Williams, Ducheneaut, Xiong, Zhang, Yee & Nickell 2006: 351) conveniently evokes art historian Julian Stallabrass's non-expert, yet remarkably incisive take on the possible nature of such substitution:

> To some degree separated from cinematic games are a set of Yuppie simulations which take the guise of 'serious' platforms designed to show off the capabilities of expensive computers. Here flight and drive simulations (the latter modelling Porsches and other such toys) compete with golf games. The vain yearning for status in those uninvolved in these real activities is partly compensated by having a computer of sufficient power to run fast and complex simulations. Occasionally the advertisements for these games dwell overtly on the snobbery and envy which apparently drive their players: Ever sat at your desk and thought "great day for golf"? (Stallabrass 1996: 87)

In other words, while playing a MMO to avoid thinking about one's real-world circumstances is not necessarily mimetic, *playing to avoid thinking about someone else being able to play golf* (or owning a Porsche, for that matter) is very likely to be a case of external imitation.[53]

In addition to that, as is the case with other motivations, the mimetic potential of escapism may be influenced by its social visibility which may increase once the

[53] In cases where such awareness is present, of course, but judging by what kinds of subjects the modern mass-media regularly prefers, it would be rather challenging *not* to be aware of every possible facet of supreme being someone else gets to enjoy.

motivation is advertised for purposes of validation or prestige signalling. I would not say such demonstrations are a regular occurrence, but when they do happen, they exhibit a number of suggestive factors:

> My history in mmos is very deep. Here are a few of the highlights: 1996 my first mmo Meridian 59, hooked! Only 3 years in EQ because I discovered SWG (pre-nge) 8 years in EQ2 4 years in LOTRO, 3 years in Rift, 2 years in Vanguard and a host of other games. I have been in WOW since release but left for almost 2 years. [. . .] As time went on WOW just kept getting more and more polished which EQ2 seemed to be lacking. WOW played so well on my system I never felt like I was missing out on graphic quality. Then suddenly it began to be heard of and became a real popular culture phenomenon. It became more then just a game only us computer nerds knew. For many WOW became the first ever mmo and a barometer be which all life would be compared. Many of us in the know who put years into other mmos seemd to take offense to this. [. . .] So why do I ask could WOW be the best mmo ever? After nearly two years away, I loaded up Azeroth and with little expectations I logged in. I started a new Night Elf and as I ran to Darnassus I looked at the landscape and listen to the music and I felt like I was home again! I simple peace and joy settled over me. I forgot the heart break of my father's recent death. I forgot about all the doctors, pills, and life style changed forced on me since my heart attack. I forgot about the stress at work and my daily life. I was in Azeroth and home! (eccoton, MMORPG.com forums 2013)

What is, for all intents and purposes, a thread on the game's recuperative qualities starts with a lengthy introduction which outlines the author's special status: they are a very experienced player. It follows with a suggestion of a particular group identity of 'us computer nerds' and 'us in the know' whose access to various aspects of the game is, presumably, more legitimate than that available to MMO newcomers (so it is 'us' against 'them' now). It is only after this preliminary set-up that the pleasures of soothing immersion are focused on.

From the mimetic perspective, this reads as a claim to become a model: the escapist pleasures are many, yet seemingly restricted to an adept or someone willing to imitate them. In the eyes of the imitator, the proposed dependency is circular: becoming like the model awards escapist enjoyment which is, in turn, an approximation of the model's being. In other words, the thread insinuates a link between the two powerfully desirable goal states — being able to enjoy video games and being an experienced gamer. As a

result, a player who likes seeing themselves as an experienced gamer may be suggested a motivation of escapism by association: I should escape by means of video games because this is what experienced gamers do and I want to be one.

This very cursory glance at the rival theory suggests that the player motivations it covers do not contradict player types, even though a finer gradation is offered. In some cases, such a level of detail is essential: a number of specialised approaches to player motivation (e.g., Zackariasson, Wåhlin & Wilson 2010) were derived from Yee's model. This study, however, benefits more from flexibility and focus afforded by player types as well as Bartle's particular conceptualisation of immersion.

3 Methodology

The aim of this study is to put electronically mediated imitation in perspective, enhance our understanding of player motivations that can be suggested or imitated, as well as to find out if competitive imitation in multiplayer online games is a theme worthy of further investigation. The intended contributions of my research include addressing this previously neglected problem as well as the originality in how the study applies the mimetic theory, in its capacity as a system of interpretive analysis, to a medium it was not previously applied to.[54]

More specifically, the application of the mimetic theory is intended to test its potential as a problem-solving model. According to William Newell, Girard's theory can be implemented as such, since it represents a paradigm, interpretive, yet rendered unique by the limitations which it imposes on the data it is used to process:

> When Girard describes, for instance, the victimization mechanism, it is just about always the same but, and this is where he is misunderstood, his description does not force the data into a concept or mold. What he is doing is offering us a *model*, a paradigm which, like all scientific paradigms, forces data into its lines to produce results. The force applied to data is a set of constraints as obtains in any paradigm — since all paradigms are problem-solving models. (Newell 2012: 73, emphasis in the original)[55]

The particular problem this study seeks to solve is the player types limitation suggested by Bartle himself: the model assumes every player is motivated independently (Bartle 2004: 140) and therefore cannot account for players imitating each other. The conclusions of this study present my hypothesis of how change of player type is

---

[54] Episodic applications are somewhat likely to exist, but to the best of my knowledge no large study of video games in the light of the mimetic theory was ever published.

[55] It is interesting to note that Bartle's Player types seem to meet the same descriptive criteria: it is a model which was meant to be a problem-solving instrument since its inception (see e.g., Bartle 1996: 10–20), in other words, it was intended to function, both predictively and reactively, to accomplish practical outcomes.

conditional on game mechanics and other players and how this change is effected through competitive imitation.

Accordingly, this study approaches the various phenomena in focus as something that makes competitive/conflictual imitation possible, something that stimulates or promotes it, or something that is an object of imitation or its outcome. In other words, my work proceeds from a strictly theoretical perspective and is distinctly theory-driven, even though it links to practical challenges that exist in the areas of video game design and video game playing. To support both the theoretical nature of this study and its practical aspirations, three investigative methods were chosen.

The first method and my primary investigative approach is directed content analysis. The term 'content analysis' rather than 'textual', 'formal' or 'aesthetic' is preferred to emphasise that the representational, mechanical and textual features of the game in question are not addressed separately or in isolation. Rather than that, aspects of MMO player experience are seen as parts that constitute player experience as a whole. Besides, framing text, representation and mechanics as 'content' enables me to delineate my subject without sounding reductive or biased towards either particular facet of it. The 'ludologists versus narrativists' debate[56] that I have touched on previously is — or at least should be — a meaningful factor in how game research methodologies are proposed or argued against. Because of that, its very definition — 'anything that occurs in sufficient numbers and has reasonably stable meanings for a specific group of people may be subjected to content analysis' (Krippendorff 1989: 404) — makes the term 'content analysis', perhaps, *the* most suitable formalisation to use in the context of game studies.

The second method is virtual ethnography approached phenomenologically, rather than culturally. This phenomenological angle is argued for in the second section of this chapter, yet it seems instructive to emphasise that this method is of secondary

[56] Recently reignited by Ian Bogost in a non-peer-reviewed publication with a talking title of 'Video Games are Better Without Stories' (Bogost 2017).

importance. I think that hands-on experience is essential where gameplay analysis is concerned, but apart from that, fieldwork over the period of two years was performed largely for reasons of intellectual integrity and validation of findings.

The third method is quantitative research. To assess the potential relevance of the study's theoretical premise and deductive inferences, as well as further validate the findings of content analysis, the study includes a comparative survey of 334 *World of Warcraft* players across two language-restricted player communities. As a way of data triangulation, the survey was intended, firstly, to eliminate the conceptual presuppositions that *could not* be supported by the data obtained from the players. Secondly, by running two similar surveys independently of each other, an estimation of variance across two isolated samples was performed.

All three research modalities are presented in detail below, sections 1, 2 and 3 respectively, in a manner, perhaps more colloquial than usual. Terms like 'coding' are deliberately avoided to foreground the fact that I am not a trained social scientist and have no intention to mislead the reader into thinking I am one. Lack of specialised experience in sociology or anthropology is a limitation of my research and a factor I want to be known in advance.

3.1 Qualitative content analysis

Within a relatively new discipline which seeks to study a relatively nascent medium, critical approaches established earlier and elsewhere are somewhat likely to impose themselves on a subject they do not necessarily apply to.[57] Putting it bluntly, a researcher may be tempted to launch whatever theory they are most comfortable with in hopes it will stick or at least produce a convincing enough bricolage. If this is to be avoided, the first question we should be asking ourselves is whether or not looking at

[57] Allegedly, the very thing to have caused the ludologists versus narratologists debate.

MMOs through a Girardian lens is at all justifiable and practical. In other words, is the method suitable for the subject and is the subject a good fit for the method? The answer is not at all obvious because of distinctive narrativity characteristic of the mimetic theory.

René Girard's mimetic approach, which Robert Doran aptly describes as 'literature as theory' (Doran 2008: xiv; emphasis in the original) is, first and foremost, a paradigm of textual and contextual analysis. As earlier observed, Girard's sources are, predominantly, works of fiction or texts that are at least in some respects imaginative. This encompasses different venues of Girard's work: where he engages with history, he posits literary sources as equivalent to ones traditionally referred to. Moreover, insights produced by mainstream social science are something he explicitly disregards.[58] Further to that, Girard's highly formulaic rendering of metaphysical desire, mimetic crisis, surrogate victim mechanism and other concepts central to his theory, is, in some sense, a 'mimetic narrative': both linear and largely predetermined. It is hardly a surprise that the mimetic theory was called upon, almost exclusively, in connection to media where textuality and narrativity are the main generative factor: predominantly literature, as well as, to a much lesser extent, film and drama. Conversely, no previous adaptation of the mimetic theory for digital games research seems to exist. This may be a good thing inasmuch as it makes the contribution original and makes innovation probable. However, it may be a worrying sign of the method being practically unsuitable and thus deliberately neglected.

[58] E.g. this quote from *Theory and its Terrors*: 'At the beginning of the twentieth century, a French writer Paul Valéry was already suggesting that the social sciences are little more that mediocre literature, meaning fiction. They are a form of literature unaware that it consists of language.The good thing about creative writers is their awareness of language. They know that language is treacherous, and they deliberately use rhetorical means to achieve certain effects. Social scientists are doing the same thing but with no real awareness of it—a dreadful *esprit de sérieux*. They have a naïve faith in facts as if they could reach facts directly, whereas in reality they reach only their own words. They mistake words for things, and this is the real meaning of the title of Michel Foucault's *Les mots et les choses.'* (Girard 2008b: 199, emphasis in the original)

It also has to be said that the sequential structure and the factor of determination characteristic of the mimetic theory are not universally compatible with the medium of video games, and the recourse to narrative in the context is a very contested subject. Whilst many MMOs have their narrative elements as well as their storytelling intent clearly visible, the same cannot be said about video games as a whole. Moreover, where such elements and intent are present, the game's storytelling project is complicated both in terms of narrative delivery and narrative reception. A clear and straightforward example of such complications is afforded by the perspective suggested by Graeme Kirkpatrick. Building on Espen Aarseth's observation that video games do not work in the same way as traditional narrative media insofar as 'nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text' (Aarseth 1997: 1), Kirkpatrick awards this nontrivial effort such prominence that the conventional schemata of meaning-making are displaced in favour of the process itself and the way the process is performed and feels to the one performing it: Kirkpatrick helpfully compares the experience of playing a video game with that of dancing (Kirkpatrick 2011: 6, 49–50; see also Kirkpatrick 2011: 21–23, 51–52; cf. Bartle 2016a: 398). A crucial point Kirkpatrick makes is narrative fictions being, in a way, inherently incompatible with the activity of playing: 'we find in video games an excess of form that overrides and negates meaning even as it repeatedly invokes it [. . .] fictions and resemblances are integral to them, but the activity of playing games is powerfully corrosive to these fictions' (Kirkpatrick 2011: 9).

Kirkpatrick's point, as well as many other points debating the role of narrative fictions in player experience are by all means legitimate and essential. It bears repeating, however, that in the still modest lifetime of the discipline, the resulting critical stance was sometimes pushed a bit too hard and extrapolated from a bit too eagerly. A focus on whatever storytelling potential games may have was sometimes explicitly argued against (e.g. Eskelinen 2001; Bogost 2017). Moreover, approaches characterised by exceptionalism and rigidity were advised: 'Do games tell stories? Answering this should tell us both how to study games and who should study them. The affirmative answer suggests that games are easily studied from within existing paradigms. The

negative implies that we must start afresh' (Juul 2001). The apparent preoccupation with who *should* study games (and, by implication, who should be *barred* from it) suggests that at its outset the debate was at least in part influenced by pragmatic rather than purely intellectual considerations. Indeed, in his critique of narrative-centric approaches, Eskelinen mentions them 'being successful in terms of influence or funding' (Eskelinen 2001) and the rhetoric referring to 'stake-claiming', 'imperialism' and 'academic colonialism' (Aarseth 2004; Eskelinen 2004) evokes resource scarcity rather than scientific validity.

Subsequently, perhaps once the most pressing concerns of influence and funding were alleviated, the debate subsided without being decisively resolved. The question of games as storytelling media still stands, if not quite as urgently as it used to. A cohort of video game scholars tends to focus not so much on the medium's narrative potential, but rather the ways in which this narrative potential is limited or superseded by the medium's innate mechanics and features (e.g., Bogost 2006). The others do not hesitate to classify video games as performative procedural narratives on the basis of formal properties that make such classification legitimate (Ryan 2007: 9–10) or use narrative-focused textual approaches to analyse player experience (Krzywinska 2007: 102–108; Krzywinska 2008). The topic is far from exhausted and the most feasible stance to assume seems to be the one formulated by Emily Short in response to Ian Bogost's non-narrativist methodology: 'Advancing a plot-blind approach as the most productive route to videogame criticism looks like an admission that games cannot contain structured narrative to the same degree that other media can. This may in fact be a just conclusion. Personally, though, I hope it is not true, and I do not consider that conclusion proven' (Short 2008).

Subscribing to Short's careful optimism, I will support her cause with an objection of my own: a purely 'non-storytelling' perspective prefers to see the medium as a kind of free-floating artefact that is neither produced nor consumed but merely exists to be studied. Firstly, insistence on ignoring the story (if present and however limited) seems

to utterly disregard any authorial intent the designer may have had.[59] Secondly, to deny any attention to the story (which may or may not be a meaningful feature of the game being studied) means to dismiss both the expectations some players may have and player experience as a whole. The first decision is epistemically curtailed, the second decision is epistemically hazardous, which is not meant to say that a methodology that approaches video games in isolation from the meaning communicated by their fictions is not at all feasible, but to stress that a more inclusive approach is, at the very least, equally valid.[60]

---

[59] In MMOs designer intent is something we disregard at our peril, as I have learned in the very beginning of my brief career in *The Lord of the Rings Online*. As a low-level, I grouped with another player to travel through the forest of Mirkwood, a zone populated by animals, mostly bears.

Three types of bears were available: male bears were the largest and most dangerous, female bears were smaller and less of a trouble, and bear cubs which spawned in groups of three were tiny and altogether looked loveable. As we moved through the zone, I noticed that while my companion tried to kill as many male or female bears as possible, he took great care to avoid any harm done to bear cubs. He never attacked bigger bears if there were any cubs around and went out of his way lest he drew the little ones' attention.

I praised his roleplaying and thoughtful gameplay: not abusing one's power, taking care of the weak and letting nature flourish seemed very appropriate in Tolkien universe.

My companion burst into laughter. 'That's nothing to do with that,' he said, 'Touch one of these and you'll aggro the whole fucking forest.'

Let us stop for a moment and consider the implications. What the player refers to is not a random event: the property of zone aggro had to be manually assigned to bear cub assets. It is not arbitrary either, as it adheres to a wide spectrum of social norms, particularly those relevant in a Tolkien-based setting. Regardless of its delivery, the message itself is clearly intentional, straightforward and much less procedural than a hardline ludocentric view would be perfectly comfortable with.

[60] For all we know, medium-centric approaches, which seem to include the audience and the maker by means of projecting onto them the medium's formal limitations may very well be the most precise ones. But having said that, these perspectives may feel extremely distant from real-world situations they seek to cover. They serve the scholar perspective spectacularly but leave the perspectives of both the designer and the player unattended.

With MMOs, whose player experience is, by definition,[61] shared, it seems to be even more vital to consider player-specific subjectivity. The case David Thorburn makes for literary approaches in television studies seems to be rather pertinent in MMO research, since the methodological issue Thorburn argues against very clearly applies: 'a scholarly discourse intent on deconstructing texts [. . .] risks separating itself from the way such texts were conceived and experienced by those who created them and by the audience who consumed them' (Thorburn 1987: 163). Following Thorburn's idea of such texts, if we accept that some MMOs may likewise be described as 'a communication system devoted most of the time to entertaining as many of us as possible with stories and fables that earlier media and story systems had told before' (Thorburn 1987: 167)[62] we have no choice but to assume the perspective of the audience and in some way account for player expectations attached to the medium's storytelling functionality (Thorburn 1987: 165–166).

Do MMO players have expectations to that effect? Less than 15% of my respondents (11% EN, 3% RU) reported they were completely unaware of the backstory behind *World of Warcraft* activities they regularly pursue.[63] On the contrary, 50% of the respondents (20% EN, 30% RU) said they were extremely well aware of the backstory. In other words, we are justified to assume that at least a small number of players do

---

[61] Referring to Bartle's definition of virtual worlds as invariably shared environments (Bartle 2004: 1; see also Bartle 2014: 15). In other words, while it is possible to play a massively multiplayer video game alone, the playing takes place within a shared environment. The player is an element of multiplayer interactions and a member of multiplayer community, whether or not they function as such.

[62] Regardless of the position we take regarding centrality of these stories in video game player experience, we simply cannot deny their presence in many video games, nor the fact many of these stories were indeed told many times before. Further to that, the way Thorburn describes the objects of his inquiry through 'their chief defining feature — their membership in a class of cultural experiences understood to be fictional or imaginary, understood to occur in a symbolic, culturally agreed upon imaginative space' (Thorburn 1987: 162) is strikingly suitable to describe collective video game play.

[63] The significant variance between the English-speaking and the Russian-speaking gamers is an unexpected and intriguing find.

have some interest in the game's storytelling aspect or at the very least consider expression of such interest socially desirable.[64] Consequently, we would do well to develop at least some regard for player incentives of being told a story as well as designer incentives of telling one. In other words we are justified to accept that some form of storytelling (however limited or liberally understood) may exist and use a critical method of arguably literary origins on the basis of the subject being 'textualisable' by designer intention and player experience.[65] In fact, we can go even further than that and adopt a more player-centric approach advocated by Tanya Krzywinska and view MMO playing as a holistic ludic/aesthetic experience amalgamated from the player's technologically restricted ability to interact with the mechanics of the game and their (formally) unlimited capacity to interpret its fictions, in which experience both 'acting in the world' and 'being in the world' are to various extents shaped by the player's individual predilections and emotional investments (Krzywinska 2007).

It has to be stressed, however, that the key strategy for dealing with the methodological challenge of 'narrativising' a not necessarily narrative subject is heightened awareness of the medium's unique form and function as well as keeping careful balance between the textual and explicitly non-textualisable. Unproductive as it may be to deny any significance to the meaning some video games may communicate to those playing them, it is just as erroneous to off-handedly equate video games to any traditionally understood storytelling media — either to make it usable by this or another agenda or

---

[64] In other words, whatever be the importance the 'narrative' features of *World of Warcraft* experience have for individual players — this factor is potentially very variable and difficult to reliably ascertain — we are by no means justified to treat these features as though they did not exist at all. What we are justified to expect is that, these features being so manifestly present, at least some players may somehow interact with the meanings afforded by the fictions of the game, and relate, in some meaningful way, to the game's aesthetics.

[65] This seems to line up well with the recently proposed actor-centered rather than media-centered approach to game studies (Radde-Antweiler 2015) which sees the consumer and the producer, as well as the contexts of production and consumption as part of gaming as cultural process.

indeed to intrude with this or another expertise into an area that seems to be less populated and competitive than the areas where this expertise originally came from.

3.1.1 Previous adaptations of textual approaches

Regardless of the medium's slightly controversial position discussed above, there is hardly a shortage of textual approaches[66] applied in MMO research: both on a broad ontological scale (Bartle 2004; Calleja 2011b) and in a more limited, domain-specific way (Krzywinska 2008; Paul 2012). The prevalence of the method being self-evident, I do not think a perfunctory enumeration would be especially useful. Instead, I will give three concrete examples of such applications that help to articulate three separate areas of MMO player experience that textual analysis is well-equipped to cover and that are of particular relevance in the context of this study.

Firstly, as Esther MacCallum-Stewart's analysis of war themes in *World of Warcraft* reveals, formal methods can be applied to examine the game's textual, aesthetic and narrative aspects. Persistent military conflict, the author maintains, is the central motif that permeates the game's core literary components (meaning backstory, lore, dialogue and such) as well as its visual representations (costume, environmental design and so forth). For instance, referring to the fact that a good deal of in-game long-distance transportation is enabled by means of a zeppelin ride, MacCallum-Stewart evokes the following:

> Since the First World War and the Hindenburg air disaster in 1937, the image of the zeppelin has been used to signify progress run amok, often along explicitly totalitarian lines. Raids carried out over British cities during the war were condemned and feared for their devastating physical and mental effect on civilians. This fear was exacerbated by H. G. Wells's prophetic The War in the Air (1908), which identified the airship as a key factor in warfare and helped to

[66] By which I mean analytic approaches that refer to principles of meaning-making established in overtly textual disciplines.

> sustain panic toward zeppelin attacks during World War I. (MacCallum Stewart 2008: 49)

In other words, the game's design choices and textual devices are analysed in terms of possible connotations they may carry as well as predictable pathways of player interpretation. Such depth of analysis goes a long way beyond what is warranted by something that more player-centric scholars sometimes dismiss as 'uninteresting ornaments or gift-wrappings' (Eskelinen 2001), yet it seems both justified and suitable when applied to the game where such reminiscences are both prominent and frequent.

Secondly, a study of *The Lord of the Rings Online* by Douglas Brown and Tanya Krzywinska exemplifies what may be described as textual analysis of game mechanics. As they argue that Hope and Fear acquire allegorical importance on both representative and ludic levels of the game, Brown and Krzywinska observe the following:

> Hope and Fear also become manifest within the player character's ability to act within the world created by the game in a general sense, as well as in more specific ways. One game event that most experienced players fear is coming to the attention of the Eye of Sauron. *This is indicated by the replacement of the on-screen mini-map in the corner of the screen with a burning red eye*, with a slit pupil like that of a cat. In addition, the Morale bar decreases and turns a livid shade of orange. In the most extreme cases an animation is triggered that shows the player's character cowering, hands held up to block the baleful view and *no longer able to wield a weapon* . . . In the middle of a 'boss' fight, this can be most disconcerting and *potentially lead to the whole encounter failing* (Brown & Krzywinska 2011: 37-38, emphasis added).

This striking analysis amalgamates the game's textual and representative features with game mechanics and shows how textual communication is enacted (if not enforced) through gameplay. Once again, this seems to challenge the 'either or' orthodoxy some ludologists used to adhere to: game mechanics are shown, very persuasively, to be textual or at least textualisable.[67]

---

[67] Ian Bogost describes communication through gameplay as 'procedural rhetoric' (Bogost 2007: ix) to stress that the message is processual rather than descriptive. In practice, however,

Thirdly, Tanya Krzywinska's groundbreaking essay on player experience in *World of Warcraft* (Krzywinska 2007) shows how textual and formal analysis can be implemented to produce an analytical framework in which the interdependent functioning of the player and the game can be situated within predefined categories, namely Determination (textual construct) and Agency (user construct). Within Krzywinska's system, the first category, Determination, comprises the entirety of restrictions, either ones imposed by software limitations or those linked to the game's rules and mechanics. The second category, Agency, comprises the variety of choices that the player is able to make within the restrictions enforced by Determination, including, but not limited to the initial choice of functional and representational characteristics, subsequent adoption of specialisation and role within the collective, as well as choices related to navigation or location, decisions concerning game tasks completion and so forth. It is the interplay between Agency and Determination, that constitutes, in Krzywinska's terms, the *World of Warcraft* player experience:

> The relative balance between player agency and restriction has a bearing on the manner in which the game's textual features shape the player's experience. This is not, however, a one-way process as the player's identity, engagement and experience realises and activates the game's text. The interplay between the game as a predetermined textual construct and as an emergent user construct works with intertextual, contextual and interpretational factors; the meanings derived from *World of Warcraft* depend on the particular knowledges and predilections a player brings to the game-world and the experience of playing within this context. In addition, a variety of issues around player identity arise because of the social context afforded by the game and it is a core contention of this essay that it is the complex interactions between text and player/s that breathe vitality and drama into this world (Krzywinska 2007: 102).

Unlike what appears to be a more traditional formal approach to video game analysis, which tends to see player experience in terms of its separate constituents (e.g., Lankoski

---

game mechanics are often both: in one *World of Warcraft* group gameplay event, the game inflicts a randomly chosen player with 'curse of misery'. Once this mechanic is applied, the affected player is pushed away from the rest of the group and starts to take over-time damage. To counteract the effect, the player must return to the group, and stand in the middle of it until the effect wears off. The rhetoric here is not merely descriptive, but didactic, in an exceedingly transparent and predictable way.

and Björk 2015), the method spelled out above has rules and mechanics, as well as the 'ludic topology' of the game world grouped together with the entirety of fictional and representational components that serve to articulate the game world and create dramatic incentives for play (see Krzywinska 2007: 101–108). It also bridges the gap between trying to approach each player individually on the one hand, and fully disregarding players on the other. Players are the necessary part of Krzywinska's argument, yet they remain an abstract, hypothetical category, a personification of human capacity to perceive and interpret, as well as the vehicle for the 'intertextual, cultural, and epistemological resonances that are likely to come into play' (Krzywinska 2006: 121).[68]

The three adaptations of textual/formal analysis presented above — Krzywinska's holistic approach that views the process of meaning-making as part of player experience, MacCallum-Stewart's contention that in-game representations shaped by real-world meanings have bearing on player experience, and, most importantly, Brown and Krzywinska's addressing of gameplay's metaphorical and allegorical properties — outline the general direction this investigation has taken. However, to make the investigation potentially replicable, and as a gesture of respect for the numerous opponents of digital textuality, the study adopts the method of *content analysis*, rather than textual or formal approach.

[68] This is hardly a conventional perspective: a much MMO research seems to gravitate towards the more ethnographic approach which addresses the players as individual human beings the author was specifically in contact with. The relative empiricism of this method is certainly its strong suit, yet it also makes purely theoretical generalisations less plausible — there is only a limited sample of players a researcher can interview, and a significant proportion of this sample is likely to be self-selected.

3.1.2 Content analysis research procedure

Content analysis[69] has been broadly defined as 'a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from data to their context' (Krippendorff 1989: 403). Apparently, this definition is so elegant that its boundaries may appear blurred, i.e. the difference between content analysis and other textual or formal approaches is not too obvious. An important distinction, however, is the method's commitment to validation and reproducibility which is a vital part of the content analysis tradition (Krippendorff 1989: 407; Krippendorff 2004) and which is not necessarily present — indeed often omitted — in many cases where textual or formal research was applied.

A vivid example of why validation of findings may be helpful in MMO-related investigations is afforded by two somewhat well-known *World of Warcraft* studies. In the first study, Scott Rettberg examines the game's formal features, describes *World of Warcraft* as a kind of interactive model of capitalist success and argues the following:

> …in a larger sense the game is training a generation of good corporate citizens not only to consume well and to pay their dues, but also to climb the corporate ladder, to lead projects, to achieve sales goals, to earn and save, to work hard for better possessions, to play the markets, to win respect from their peers and their customers, to direct and encourage and cajole their underlings to outperform, and to become better employees and perhaps, eventually, effective future CEOs. Playing World of Warcraft serves as a form of corporate training. (S. Rettberg 2008: 20)

In the second study, Joyce Goggin seems to follow Rettberg's line of thought with regard to the game's capacity to 'train' the players, but the conclusion she arrives at is remarkably different:

---

[69] The method is known to have been skewed towards quantitative approach, the distinction that Krippendorff proclaims to be dated and unhelpful, concluding that 'content analysis has evolved into a repertoire of methods of research that promise to yield inferences from all kinds of verbal, pictorial, symbolic and communication data (Krippendorff 2004: 17, see also 15–16). In particular, qualitative content analysis is presently a well-established approach (Kohlbacher 2006; Bengtsson 2016).

> In other words, gamers have already playfully internalised the discipline needed to work in businesses of the future and, like fan playbourers, they expect little job security and will take enormous risks. Here again then, the boundary between what would commonly be understood as 'play' and 'work' is blurred, making it possible for business to recruit employees who have been fully trained at no cost to the company, as well as employees who are not risk-averse and ostensibly expect little in the way of job security. (Goggin 2011: 364).

On paper, both inferences seem to be rather plausible, yet the very different implications — by Rettberg's conjecture, *World of Warcraft* players are likely to be financially secure and Goggin's hypothesis is visibly skewed towards the opposite outcome — suggest that the findings of both studies are not necessarily stable and not readily reproducible. Some kind of data triangulation would have been of use, yet neither Rettberg nor Goggin use any validation procedure. Moreover, some crucial circumstances of the investigation seem to have been deliberately eschewed: both studies gloss over the fact that the majority of MMORPG players are, for all intents and purposes, functioning adults (Griffiths et al. 2003; Yee 2005; Castronova 2005; Yee 2006; Williams et al. 2008; Billieux et al. 2013). The age of the subjects perhaps complicates (if not undermines) the 'training' assumption both scholars proceed from. Whatever outcome *World of Warcraft* players are supposed to reach, did they reach it already, or are they going to reach it over some period in future? In general, how long would it take for 'training', or 'internalisation' to bear fruit, and how would we know whether or not it took place at all? These kinds of details are never addressed, so our main takeaway are two strongly phrased yet highly speculative claims, to which validation might have added some real-world weight, yet no validation was deemed necessary.[70]

---

[70] It seems that a researcher who wishes the medium well should be especially careful with these kinds of extrapolations. Implied causality is often too easy to abuse — if video games can make someone worse or better off financially, they can also make someone violent, sexist or racist — and there does not seem to be any shortage of parties interested in claiming just that. This thesis proposes a link between video game play and real-world behaviours too, yet the connection is reverse: I argue that actual life may, in some cases, reflect on someone's gaming and not the other way around.

This is not a call for some particularly draconic reliability guidelines to be introduced in the field of game studies. The more daring hypotheses emerge, the better[71] — if nothing else, they populate the field with data and in so doing reinvigorate it. However, the discipline which tends to be populated by findings that are broadly inconsistent with each other, if not mutually exclusive, may suffer in terms of coherence and utility. To help avoid that, this study adopts the general guidelines of content analysis and supports the plausibility of its hypothesis by means different from merely producing it.

Which method of content analysis was applied and to what data? Fundamentally, the process of content analysis may be described as investigation of patterns within a volume of information, in other words, segmentation of data into categories that were assigned in advance or produced in process. Two different ways of how content categories — which Hsieh and Shannon aptly define as 'patterns or themes that are directly expressed in the text or are derived from them (sic) through analysis' (Hsieh & Shannon 2005: 1285) — are developed produces two distinct analytic approaches. In conventional content analysis, content categories are derived directly from the data being analysed and directed content analysis seeks to interpret the data through predefined categories obtained from a pre-existent theory or consistent with a pre-existent hypothesis (Hsieh & Shannon 2005: 1285).

In some (albeit very broad) sense, the mimetic theory is a good example of directed approach. It is quite clear, if never declared, that Girard did not start with the data. Instead, he 'discovered' the categories of mimetic desire, model/obstacle relationship and mimetic rivalry and filtered a significant quantity of diverse information through these categories to produce a theory. This study adopts the same directed approach: the data under examination are qualified into categories derived from the mimetic theory and not from the data itself.

---

[71] With the exception of purely conjectural claims that are likely to be used to enforce policies and regulations against the medium, or those purposely tailored to legitimise state interference in the industry.

The following concepts from the mimetic theory were used as the basis of analysis:

Mimesis, mimetic desire — which may, in the context, refer to imitation of player motivations, choices, goals and behaviours;

External/internal mimesis — which describes the governing role of proximity and exposure in the emergence and distribution of mimetic phenomena;

Model — which refers to self-assigned target of imitation as well as multiple factors that stimulate and promote imitation;

Arbitrary prestige — which covers both the perceived object of desire and its perceived value;

Rivalry, model/obstacle relationship — which describes the state in which the model and the desiring entity compete over objects invested with arbitrary prestige;

Difference/diversity — which includes distinctions that prevent mimetic rivalry between community members, as well as lack of such distinctions;

Mimetic crisis — which describes the situation in which difference is derogated to such an extent that mimetic rivalry engulfs the entirety of the community;

Magical thought — which summarises a set of beliefs that seeks to explain or justify contingent events by social or practical factors present in the community.

Scapegoat process — which describes the mechanism by which intra-communal aggression is transferred onto a separate entity external to the community.

The themes and patterns outlined above were then sought for in a vast and diverse volume of data, including *World of Warcraft* first-hand experience, participant observation, in-game social interactions, game lore, community produced guides, screenshots and video captures (both self- and community-produced), as well as player-produced blog posts and game community forum discussions. In general, the following content units were assumed:

> **Game fictions** — including but not limited to the backstory of specific game events and the entirety of lore describing the game world. It also comprises the topography of the game world, its 'geopolitics', environmental 'props' in which the game events take place, as well as visual representations of game characters, player controlled and otherwise. To some extent, game fictions may be seen as correspondent to game narrative — the much debated term used strictly in Marie-Laure Ryan's definition as 'the use of the signs, or of a medium, that evokes in the mind of the recipient an image of a concrete world that evolves in time, partly because of random happenings, and partly because of the intentional actions of individuated intelligent agents' (Ryan 2007: 10).[72]
>
> **Game mechanics** — including game rules, restrictions and affordances, as well as the pre-designed/intended process of gameplay. Unlike narrative, the concept of mechanics is unique to playable electronic media. It has been defined as 'the various actions, behaviours, and control mechanisms afforded to the player within a game context' (Hunicke, LeBlanc & Zubek 2004: 3). It is also interesting to note that in *World of Warcraft* hardcore raiding, the term is, perhaps, more frequently used in the context of 'boss mechanics' or 'raid mechanics' than 'player mechanics' as the definitions above would suggest. In other words, seen from the perspective of a raider, game mechanics are both

[72] This definition seems to fit video games well because its exactitude reveals its limitations: in the context of online gaming the concrete world almost always exists but not necessarily evoked in all cases or for all recipients. Moreover, some specific mechanisms of online gameplay — episodicity and recurrence come to mind — seem to be extremely counter-productive in terms of narrative engagement understood this way.

player-centric (as in ‘player mechanics’ or ‘class mechanics’) and game-centric (as in ‘boss mechanics’ or ‘raid mechanics). For this reason, this study prefers Miguel Sicart’s definition that offers more space for interpretation and therefore could incorporate mechanics characteristic of and usable by a character not controlled by a player: ‘game mechanics are methods invoked by agents, designed for interaction with the game state’ (Sicart 2008), with a proviso that the agent invoking a mechanic is not always human, nor even necessarily personified: in a sense, the game itself is an agent.

Player interactions — the data on how players interact with game mechanics and with each other. These data were obtained, predominantly, through fieldwork, participant observation and *World of Warcraft* community forums. Another crucial source of information on player behaviours is player performance logs that are represent a realtime capture of gameplay. The latter data are of exceptional value for a researcher able to read and understand them, which requires software literacy and, most importantly, in-depth knowledge of gameplay mechanics. In cases like this, the researcher’s personal gaming competence which some scholars have been arguing for is especially convenient (e.g., Aarseth 2003: 7; Bartle 2016a: 456; see also Ducheneaut, Yee & Bellotti 2010: 138).

Paratexts — by Lisbet Klastrup and Susana Tosca’s definition, the term summarises player-generated content that is stored, distributed and consumed outside immediate gaming experience (Klastrup & Tosca 2011: 49), such as *World of Warcraft* community forum threads and discussions, player-produced guides and videos, as well as other game-related resources. Barring a few salient exceptions — Christopher Paul draws on paratexts extensively and with notable success (Paul 2012) — this unique source of data seems to be relatively

> underused if not neglected by many video game researchers, which may be a justified decision in some cases and less so in others.[73]

Such diversification of material ensures better coverage of research problem by making pattern recurrence more manifest[74]. However, it does little to address the most important limitations of directed content analysis, which are researcher's bias and, as a consequence, preferential treatment of evidence (Hsieh & Shannon 2005: 1283). If we are being sincere, we should not treat those factors as avoidable risks, but rather, as inherent limitations characteristic of the approach.[75] For this reason, it is difficult to recommend directed content analysis in isolation; moreover, it seems instructive to use it in conjunction with a different method, primarily, hands-on experience with the subject.

3.2 Field research

It bears repeating that this study is theory-driven and based on deductive analysis. Participant observation or virtual ethnography, therefore, are not a primary source of data that are studied. Having said that, first-hand experience is a strategy that is very

---

[73] To give an example of the latter: Adrienne Shaw's argument of avatar appearance being relatively unimportant for video game players (Shaw 2014: 97–145) is careful, nuanced and in many senses persuasive. Its possible shortcoming, however, is that it seems to be based on 'dozens of in-depth interviews with people who play digital games and are members of marginalized groups' (Shaw 2014: 7), which may have produced a perspective a bit too shallow to freely extrapolate from and was a surprising choice, considering the overwhelming volume (we are speaking hundreds of thousands, not dozens of opinions) of information on this particular subject contained in video game paratexts.

[74] It is interesting to note that Girard's mimetic approach does, in some sense and to a certain extent, qualify as content analysis: he produces a pattern, observes its recurrence infers its phenomenology and validates (at least ostensibly) his findings by recovering the same pattern and phenomenology across a broad range of content — literature, history, anthropology, religion, human behaviours and so forth.

[75] See e.g., the discussion of Jessica Langer's analysis of *World of Warcraft* from the standpoint of postcolonial theory in Chapter 4 of this thesis.

well-established in online video game studies (see e.g., Nardi 2010; Pearce 2009: 199–204; Golub 2010). A hands-on approach is believed to be of significant value when used in conjunction with a different method (Lankoski & Björk 2015: 27; Engerman 2016: 63–64), and it was certainly beneficial in the case of this thesis. Apart from the method's proven efficiency, the reason to include it was this particular author's unswerving belief in the ethical necessity of first-hand experience in interactive electronic media studies.

Do video game researchers need to play a video game in order to analyse it? It is not unexpected that no absolute consensus on the matter exists: some scholars would say video games should be played as part of their investigative examination, while others believe there is no such need.[76] A truly surprising part of this debate, however, are the arguments used to support either opinion. A 'pro play' video game researcher may argue that game scholars are expected to have personal experience with their subject just like philologists and film scholars are expected to. In other words, while the latter should read works of literature and watch films, the former should play games (Gottlieb 2015: 22; see also Aarseth 2003: 3). An 'anti-play' scholar, on the other hand, is likely to say that playing video games is not obligatory for a scholar studying them just like it is not necessary for a sociologist studying Olympic games to be a competitive athlete (Anthony 2015: 13; cf. Crawford, Gosling & Light 2011: 284–285).

What seems to be the crucial difference between these two opposite views is the portrayal of video games as either perfectly penetrable material which is readily accessible to a researcher, or something that has a significant barrier to entry. It seems that supporters of the latter opinion tend to view playing video games as something that requires a sizable investment of exceptional and possibly unwarranted effort — comparable to professional sports, no less. This altogether laboured analogy may be

[76] Clearly illustrated by Current Key Perspectives in Video Gaming and Religion (2015) a special issue of Gamevironments journal including a roundtable discussion and subsequent interviews with nine researchers who took part. When posed the question of whether or not games should be played as part of their examination, three scholars have argued that there was no such necessity.

viable, to some extent and in a very limited number of cases, yet the apparent commitment with which some scholars strive to legitimise the 'non-participation' approaches suggests that video games are a subject both tempting and singularly repellent. The tone and rhetorical thrust of some such advocacies — 'Aphra Kerr's argument that questions the symmetry of the democratization of innovation processes within the games industry does not require her to go and play games [. . .] Adam (2005), for example, discusses the Internet with respect to cyber stalking – she is not criticized for not doing it herself' (Crawford, Gosling & Light 2011: 285) — seems to somewhat resonate with at least two common stigmas attached to playing video games.[77] The first stigma represents the dismissive attitude which posits video games as something worthless, shallow and inconsequential, indeed something a 'serious' academic should by no means be expected to 'go and play'. A prejudice of this kind was lucidly described by Thomas Malaby (Malaby 2007: 97) and acknowledged by many others. In other words, the avoidance of first-hand experience may be meant to prevent some presumed loss of face — a strategy both understandable and affordable in some cases, yet one I believe to be detrimental for studies that focus, specifically, on multiplayer online gaming. With these kinds of products, the community is a formative part of the phenomenon, contempt for the medium is very likely to mean contempt for its audience, at which point a significant bias becomes unavoidable.

The second stigma which may underlie the comparison of playing video games to cyber stalking reflects the long-standing view of the medium as something inherently tainted if not deliberately harmful. Such seems to be the stance assumed by mainstream media, which sometimes declare a connection between video games and violent crime, sexism or addiction, a stance both exceedingly apparent and documented in video game research (see, e.g. Geraci 2014: 229). Should academic research follow suit? The

[77] There is no gainsaying that research focused on economic aspects of video game industry and unrelated to games as playable media could be produced in absence of hands-on experience. The example seems laboured, however, when used as a counterargument to Aarseth's position which pertains, unambiguously, to the process of playing video games.

picture appears to be a lot less clear-cut than an average media publication would have it.

For instance, claims of violent game play being capable of causing real-world interpersonal aggression seem to appear consistently and to this day (e.g. Greitenmeyer 2018; Bushman 2018: 201—202), yet there is evidence to support the *opposite* hypothesis (Cunningham, Engelstätter & Ward 2011; Markey, Markey & French, 2015; Engerman 2016: 47—48), as well as to challenge the methodology of violent video game studies (Ferguson 2018) or the conclusions these studies tend to reach (Ferguson 2015a; Ferguson 2015b). In other words, there is neither consensus, nor incontrovertible evidence as to whether violent video games increase real-world violent behaviours, or decrease these behaviours, or have no significant influence on them. What makes the issue especially alarming, however, are the findings that point to general overstatement of the correlation between violent game play and aggressive behaviour (Hilgard, Enhelhardt & Rouder 2017) and publication bias in favour of this correlation (Ferguson 2007). In other words, studies supporting the link between violent video games and real-world aggression are somewhat likely to be published regardless of their observable shortcomings.[78]

The situation in which a position on a very controversial subject is disproportionately favoured and opposite views are systemically downplayed or even discriminated against is likely to contribute to the overall climate of moral panic maintained by the media. Indeed, 'moral panic' are the exact words that some video game scholars do not hesitate to use (Nardi 2010: 123–136; Ferguson 2008; Markey & Ferguson 2017). In such circumstances, academic research addressing violence in video games or video game 'addiction' is increasingly likely to result in policy-making initiatives or other regulatory action that may prove to be a major impact on both the industry and the

[78] Which may be further exacerbated by what is plausibly a common situation: post-publication peer review is deincentivised and sometimes deliberately obstructed by the journals that have published the paper (see Matarese & Shashok 2018). Indeed, it took five years for a misleading paper that links video games to real life violence (Whitaker & Bushman 2012) to be retracted.

audience, on cultural as well as social and economic level. If we, as researchers, want to keep our interference beneficial, we might do well to heed Espen Aarseth's demand that: 'if we comment on games or use games in our cultural and aesthetic analysis, we should play those games, to such an extent that the weight we put on our examples at least match the strata we reach in our play' (Aarseth 2003: 7). With regard to MMOs, the same kind of research rigour is advocated by Constance Steinkuehler:

> The one piece of advice I would give people: If you're going to study these games, you damn well better be playing them. If you can't spend what's considered for the community a standard amount of time in them—for World of Warcraft at least 20 hours a week is just standard maintenance and a hard-core player would be about 40 hours a week—and if you're not willing to invest that in some way then I can't write about World of Warcraft unless I'm actually willing to play World of Warcraft. That's not to say that if you're going to study scientists you've got to be a scientist, but at least being literate in the community. (Steinkuehler 2007 cited McKee & Porter 2009: 20)

In following that principle, the extent of my playing was defined by my research subject — in particular, hardcore progression raiding in *World of Warcraft* — and my hypothesis — that mimetic relationships and interactions may emerge in the process of collective play and become a significant factor of player motivation. From the subject point of view, playing the game was not merely desirable, but simply unavoidable. The most feasible way for a researcher to participate in *World of Warcraft* hardcore raiding is to be able to perform at this level of game challenge.[79] A 'free-ride', while not entirely impossible, is not a regular opportunity: hardcore gaming groups are, in many aspects, a closed community, accessible by way of demonstrable credentials that imply a significant degree of player literacy and competence.[80] Having gained access to this

---

[79] This does not apply to hardcore gaming exclusively: speaking of the decision to actively participate in the game being studied, Celia Pearce describes the choice as 'more technical than philosophical' (Pearce 2009: 196) i.e. a researcher has to be in the game in order to observe it.

[80] There is a notional possibility for a researcher to observe the process of collective gameplay at high levels of challenge without participating, i.e. to watch a video of someone else playing. Experience obtained this way will be qualitatively different from that enabled by personal participation (Calleja 2011a: 70-71) However, if the researcher wants to understand what exactly the players in the video are doing and why, they would have to acquire in-depth knowledge of game mechanics and player practices before they commence with the observation. Besides,

community, the researcher will be expected to provide an adequate contribution to collective effort — both in terms of significant time investment and proportionate game play efficiency. In other words, what anthropologist Jeffrey Cohen describes as an important opportunity a researcher may have to mitigate the intrinsic exoticism of their position by actively participating in the everyday life of the community he or she observes (Cohen 2000: 322), is something a researcher of hardcore raiding is likely to take for granted: passive, uninformed observation is not compatible with the community's main focal concern, by which I mean the process of collective engagement with the game at its highest difficulty.

It has to be said that valuable findings in the area of collective hardcore gaming were produced both by means of first-hand participation (e.g., Paul & Philpott 2011; Chen 2009) and through participant interviews which did not necessitate participant observation (e.g., Karlsen 2011). The central argument of this thesis could have been made without long-term personal involvement in *World of Warcraft* hardcore raiding. As earlier observed, however, the hands-on approach is a matter of honesty, transparency and open-mindedness which is essential with regard to a very controversial subject. It also presumes increased awareness of this subject: as was numerously observed, extensive game play experience accounts for superior understanding of game mechanics and situations (Aarseth 2003: 7; Bartle 2016a: 456). It is also important, with theory-driven, deductive studies like mine, to embrace every opportunity to test the initial assumptions from which the argument proceeds: especially when the theoretical framework in use is itself quite contentious. For instance, my description of the relationships within the gaming community as potentially antagonistic (in some cases and in some respects) is a claim I would be less comfortable making if I did not more than once experience different kinds of inter-player conflicts myself.

3.2.1 Field study research procedure

The main volume of fieldwork was conducted over the period of twenty-four months: from October 2014 to November 2016.[81] As earlier observed, there is no shortage of previous successful adaptations of various participant observation/virtual ethnography approaches in MMO research. To choose the most appropriate method for this study, however, I had to accommodate for two relatively uncommon circumstances. Firstly, unlike many previous works on the subject, my study does not rely on participant observation as the primary source of data. The central points of my argument are not derived from the data obtained in the field, but stem from the combination of Girard's mimetic theory and Bartle's work on player motivation and player immersion. Secondly, the specifics of hardcore gaming require, arguably, much more proactive participation than would be sufficient for general purpose virtual ethnography which does allow for significant stretches of passive observation or various forms of socialising.

With this in mind, the field research that I undertook while working on this thesis was performed in the role of *participant as observer*. In the classification proposed by Raymond Gold (Gold 1958: 219–222) this role requires the researcher to operate on the basis of full disclosure, presumes that participation is, to an extent, prevalent over observation and allows for building personal relationships within the community the researcher becomes part of. Gold describes the specifics of this role as follows:

> Although basically similar to the complete observer role, the participant-as-observer role differs significantly in that both field worker and informant are aware that theirs is a field relationship. This mutual awareness tends to minimize problems of role-pretending; yet, the role carries with it numerous opportunities for compartmentalizing mistakes and dilemmas which typically bedevil the complete participant. Probably the most frequent use of this role is in community studies, where an observer develops relationships with informants

[81] It has to be stated, in the spirit of full disclosure, that the period in question was both preceded and followed by years of intermittent playing *World of Warcraft* as well as a number of other MMOs. Regardless of the fact, the period that constitutes fieldwork included considerations and procedures that were not regularly relevant. It also coincided — purposely — with the period when my involvement in hardcore raiding was at its most intense.

> through time, and where he is apt to spend more time and energy participating than observing. At times he observes formally, as in scheduled interview situations; and at other times he observes informally — when attending parties, for example. During early stages of his stay in the community, informants may be somewhat uneasy about him in both formal and informal situations, but their uneasiness is likely to disappear when they learn to trust him and he them (Gold 1958: 220).

In 2015, when I was offered a place in a hardcore progression group with which I would later raid the highest difficulty content, I informed the group of my position as virtual worlds researcher with interest in motivations and incentives of hardcore cooperative play.[82] Remarkably, the situation was welcomed, rather than tolerated by the group, and the fact that some kind of passive observation may take place during the raid did not seem to reflect on their behaviour, which is to say their behaviour did not seem to be any different from that I witnessed in my previous collective gameplay experience, or player behaviours that I observed in video captures or streams of other groups playing. This apparent lack of uneasiness or distrust may be, in part, connected to the inherently 'meritocratic' basis of hardcore gaming relationships. High player competence constitutes an extremely important part of a hardcore gamer's[83] social capital, perhaps, regardless of their real-world circumstances. It also may be partially attributed to the fact that no formal observation sessions took place and no formal interviews were conducted. Informal observation took place at all times, some written communications were logged but are not used in any obvious way. Voice communications were never recorded. Game performance logs were kept and meticulously analysed, but in this context the numbers and graphs are, arguably, neither personal nor directly social. In contrary to what some users of virtual ethnography advise (e.g., Golub 2010), no private or personal details were collected for the purpose of the study, moreover any direct

---

[82] In other words I had the group's informed consent to me being present during collective gameplay activities. Regardless of my active participation in these gameplay activities, my research was always restricted to observation and only that. No experimentation in terms of deliberate intervention, influence or manipulation was ever intended or took place.

[83] We will undertake an in-depth examination of hardcore gaming in Chapter 4. For now, suffice it to say a hardcore gamer is someone who is likely to play more than a regular player and, most importantly, with greater success.

references or concealed implications regarding the players' actual life circumstances were deliberately avoided.

The epistemic decision to exclude concrete real-world people from the study is motivated, in part, by the set of principles manifest in the mimetic theory. Girard seldom, if ever, refers to specific respondents or patients, documented case studies or clinical experiments. Instead, he populates his theory with fictional characters, distinctly fictionalised historical figures, abstract categories or loosely defined social groups. He is more interested, arguably, in how his proposed system functions, and not in the system's human constituents, even though his proposed system is consequential, by and large, on the social level. Despite Girard's ultimate purpose, his choice of procedure resonates with the aims of my own research which does not claim nor pursue social outcomes but rather seeks practical outcomes for virtual worlds as systems. In other words, where Girard preferred to work with fictional characters (and not actual people) I prefer to work with virtual identities (and not actual people). Particularly, to borrow Lankoski and Björk's remarkably apt formulation: 'the player is seen only in terms of actions they can perform' (Lankoski and Björk 2015: 6), which is to say the player is not approached as a person but as a functional element of gameplay as process. The same utilitarian abstraction, perhaps, is hinted at in Bartle's original description of player types as 'players who suit MUDs' (Bartle 1996: 1), i.e. not so much people and their personal preferences, but rather functional categories which games as systems are well-equipped to incorporate, and players as parts of these systems are able to occupy. A shift of this kind may seem controversial within the often-individualistic environment of contemporary humanities, yet it is likely to be very productive in the context of gameplay analysis, where focusing on something more than the broadest categories of individuality will often prove unsustainable and distracting.

In formal terms, my *World of Warcraft* field research was phenomenological rather than ethnographic (see Maggs-Rapport 2000: 220–221). It focused on the interpretation of field situation within pre-existent theoretical framework and towards a preconceived hypothesis, rather than on production of new meaning through field observation. What

it allowed me, specifically, was to examine the interrelationship of game fictions, gameplay mechanics and player actions, both through my own experience and, indirectly, through the experiences of my co-players, both actual, i.e. reflected in performance logs, and those presumable from group communications before, after and during the raid. In Gordon Calleja's terms, participation enabled me 'to observe the views of other players through personal participation in the same game world as the participants' (Calleja 2011a: 35). Since this research modality qualifies as participant observation, it seems helpful to address a few common concerns linked to participant observation in a virtual setting and whether they were a significant factor in this particular study.

The very plausible opinion that once the players would learn they were observed they will dramatically change their behaviour and therefore significantly compromise the possible findings (Burke 2004) was not supported, which is to say I did not identify any signs indicative of such behavioural changes. This may be linked to the prevalence of gaming expertise within hardcore gamer relationships. Player literacy and the instrumental benefit it offers the group seems to outweigh other possible considerations, if the researcher proves themselves as a competent co-gamer their status as a researcher may become a lot less salient for the group they work with. The opposite is also true, however. Frank Manning's 'clown approach' to studying play, where the researcher 'observes the social world as a participant but is clumsily integrated with the surroundings and thus ironically detached' (Manning 1993: 12) is extremely unlikely to have much success with hardcore gaming communities. Clumsiness is something clearly detrimental for the community's goals and focal concerns, and most hardcore groups will not, in all probability, be satisfied with the researcher being ironically detached at their expense. As a conclusion, the commonly advised policy of full disclosure seems practically feasible in hardcore online gaming research. However, in full concordance with Aarseth's methodological observations, I would expect the accessibility of gamer communities to be conditional on the researcher's personal gaming literacy and player skill (cf. Aarseth 2003: 7).

Having said that, once the requisite degree of competence is obtained and demonstrable, the situation becomes double-edged. In my experience, playing at these levels of challenge and commitment — raiding alone took 12 to 16 hours every week and was a pastime invariably very intense and often quite frustrating — it may become frightfully easy to lose one's focus as a researcher, 'go native' to borrow a term from real-world anthropology. If such loss of focus would happen the researcher may, in all probability, keep observing the game, collecting the data and logging it, but the original purpose of their enquiry would be substituted with something much more involved with the game than their original intention would allow for. In this case, a researcher runs the risk of neglecting the real aims of their work and of succumbing, instead, to producing highly detailed and largely descriptive collections and classifications which may be useful, up to a point, but not necessarily germane. Besides, if one wants to remain unbiased, one should always remember that certain mechanics are purposely designed to be compelling and pervasive. If these mechanics or incentives are, to some, extent, internalised by the researcher, their perspective is likely to become skewed in favour of those mechanics and to the detriment of other factors. To avoid either of these problems, it is highly advisable that an online game researcher takes regular 'cooling-off periods' (Gold 1958: 220, 221) just like a real-world anthropologist or ethnographer would.

Another cause for concern, somewhat connected to the 'overinvolvement' problem above is very well summarised by Kerstin Radde-Antweiler: 'While you – as a researcher – are playing the respective game, can you really observe the gamers' attitude or experience within the game?' (Radde-Antweiler 2015: 34). Conceivably, this may be a methodological issue in many cases. However, collective hardcore gaming research — in which observation cannot be carried out without playing — seems to be sufficiently robust against this challenge. The interference of performance with observation is very likely to be mitigated by the factor of downtime. Much unlike single-player video game experiences, *World of Warcraft* hardcore raiding is a repetitive, regular schedule activity with frequent pauses incomparable to those that may naturally occur in a non-multiplayer setting. As was confirmed by researchers with

practical raiding experience (Chen 2009), it may take up to an hour for the group to assemble. The players spend these periods of downtime together, in comparative idleness, located within the game world but not necessarily performing any gameplay activity whatsoever. What commonly takes place then are reflections and discussions regarding the encounter to follow, the recent events experienced in the game world, and indeed gameplay mechanics and player interactions. Much the same happens between unsuccessful attempts to resolve the encounter, when the raiders brace themselves for another go. There is, therefore, space for both observation and communicative exchange, from which some knowledge of the players' attitude and experience may be derived.

3.3 Comparative survey

In a theory-driven, deductive, subjectivistic and largely qualitative study like mine, a quantitative element provides another layer of much-needed validation. It makes the theoretical assumptions behind the main analytical framework more credible and implies (though hardly more than implies) that its conclusions may be of some real-world relevance. Besides, various kinds of quantitative analysis may be especially attractive in virtual world settings: a vast assortment of data is tracked automatically by the world itself and is, to an extent, readily available. This allowed for a number of innovative applications within MMO research, such as the study of *World of Warcraft* gameplay patterns, virtual demographics and player habits derived from the data collected by AI agents over 8 months (Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell & Moore 2006b). The same researchers authored an important work that challenges the conventional views of MMO sociability, again, on the basis of AI-collected data (Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell & Moore 2006a). Other unusual applications of quantitative method exist, such as a unique study of *World of Warcraft* area revisitations produced by factor analysis of server logs over 2 years (Thawonmas, Yoshida, Lou & Chen 2011), or the analysis of

player communication patterns based on 1944 ingame chat messages logged over a period of 1 month (Ang 2011).

Unlike complex research strategies above, player surveys are, perhaps, the most common and popular quantitative method that is regularly employed in MMO research, particularly in player motivation studies (e.g., Yee 2005; Wu, Wang & Tsai 2010). This study opts for this method since in addition to being relatively more accessible than some approaches exemplified above, a player survey allows me to engage with what is, arguably, Girard's most controversial claim: the nonexistence of autonomous individuality. The mimetic theory does not accept the possibility of independent (i.e. non-suggested and non-imitated) motivation, which runs contrary to the very logic of player motivation research produced earlier. Autonomy of player preferences seems to be something taken for granted.

'How important is it to you to be well-known in the game?' is one of the questions Yee's seminal survey includes (Yee 2005). As we can see, the question refers to a neutral and isolated idea of in-game fame which the players are invited to acknowledge in a likewise detached and non-reflexive manner. The question does not address *why exactly* it is important for the players to be well-known[84] and *what are the criteria* by which the players decide whether or not they are well-known sufficiently. For the mimetic mindset, 'being well-known' is less of an abstraction: it is always 'being just as well-known as someone else' or 'being more well-known than someone else is' — both the driving impulse and the criteria of success are present. However, this perspective seems to be absent from video game player motivation surveys and the possible ways in which different motivative stimuli are created and promoted by the relationships between players within a shared virtual environment are not intentionally controlled for.

[84] Consistent with Bartle's observation regarding Yee's player motivation categories: they cover the processes the players tend to engage in but not the intentions that motivate these processes (Bartle 2014: 13).

The questionnaire used for this thesis is largely a player motivation survey as well, yet the angle is different. Throughout my survey, I ask the players, both explicitly and implicitly, about how other players motivate them or how they influence or affect their choices and attitudes. In other words, my quantitative research is purposely designed to foreground mimetic models and approaches to imitating these models that may be present in some collective or socially situated gameplay environments. More specifically, the intention is not to posit mimetic desire as a universally present factor, but rather *to ascertain that these factors are not entirely absent*, in which case the practical viability of my whole thesis would be rather questionable.[85]

Another thing that sets this quantitative study apart from 'state of the art' player motivation surveys is that it draws on two isolated samples. A sample of English-speaking *World of Warcraft* players (EN) was recruited as well as a sample of Russian-speaking players (RU). Both studies — one in English the other in Russian — were run simultaneously. The first and most important reason to run two separate surveys in parallel was an attempt to address the two most significant limitations of this quantitative study: its insufficient coverage and possible unreliability of respondents. A sample of 334 players is somewhat representative (partially because of not being a convenience sample obtained from the pool of respondents I had personal access to, as well as not offering any financial or material incentives), but certainly not enough to generalise from. Reliability suffers from self-selection bias which may be exacerbated by the fact that 'hardcore raiding' or 'mythic raiding' represents a status of high social desirability.[86] Having two volumes of data acquired in two different language groups

---

[85] The claim to independent motivation being nonexistent is especially jarring in the context of multiplayer gaming with a body of relevant research implying (if not actually declaring) the opposite. It would have been neither scientifically feasible nor practically helpful to try to challenge the autonomous nature of some or even most player choices in socially situated gaming, so the quantitative part of this study does not attempt that. What it does instead is to bring into focus the choices that may, for some players and in some cases, be motivated externally.

[86] In line with some conventionally accepted guidelines (e.g., Fowler 1995; Bradburn, Sudman & Wansink 2004), the social desirability bias was counteracted by phrasing survey questions in such 'unthreatening' way as to mitigate the possible negative connotations of giving response.

allows us to counteract both biases insofar as it lets us *compare variance across two independent samples* (small variance suggests higher probability of findings being replicable). Together with the fieldwork, this comparative quantitative research serves as a layer of validation for inferences made on the basis of theory-driven content analysis.

I will give a concrete example of how this two-layer validation is applied. A significant part of my argument relies on in-game usage of comparative performance meters, i.e. third-party software applications which provides real-time tracking of individual performance of a player within a group, as well as real-time comparison of his or her numbers against those shown by other players in the same group. In theoretical terms, recurrent adoption of such software is indicative of intra-group competition. Rivalry between members of the same community is indeed one of the cornerstones of Girard's theory: if we assume that our framework applies, then intra-group competition is likely to be present and therefore, players are likely to use comparative performance metering. On the level of field observations, mechanisms of comparative performance metering exist and are fully functional, as well as commonly referred to, which suggests that the players are, at least, not unlikely to be using this software. Our next logical step, then, which some video game theorists seem to avoid, is *to ask the players if they actually use it*. If the response is overwhelmingly negative — we should probably rest our case. But when the response is overwhelmingly positive (91% EN, 96% RU) and shows relatively little variance across two isolated samples — we are justified to conclude that we may be on the right track.

A secondary objective of making two separate language-based surveys was to produce a volume of comparable data which may have some limited practical value on its own: Quandt, Chen, Mäyrä and Van Looy comment on the scarcity of comparable gaming

---

The question phrased as: 'In general, what raid difficulty you currently prefer?' in fact means 'How prestigious are raid groups you are allowed into on the basis of your gameplay competence or lack thereof?' Regardless of these precautions, questions referring to self-assessed value may be skewed by some respondents signalling prestige (and therefore overstating their value) and others signalling moral virtue (and therefore understating it).

data from different countries and advocate for cross-national gaming research (Quandt, Chen, Mäyrä & Van Looy 2014: 23–24). My research does not necessarily qualify as cross-national — the EN sample is a combined sample of English-speaking players from Europe and North America and the RU sample is somewhat likely to include Russian-speaking players who neither live in Russia nor identify as Russian nationals. However, it does cover two isolated multitudes which may be representative, up to a point, of two separate gamer demographics. Conspicuous by its absence is a survey of Chinese-speaking *World of Warcraft* players, which would have been extremely relevant for my study, yet could not be carried out due to limited accessibility and lack of funding.

3.3.1 Survey research procedure

The data collection for the study was granted approval of the university research ethics committee and conducted by means of a web-based questionnaire. The survey included 49 multiple choice questions that were almost entirely game-related.[87] No questions that would normally be described as sensitive were asked, and no information that would normally be understood as private was collected. The study was fully anonymous, and the participants were not individually identifiable.

The sample for the study was obtained through recruitment threads posted on the official *World of Warcraft* community forums: BattleNet EU, BattleNet US and BattleNet RU (in the latter case both the survey and the recruitment thread were in Russian). As a result of choosing this method of dissemination, there were worries concerning survey fatigue (Bergstrom 2016) — a situation in which perceived frequency and density of surveys makes the studied community antagonistic towards scientific studies per se. This factor proved to be insignificant for this study — only one antagonistic response was registered across the three forum threads, which caused a

[87] No private details or personal data were collected with the exception of age bracket (which could not be skipped) and gender (where information could be witheld).

minor altercation but did not in any apparent way influence data collection.[88] An entirely different issue, however, was not expected yet emerged, independently, in all three cases. It had to do with the fact that the survey was not hosted on the university's 'branded' servers or anywhere within the 'ac.uk' domain pool. In each of the three threads a respondent expressed doubts regarding the study's trustworthiness: if this is genuinely a university-backed research why is it not hosted on the website of the university that backs it?

While there seems to be an ongoing trend of academic organisations securing their dedicated place with global survey platforms — Qualtrics, for instance, cites over 8000 educational establishments they have a partnership with — some universities apparently prefer their surveys to be conducted by way of private Surveymonkey.com accounts that are set up by researchers themselves. There is little doubt that such strategy benefits the universities financially, it does lead to money being saved. My experience shows, however, that such frugality may have negative consequences for values, perhaps, less pecuniary yet no less relevant: those that concern contribution to human knowledge.[89] It is hard to estimate how significant the impact of privately ran surveys on sample size may be, yet it is clear that sample size is affected. Consequently, in cases when the research in question is something the university is inclined to facilitate it is advisable for them to host the questionnaire under their own web credentials: either through partnership with a global quantitative research platform like Qualtrics or by providing the researcher with an access to some in-house quantitative appliance they may have.

The survey ran for six weeks from late May to mid-July 2017. Infrequent maintenance of forum threads — clarification of details, answering questions and such — was required. In general, the response from the RU *World of Warcraft* community was

---

[88] It was also unclear if the respondent was against surveys as such, or merely those that did not offer any financial incentive.

[89] Ironically, this sometimes results in universities' own guidelines being contradicted. In my particular case, the research ethics committee declared that the data should be stored on the university's servers. However, the data cannot be stored on the university's servers if the university does not provide any.

significantly higher: together, US and EU zones provided the same number of respondents as RU zone alone. Respondent activity within the two samples seemed to follow different patterns — it was somewhat uniform throughout the study period in the EN and distributed across two pronounced peaks in the RU.

Once sufficient data were acquired, correlation analysis had shown motivational dependencies not previously explored. The study results are presented in Chapter 4 whenever relevant and provided en masse as a separate Appendix.

4 Mimetic desire in *World of Warcraft*

The purpose of this study is to investigate the phenomenon of competitive imitation in *World of Warcraft* within the theoretical framework of Rene Girard's mimetic theory. To find imitation, we need to look for models, which may be overtly present in the game or emerge as a result of player interactions, predesigned or otherwise. Where models exist, imitation is always present. To find conflict, we need to follow Girard's own heuristic: differences between members of community protect the community from internal imitation, dissolution of differences and distinctions brings about crisis of imitation, in which everyone is, potentially, a model for everyone else.

In other words, we need to examine the prevalent state of the game to see whether it contains situations in which model and subject players in close proximity compete over desirable objects that are not desirable in and of themselves, but a pretext for achieving desirable *being*. Before we do that, however, we have to define what constitutes *being* in the context of this research. Accordingly, the first section of the following chapter includes a discussion of identity and possible configurations of player-character intersubjectivity. In this section we focus, specifically, on what kind of player-character rapport seems to be more likely in *World of Warcraft*, as well as address the mimetic implications thereof.

Sections 2, 3 and 4 of the chapter examine the embedded differentiations between player-character identities, namely gender, race and faction. We look at mimetic themes and patterns in how these differentiations are constructed and actualised by the players, as well as player behaviours these differentiations mechanically enable and stimulate. After we have observed character differentiations within the constraints of the mimetic theory, we conclude if character differentiations provide sufficient degree of distinction to mitigate internal imitation between the players.

Having defined the actors of *World of Warcraft* as shared virtual environment, we address the state of affairs in which these actors predominantly exist. Section 5

investigates the MMO ‘endgame’ phenomenon which it approaches, mimetically, in terms of increased proximity and diminished distinctions. Section 6 outlines the primary markers of differentiation and means of comparison, which further enables us to address the objects the players compete for in process of endgame play, as well as the possible mimetic incentive for this competition.

Section 7 looks at protected differences, namely character class and the player group role it presumes. Here as well we uncover mimetic patterns and themes and assess how the game’s social and mechanical conditions contribute to competitive imitation. As we did earlier, we assess the constituents of desirable goal states from the perspective of differences being protected or, to the contrary, dissolved.

Section 8 takes us back to player motivations in their capacity as essential difference between the players. We examine Bartle’s player types of Explorer, Socialiser, Achiever and Killer together with the ways in which *World of Warcraft* endgame mechanics enable and facilitate them or, to the contrary, obstruct and diffuse them. In Section 9, we look at how exactly the intra-group inter-player conflict proceeds and on what mechanical and motivational basis. In this section, I argue for the general primacy of Killer type motivation in *World of Warcraft* endgame and propose a conditional revision of Bartle’s suggested ‘route’ of player type motivational drift.

4.1 Player-character identity

The phrase ‘virtual duplicate of human society’ is the what Girard chose to describe a very unusual approach to animal husbandry. Traditional peoples of Nuer and Dinka, Girard observes, organise their cattle in a way that approximates their real-world social structure. In a somewhat striking manner, every member of the community has one of the cattle assigned to them by means of a shared name (Girard 1989: 3). These named cattle become, in a sense, an interface for the human beings they are linked to: in every

transaction the named cow is used, be it for payment, as means of exchange, or for the purpose of sacrifice, its human double does not participate personally, yet a *mediation* of them taking part is implied.

The virtual world of a MMO may also be described as an approximation of a human society, albeit in some very broad and general understanding. Not entirely unlike the virtual duplicate Girard is referring to, this world is, in part, populated by named human-linked interfaces, which represent the player they are linked to in events and transactions where the player is not physically present. The way the Nuer relate to their bovine representations is, in all likelihood, defined by what the tradition prescribes this relationship to be. In MMOs no such regulations exist; the way different players relate to their avatars is not necessarily or always similar. In other words, where *World of Warcraft* is concerned, we do not know who these named entities are.

4.1.1 Defining player-character identity

In order to examine imitation and conflict in *World of Warcraft*, we need to define who the participants of these mimetic relationships may be. In other words, we need to clarify who imitates whom and who is the other's rival? More specifically, how players see their own identity when playing and, vitally, how they perceive the identities of the other players they interact with?

Again, Richard Bartle is going to be our initial reference point since he provides a much-needed link between player identity and player motivation. For Bartle, identity is closely related to immersion: the former may be described as possible consequence of the latter (Bartle 2004: 157, 161, 202). As such, identity obtains when the player is able and willing to reach the stage of absolute immersion, in which the distinction between the character and the player becomes nominally negligible and the character is no longer thought of as a separate entity (Bartle 2004: 155; see also Klimmt, Hefner & Worderer 2009: 354, 356). This ultimate stage of immersion, *persona-level*, in Bartle's

terms, is preceded by, initially, non-immersion, in which the player lacks any identification with the interactive element they are in control of. The second stage of immersion is *avatar-level* immersion, in which the controlled object is regarded as an individual, albeit external entity that is typically referred to in third person. The third stage, the last one before the persona-identity is acquired is *character-level* immersion in which the player may have several well-developed characters which they refer to in first person or third person interchangeably (Bartle 2016a: 405).

Having achieved absolute immersion of the persona-level, the players no longer distinguish between their character and themselves, acquiring the sense of being personally present within the virtual world (Bartle 2016a: 405). In particular, some may perceive their character's vulnerability as, in some sense, vulnerability of their own (Bartle 2004: 154; 2016a: 88; cf. Rehak 2007: 140). Since no difference between the two entities is perceived to exist (or at least believed to be of importance) the player will always use first-person pronoun when referring to their participation in game events and gameplay activities.

The way in which the stage of immersion correlates to either third or first-person pronoun being used to describe the character is highly evocative of the distinction formulated by Richard Wollheim (in a context entirely unrelated to video games and yet immediately applicable to them):

> When it might be thought that I am centrally imagining the Sultan Mahomet II's entering Constantinople, what I am really doing is centrally imagining myself being identical with Sultan Mahomet II, or identical with him at least for the duration of his entry into Constantinople. However, I query the intelligibility of what *this interpretation requires me to imagine: that I am identical with someone else*. And it is interesting, and germane, that the support that idiom is supposed to lend to the possibility of my imagining such a thing turns to be illusory. I can say — there is such an idiom — that I imagine myself being Sultan Mahomet II. But in this idiom, appearances notwithstanding, identity does not occur: I am not saying that I imagine myself being identical with Sultan Mahomet II. And this we can see from the fact that, though identity is symmetrical, *'imagining myself being Sultan Mahomet II'* and *'imagining Sultan Mahomet II being me'* are not synonyms. They are used to pick out two different imaginative projects. (Wollheim 1986: 75, emphasis added)

Apparently, Bartle takes this very discrepancy into account yet phenomenologically restricts it to non-interactive narrative media: 'If you do imagine yourself to be Cathy out of *Wuthering Heights*,' he argues, 'Then you're her only while the text is paused. When the text moves on, you can feel what you feel, but you can't *be* her' (Bartle 2016a: 419, emphasis in the original). It is clear that the degree of presence afforded by virtual worlds is different from the above and therefore the convergence of the character and the person who imaginatively 'activates' the content is achievable on a different scale. However, a slightly divergent perspective on player-character interaction proposed by Gordon Calleja suggests that in some cases 'being' the character may be consciously and deliberately avoided.

With less focus on identity acquisition, Calleja approaches MMO player experience as a continuity of player-centric events which constitutes an emergent, eventful narrative by means of 'a cyclical process afforded by the representational, mechanical and medium-specific qualities of a game and actuated in the mind of the player' (Calleja 2011b: 97; see also Calleja 2011a: 43-44, 113-133). According to Calleja, player 'alterbiography' (Calleja 2011b: 97) may be experienced differently: as something that happens to the player themselves, or something that concerns a self-conceived fictitious third party, in Calleja's example, one Muun the Hobbit (Calleja 2011b: 98-103). In other words, having chosen 'alterbiography of entity' over 'alterbiography of self' (Calleja 2011b: 97), the player is *telling themselves a story* about someone who is *explicitly not them*. This is not *me* (Gordon Calleja) who is the protagonist of virtual world adventures, but *him* (Muun the Hobbit). The gradual motion towards identity convergence which Bartle argues for is deliberately impeded, the player is determined to stay at the stage of character-level immersion, keeping the distance sufficient for virtual and real-world identities to remain separate from each other. This is something that Calleja's conception of in-game involvement allows: unlike Bartle's player, Calleja's MMO participant does not have to identify with the avatar on a personal level. Regardless of how they relate to their avatar, they are thought to be co-located within the virtual world

through the avatar's position within it (Calleja 2007: 86–87) and linked to the avatar by their ability to control the avatar's motion (Calleja 2011a: 61–62).

The problem is, we do not seem to have any means to reliably establish what stage of immersion the significant part of the players is at, and whether they think they fully identify with their avatar or keep real-world and virtual identities separate. Externalised third person storytelling consistent with Calleja's alterbiography of entity is somewhat customary with *World of Warcraft* role-playing community. However, the fact role-players tend to *communicate* their in-game existence in third person does not necessarily mean this is the way they *experience* it. Outside of the role-playing context, the players seem to be using first person pronoun most of the time, yet we have no way of telling if they refer to themselves as identical to their character or themselves as controlling their character by means of computer-mediated influence.

Another perspective on MMO player immersion will help to illuminate the problem. 'No one ever says,' Eduard Castronova observes, '"My character's strength is depleted," or, "My avatar owns a dune buggy." They say "my strength" and "my dune buggy."' (Castronova 2005a: 45) Indeed, people also tend to say 'I ran out of fuel' rather than 'My car ran out of fuel,' or, 'My video card is cutting edge,' instead of 'My computer has the latest video card installed'. My analogy must be somewhat close to what Castronova has in mind as he then compares, brilliantly, in my view, the avatar to a *prosthetic arm* which the player equips in order to operate within the virtual environment. In other words, the avatar is conceived of as a tool that the player is so proficient with and uses so much that its presence is no longer acknowledged (Castronova 2005a: 45).

In line with Wollheim's paradox, we can say that immersion in MMOs can be defined by which part of the cybernetic loop is assigned greater salience. It can be character-centric, as in Calleja's alterbiography of entity, Celia Pearce's famous alter ego, perhaps (Pearce 2009: 196–199) or William Bainbridge's pronounced rejection of identification (Bainbridge 2010: 187–188). It also can be self-centric; both Bartle's persona-level and

Castronova's prosthetic arm seem to adhere to this modality: the former does not see the avatar as a separate entity and for the latter the avatar is not an entity at all.

The question we should address before we delve deeper into the matter, is how the MMO player's social environment reacts to them. The player may experience themselves in a character-centric or self-centric manner, but what do the other players perceive them as? In organised group PVE gameplay in *World of Warcraft*, if voice communications are used (which they often are) the player would almost invariably describe themselves in first-person: not *her*, Groan the Shaman, but *me*.[90] The way other players address them, however, differs on a case to case, player-to-player basis. The players can refer to their teammate by the name of their character, or prefer their real-world name, or use both forms of address interchangeably. Let us imagine that my teammates have accomplished the persona-level immersion. When I am called 'Groan' on the voice chat, does this mean that the caller addresses my character, or myself as someone who controls the character, or me as someone identical with the character?[91]

Let us also imagine that Gordon Calleja encounters me in the game while he plays through the alterbiography of Muun the Hobbit. Does he see me as Groan the Shaman, or Eli Goren, or some combination of the two? The initial point of any mimetic discussion is to search for objects and models, and we will find them if we pinpoint the Other[92] and the ways in which the Other differs from the Self. Speaking of player identity, we are not so interested in how the player identifies in isolation as in how he or she relates to the other players with whom their virtual experience is shared. We need to know if other players are perceived as *characters* (which may be an expected result of

---

[90] In process of an ongoing involvement with game mechanics, the player is, instrumentally, themselves. Subject to a factor discussed in the following section.

[91] Which may be a somewhat jarring experience: the character, Groan, is female, yet my voice during team communications is unmistakably masculine.

[92] In this thesis, the concept of 'other' (or 'another') is used in a strictly Girardian sense, which is to say, 'someone other than me', 'someone who is not myself'. It does not carry the implications of abnormality and/or alienation that some cases of sociological usage of the word imply and the two terms should not be conflated.

character-centric immersion) or *players* (which is likely to be a consequence of self-centric immersion).[93]

4.1.2 Mimetic construction of identity

At first glance, character-centric immersion, in which the character may function as a model for the player seems to fit within our mimetic configuration since this kind of character functioning is something that some players clearly express. For instance, T. L. Taylor quotes a female MMO player as saying:

> I went with the really cute female Wood Elf, with dark hair, and I really believe I identified with her strongly. I wanted to be her. She had a 3-inch waist and didn't have any problems swinging a sword around. I, at the time, if I carried a couple bags of groceries, in the house I was pooped. Obviously her boobs did not sag, she didn't have to wear a bra, she didn't want one. I have two children, I have to help mother nature. So I really wanted to be her. (Taylor 2006: 111)

If this player's desire to *be* her character is approached from the mimetic perspective, it corresponds to triangular desire. The subject desires the being of her model through the qualities of body shape and physical fitness that the subject considers to be desirable. The situation seems feasible, since the mimetic theory acknowledges overtly fictitious models as well as those acquired through real-world experiences, impressions or interactions. Fictitious models is something Girard refers to as early as the first page of his first major work, which he starts with a description of Don Quixote surrendering his free choice to Amadis of Gaul, who he knows is a fictional character (Girard 1976: 1–4). Almost immediately, another example of mediation through literature is provided: 'Emma Bovary desires through the romantic heroines who fill her imagination. The

[93] This is clearly context dependent and may be very different from player to player. Our purpose, however, is not to figure out a universally correct understanding of how players see their own characters or those belonging to the others. What we are looking for is the specific kind of player that suits the mimetic heuristic.

second-rate books which she de-voured in her youth have destroyed all her spontaneity' (Girard 1976: 5; see also Palaver 2013: 50–51).

The difference between the two situations is simple: with literary mimesis the suggested model is compiled by the author of the story (Girard 1976: 4). Choices and behaviours that Emma Bovary seeks to copy are not formulated by herself, but by whoever wrote these romantic novels. Amadis of Gaul, Don Quixote's fictitious model has a pre-existent story, as well, which Don Quixote merely seeks to reproduce. In contrary, a *World of Warcraft* character has no self-sufficient story the player would be able to relate to.[94] Moreover, some design decisions seem to suggest the opposite intention: a character is constructed without an individuality of their own, moreover a number of devices are introduced in order to avoid as little as an illusion of independent selfhood:

- First, and perhaps foremost, the player character in *World of Warcraft* does not speak. Unlike some other popular MMOs, the player has no prewritten lines to choose from and is never assigned any. Their interaction with the NPC is uni-directional, no dialogue as such takes place. In comparison, *The Elder Scrolls Online* (ZeniMax Online Studios 2014) offers the player a choice of pre-written dialogue lines which they may use to prolong the dialogue and experience a bigger part of the backstory. *Guild Wars 2* (ArenaNet 2012) does not offer the player to choose any lines, yet the character's part of the conversation is always pre-written and often voiced-over. Both approaches arguably detract from character identification: the player has no choice how to phrase their response, nor any influence on its tone (cf. Bartle 2004: 241; see also Klimmt, Hefner & Worderer 2009: 361). In the two examples above, the character communicates on its own accord, increasing character-centric involvement and decreasing self-centric immersion. In *World of Warcraft* no such circumstance is present, the character has 'no mind of its own' so to speak.

[94] A 'protagonist' with little pre-existent backstory is a common situation in MMOs, and comparatively unusual in 'story driven' single player video games.

- When spoken to, non-player characters use second-person pronoun as though they were addressing the player directly.
- First person camera view is available but extremely inefficient for anything apart from simple transportation. The third-person camera, however, is locked onto the player character, positioned behind their back and designed to track and follow the movements of the avatar and the direction of the player's look.
- Conversely, in-game cutscenes that show the player character from uncommon, disembodied angles — e.g. top-down, facing the camera, etc. — are remarkably scarce. There are, perhaps, less than a dozen such cutscenes in the game. In comparison, player character in *Guild Wars 2* is shown from a detached perspective every time it interacts with a non-player character. This 'cinematic' approach emphasises that the character and the player are not the same.

To this we may add that the options of avatar appearance customisation are relatively scarce. There are a few pre-designed head options, some haircuts, and a number of skin tone presets. There is only one body option in each race/gender combination. All this contributes to *World of Warcraft* character having no character of its own. Unlike Emma Bovary's fictitious model, the avatar is an empty shell which the player themselves must imbue with meaning. Consequently, some players approach their characters as a product of their own making:

> More or less, I create characters and craft stories for them. I love RP and, although I don't do it very often, I definitely enjoy giving my character's personalities, backstories, goals, etc. My characters are moreso an extension of my creativity than anything else. (Gwynnethe, *World of Warcraft* community forums 2018).

The problem with this, in the mimetic framework, is that once the player has claimed their authorship over their character, the character becomes a projection of the Self and can no longer serve as the model for the player controlling it.[95] This does not work heuristically: the mimetic desire is a triangle, of which every angle is occupied by a

[95] Which is, again, very likely to be different in a 'plot-driven' single player video game, particularly one played in third-person perspective.

separate entity: the subject, which corresponds to the Self, the model, which is, necessarily and always, the Other, and the object which can be neither the Self nor the Other.

It is interesting to note that this impossibility of self-mediation is something that Bartle's commentary on character-centric immersion intuits with precision and clarity:

> Role-players map themselves onto a character. They don't map the character onto themselves. In so doing, they can come to an understanding of what makes their character tick, which enables them to *reflect on their own attitudes, beliefs, and ways of thinking*. The key is that they change, but the character doesn't.
>
> The default for virtual worlds is for both to change. As a role-player, you can only learn about yourself as you approach a character; once you reach the character, you can learn no more from it. You have to take another role if you want to go in a different direction (Bartle 2004: 191, emphasis added).

From the mimetic standpoint, this situation translates as a never-ending search for a model which is futile since the model is sought after in a place where one cannot be present. The character does not change because the player fails to acquire a functional target for imitation and tries to imitate themselves, circularly and with predictably little success.

If we are to understand this dependency better we should draw on the concepts of *wishful identification* (Van Looy, Courtois, De Vocht & De Marez 2012) and *reduction of self-discrepancy* (Klimmt, Hefner & Worderer 2009; Van Looy, Courtois & De Vocht 2014). The first concept refers to the player's intention to resemble the character, particularly, in aspects in which the character is deemed to be superior (Van Looy, Courtois, De Vocht & De Marez 2012: 203; cf. Klimmt, Hefner & Worderer 2009: 356), which may be motivated by and actualised through the second phenomenon: the mitigation of discrepancy between the player's perceived self and the idealized imaginary self that he or she would prefer to embody (Klimmt, Hefner & Worderer 2009: 364). If we reformulate this state of affairs as the player's desire to alleviate the discomfort of inadequacy that they feel when they compare themselves to an imaginary ideal, we will, finally, uncover the Other:

> … shame is a mimetic sentiment, in fact the most mimetic of sentiments. To experience it I must *look at myself through the eyes of whoever makes me feel ashamed*. This requires intense imagination, which is the same as servile imitation. Im-agine and imitate are in fact one and the same term. (Girard 1986: 155)

For reasons we have just discussed, a *World of Warcraft* character is ill-equipped to occupy the position of someone from whom the player's feeling of lack originates. The eyes of the model, which makes the player feel ashamed, belong to another human being. The nearest approximation of the Other in the setting of a virtual world is another player, whom the subject imaginatively perceives as represented through that player's character. What makes the MMO situation unique is that another player is not present physically. In most cases, virtual acquaintances have never met each other in real life and in all probability, never will. As they interact with someone else's character within the virtual world, the players engage with an imaginary idea of individual agency that is given shape by the distinct characteristics of the Other's in-game persona (discussed further in 4.2–4.8). In other words, when approached mimetically, the character is unlikely to be identical to the player's Self as Bartle suggests. It is also more than a functional appendage, as Castronova proposes (it is an appendage, in a way, but its mimetic function is different from instrumental manipulation). It is definitely not a third-person narrated entity with no implication of a real-world actor behind it.[96] Rather than either of three, the character becomes a portable collection of cues, signs and objective properties that may, together or separately, constitute an object of desire, in other words, indicate the character-player's possible model status to their potential subject. Importantly — and this is something that Bartle, Calleja and Castronova seem to leave implicit rather than dwell on — the virtual persona's desirable properties are consistently recycled within the shared environment of their potential subjects or models. In other words, the player's MMO identity is, in many aspects, socially-dependent.

If I had to name a player who corresponded to Bartle's persona-level, I would think of Destinite, the leader of 'Honor Capped', a guild on the Outland EU *World of Warcraft*

---

[96] Predictably, this may be very different in case when a single player video game is played.

server. There were three things that Destinite was famous for. Firstly, he killed other player-characters on sight, regardless of whether or not they could retaliate. Secondly, he used to put together enormous groups of up to 80 players with which to wreak havoc on the opponent faction (discussed further in 4.4). Thirdly, he was particularly well-known for his proverbially bad attitude that he regularly displayed in world chat conversations, his own guild chat, and *World of Warcraft* community forum threads. As a result, the community itself contributed a lot to his in-game persona being established, popularised and preserved. An assortment of in-game videos and screenshots exists, in which Destinite is killing someone or is killed himself, his name is occasionally mentioned in the in-game chat conversations on different servers, let alone his native Outland, and a search for 'Destinite' on the *World of Warcraft* EU community forums returns more than 2000 hits. It has to be stressed, that unlike what Bartle seems to suggest, the connection of the player's virtual persona to a specific character is sometimes negligible: Destinite used to play different characters, sometimes under different names (predictably, his characters were occasionally banned from the game) yet it was always widely known that the character in question was him.

Mimetically, this is a case of external mediation in which the status of the model is both produced and consistently supported by the others. As an example of that, Wolfgang Palaver refers to the Berma incident in Marcel Proust's *Within a Budding Grove*: a child is looking forward to attending his first theatre performance, in which he is going to see the famous actress he never saw before and knows nothing specific about. Regardless of having little idea of what theatre performances are like and if the actress is any good, he expects the experience to be absolutely transforming — purely on the basis of what someone else is saying about the actress in question. When the performance takes place, the boy is disappointed: the actress proves to be nothing special and the performance is altogether underwhelming. However, the moment the audience starts to applaud, the boy's admiration for the great Berma is immediately reignited — the reaction of the audience suggests to him her 'real' value (Palaver 2013: 54–55; see also Girard 1976: 29–30). In many cases, a MMO persona may be subject to similar social regulations: most players have never met Destinite as a player character, yet as long as a significant

number of players keep him in the centre of attention, his *World of Warcraft* persona is secured.

To reiterate, for most players, their virtual partner under the condition of mimetic desire is another player, perceived as an idea of an individual agent contextualised by a combination of manifest or inferable distinctions that constitute their virtual persona which is persistently validated by the game's shared social environment. The following sections address the two kinds of these identity distinctions: ones that result in difference and ones that do not.

4.2 Character gender as a factor of differentiation

As I have said earlier and will be saying throughout the rest of the thesis, in order to find imitation, we must search for the model. We have defined, in the section above, that the model for a MMO participant is likely to be another player who is pointed out as a model by their manifest distinctions. For Girard, the potentiality of mimetic desire — in his terms, the only desire possible — is delineated by the model's differential qualities:

> The view of desire as an object/subject relation is false even in the case of art, which aesthetes love to bring up because it seems to prove the existence of solipsistic desire in which they want to believe. In reality the most powerful component of aesthetic emotion is a godlike *otherness* in the admired work, a quality that too much familiarity may weaken or even destroy… (Girard 2000: 117, emphasis in the original; see also Girard 1987: 338)

The model is distinctive and a factor of any transaction that corresponds to desire. Consequently, we should examine various modes of identity differentiation in MMOs and find out which of them have the potential to elicit desire.

In *World of Warcraft*, character gender has no direct influence on player mechanics, yet it constitutes the initial difference between characters as representations. If we look at it formally, the avatar mechanics afforded by a female character are identical to those actualised through a male avatar. However, the very vehicle of the player's interaction with the game is either male or female and choosing to be represented as either is one of the first choices the player will have to make.

What follows is an overview of some gender-related issues characteristic of MMOs as a whole and *World of Warcraft* in particular. By and large, the section represents the mimetic viewpoint and does not claim to be the only appropriate perspective from which the problem touched on below should be addressed. In other words, the mimetic theory is not being proposed as a replacement for the vast body of research on gender in MMOs, but merely as a contribution that takes on a facet of the issue which may be of somewhat niche interest but of interest, nevertheless.

4.2.1 General observations on character gender

An option to play as a man or a woman is overwhelmingly common in MMOs; most games of this kind allow the player to assign either gender to their character. One salient exception that comes to mind and somewhat reinforces the rule was the race of Chua in a SciFi game *Wildstar* (Carbine Studios 2014). The Chua — petite, rodent-like creatures — represent an embodiment of the 'mad scientist' archetype and are, supposedly, of indeterminate gender, their biological sex cannot be visibly discerned.[97] Here, the

[97] It is interesting to note that, although the gender neutrality of the Chua is explicitly declared in the accompanying lore, non-player characters use gender-specific masculine pronoun when they address a Chua character. Together with the lack of any recognisable sex characteristics (i.e. breasts), this peculiarity suggests that Chua are male, regardless of their supposed lack of gender. Which may have been an indirect sign of the gender disbalance referred to at 2.2.4. Conceivably, the decision to make Chua exclusively female would have been discomforting to a greater number of players.

absence of recognisable sex characteristics, primary or secondary, allows the player to construct a supposedly gender-neutral identity for themselves, if they so desire.

In contrast to the above, the three distinctly zoomorphic races in *World of Warcraft* have their sex characteristics deliberately humanised: the cow-like Tauren females have breasts instead of an udder and Pandaren females have two breasts and not four, as real-life panda bears do. The lupine worgen women not merely have two breasts instead of six, but an alternate human body they may shape-shift into at will. In addition to that, differences in character size, posture, animation and the distinct ways in which interchangeable outfits are applied to the base model of either gender, we would be justified to argue that females are designed to be, in some ways, more plausibly anthropomorphous — or at least less zoomorphic or contrived — than males, at least where the three beast-like races are concerned. This peculiarity is in concordance with Hilde Corneliussen's observation that, in *World of Warcraft* a kind of an aesthetic divide is drawn at the representation of female body, a limit of unattractiveness, so to speak, which a female character will never be allowed to exceed, regardless of how monstrous her male counterparts may be (Corneliussen 2008: 73–74). The same holds true for the other races in the game: a woman always looks more elegant and, in most cases, noticeably younger than a man.

This deliberate 'beautifying' of females is, in and of itself, a marker of difference, a notable feature allowing — at least superficially — the construction of a separate group of game agents distinguished by means of a common aesthetic denominator. What furthers this division, however, is the way in which some conventional notions of conventional beauty and sex appeal, are contrasted with masculine bulk, muscularity and implied physical power. With the exception of goblins and gnomes, races where characters of either gender are similarly diminutive, male characters in *World of Warcraft* are noticeably bigger and heavier than female ones. The dimorphism seems to be proportionate by design: female orcs have well-defined musculature, but male orcs are muscular to the point of ridicule; female night elves are slim, supple and athletic, but male night elves sport an exaggerated muscular physique; a female tauren is

noticeably bigger than a male belonging to any other race, yet her size is counterbalanced with the enormous bulk of a male tauren, the most massive playable creature in the game. The contrast is exaggerated, if slightly, because most weapons, armour and other visible equipment is scaled to fit these body proportions: a sword or a helmet looks bigger and heavier when worn or wielded by a male than when a female uses it. For some players, this may provide a visual cue indicating even greater physical strength, a separate token of heroism, which seems to conform to some conventional expectations of masculinity.

It would appear that the distinction of higher appeal that is definitely designed into the game's representations of women is somewhat balanced by indications of greater physical power characteristic of how men are portrayed. Most importantly, however, the player's choice of gender has no bearing on the numericals that govern the character/player mechanics. The baseline characteristics of male and female characters are entirely identical, regardless of what playable race was chosen. The assortment of roles and specialisations available to the player is not gender restricted. No matter how much stronger male characters look, female characters are every bit as powerful. Regardless of how elegant female bodies may appear, they can withstand precisely the same amount of damage that male bodies can. With all the gender inequality that may be presumed, perceived or inferred, cosmetic differences are most likely to have zero consequence for game mechanics and the actual/objective process by which the player interacts with them.[98]

[98] There is a body of evidence that suggests there is a link between various configurations of the avatar and the player's self-perception (Blinka 2008; Dunn & Guadagno 2012; Van Looy, Courtois & De Vocht 2014); which may, in turn, influence the player's social behaviours and interactions with other players (Yee & Bailenson 2007; Yee, Bailenson & Ducheneaut 2009). Regrettably, we do not have enough data — if any at all — that would allow us to conclude that the visual characteristics of the avatar, including their gender, may somehow affect the player's engagement with game mechanics, i.e. the actual 'tools' that enable them to timely and efficiently complete whatever tasks the game sets before them (although it would be premature to dismiss such possibility).

An issue somewhat commonly brought up in connection to video games[99] is biased or inequitable approach to how men and women are fictionalised. For instance, an analysis of *Everquest* (Sony Online Entertainment 1999) by Keith Massie has revealed significant underrepresentation of women among the non-player characters in the game and even more dramatic lack of women fictionalised as personae of importance (Massie 2011: 258–262). However, an alike inventory of *World of Warcraft* NPCs conducted by Hilde Corneliussen has shown that gender distribution among fictional characters and non-player ones is relatively balanced and proportionate. Building on that, Corneliussen describes the fictionalisation of women in the game as a generally favourable, with some potential for gender parity (Corneliussen 2008: 69–78). The gender ratio of NPCs is not the only thing worthy of note. It is also important that at some point in history, the three most iconic races in the game had female leaders: the human leader Jaina Proudmoore, the night elf general Tyrande Whisperwind and Sylvanas Windrunner, the undead queen. Far from being a formal decoration, these valiant viragos were represented in position of agency and power, in terms that seem to be markedly distant from androcentrism or patriarchy. This fragment of in-game lore is especially interesting:

> The remaining Alliance forces under Jaina Proudmoore settled in southern Kalimdor. Off the eastern coast of Dustwallow Marsh, they built the rugged port city of Theramore. There, the humans and their dwarven allies worked to survive in a land that would always be hostile to them. Though the defenders of Durotar and Theramore kept the tentative truce with one another, the fragile colonial serenity was not meant to last.
>
> The peace between the orcs and humans was shattered by the arrival of a massive Alliance fleet in Kalimdor. The mighty fleet, under the command of Grand Admiral Daelin Proudmoore (Jaina's father), had left Lordaeron before Arthas had destroyed the kingdom. Having sailed for many grueling months, Admiral Proudmoore was searching for any Alliance survivors he could find. Proudmoore's armada posed a serious threat to the stability of the region. As a renowned hero of the Second War, Jaina's father was a staunch enemy of the Horde, and he was determined to destroy Durotar before the orcs could gain a foothold in the land.

[99] Though arguably less relevant with regard to MMOs.

> The Grand Admiral forced Jaina to make a terrible decision: support him in battle against the orcs and betray her newfound allies or fight her own father to maintain the fragile peace that the Alliance and the Horde had finally attained. After much soul-searching, Jaina chose the latter and helped Thrall defeat her crazed father. Unfortunately, Admiral Proudmoore died in battle before Jaina could reconcile with him or prove that orcs were no longer bloodthirsty monsters. For her loyalty, the orcs allowed Jaina's forces to return home safely to Theramore (*World of Warcraft*, Blizzard Entertainment 2005).

Apart from showing a woman as playing a momentous role in the world's history, this episode resonates with some stereotypes connected to the mimetic crisis of persecution (see section 2.1.4 of this thesis). Specifically, Jaina's betrayal of her father qualifies as a crime that eliminates differences — an act of patricide is the destruction of differences between family and non-family. Furthermore, the purpose of this crime was to derogate distinctions even further, preserving the truce between orcs and humans, who were historically antagonistic to each other. Predictably, this led to even greater conflict that required a collective killing of a malicious dragon to quell. The story seems to be, in many aspects, archetypal and the fact it adheres to Girard's schema suggests — at the very least — that Girard analysed the mythical texts correctly, or at least studied them with sufficient rigour.

What does the above say about the differentiating capacity of gender in *World of Warcraft*? We can see that character gender is irrelevant in terms of gameplay mechanics and implies no of gender-linked conditions or restrictions on choosing specialisation, profession, or any game activity to pursue. We should also make note of relative scarcity of gender discrimination in game fictions, lore and world-building. All of this justifies a suggestion that, exaggerated as the representational distinctions may be, in practical terms the game is a realm of gender equality, not quite like the real world, one may add. In other words, since character gender does not affect character proximity, this differentiation of identity is mimetically inconsequential, in other words, it will not be a factor in preventing conflictual imitation. Where the second part of our theoretical model is concerned, gender in *World of Warcraft* does not seem to have any obvious interactions with either of the four player types. More specifically, the player is

unlikely to prefer a female avatar in order to play as an Achiever or Explorer — the two preferences do not seem to interact in any significant way.

Nevertheless, a kind of an opposition, is created between beauty and power — 'elegance' and 'brawn' may be more adequate terms — and, inexorably, the player has to make a choice of which characteristic to side with. We may be tempted to take the feature 'at face value' and conclude that the choice merely exists to accommodate wider player demographics, perchance provide an in-game representation template for men and women that play it. However, even though this approach would be correct on the surface, adopting it would lead us to disregard one of the most striking affordances of collective online gaming. This refers to the fact that the player can indeed choose whether they want to be represented by an avatar correspondent to their biological sex or that of the opposite, i.e. has the possibility to perform an identity transformation commonly referred to as cross-gendering.[100]

4.2.2 Cross-gendering and slutmogging

In *World of Warcraft*, cross-gendering has achieved certain prominence: the average number of female characters[101] across US and EU server zones is reported to be about 40% (Realmpop 2018), whereas the number of women that play the game is, in all probability, less than 20%. It is also a very well-established phenomenon, that male gamers have a tendency to create and play female representations of themselves (Blinka 2008; Guadagno, Muscanell, Okdie, Burk & Ward 2011; Yee, Ducheneaut, Yao & Nelson 2011; Dunn & Guadagno 2012; Yee 2014). Summarising twelve years of MMO player demographics research, Yee ascertains that *men play a character of the opposite*

[100] Which may or may not be accompanied by the player's intention to represent themselves as a person — and not just the avatar — of different gender.

[101] These data list characters that were created, but not necessarily played.

gender up to four times more often than women do (Yee 2014: 111; see also Nardi 2010: 72-73; Bartle 2016a: 543; Bartle 2016b: 420).

This somewhat peculiar variance is complicated by the fact that a small number of female outfits tends to emphasise if not amplify the same image of conventional femininity and sex appeal that the female body in *World of Warcraft* seems to be meant to communicate. Taken to the extreme, this results in manifest disparity; the notorious Black Mageweave Leggings look like a pair of dark coloured trousers when worn by a male character and transform into thong and stockings ensemble when the character wearing them is female. Esther MacCallum-Stewart and Justin Parsler rightly point out that this asymmetry constitutes a straightforward limitation of the player's freedom to choose the degree of sexuality they wish to invest their avatar with (MacCallum-Stewart & Parsler 2008: 230–231), although it would be excessive to exaggerate the issue. The proportion of deliberately sexualised female armour designs is comparatively very small — most armour sets look exactly the same regardless of the character's gender. Besides, an unwanted look is currently easy to avoid owing to the in-game 'transmogrification' system that was introduced in late 2011 and allows the players to change the appearance of their armour and weapons to something more suitable for them.

This should, in all likelihood, be sufficient to alleviate the problem some players may have had with sexually suggestive armour designs. However, the opposite effect is in evidence. The feature gave birth to a 'slutmogging'[102] phenomenon, where players modified the ordinary-looking armour pieces their female avatars wore to create deliberately erotic attires; something that was difficult to achieve before since the distribution of particularly revealing items was relatively sparse. Moreover, the items offering such qualities became a kind of a collector's rarity, picking those out became a kind of a hobby for some players: one of the earlier 'slutmogging' forum threads that bears a telling title of *'Need a bikini? I've got you un-covered!'* (Lull, World of Warcraft community forums 2011) has 89 full pages of posts and is active up to the

[102] A portmanteau of 'slut' and 'transmogging' (transmogrification).

time of this writing.[103] The resulting state of affairs — the vast majority of 'slutmogs' are used with female characters — lends some support to sexual objectification concerns, not necessarily in *World of Warcraft*, but in online games as a genre (e.g., Yee 2014: 104–107). Which makes it all the more surprising why the huge variance between male to female and female to male cross-gendering exists.

There is a variety of explanations as to why it is relatively common for male MMO players to play cross-gender. Edward Castronova suggests gender-bending allows a male player to explore the gender identity different from their own and in so doing acquire a profound understanding of the opposite sex (Castronova 2005a: 109). T.L. Taylor and Tanya Krzywinska adopt a more constrained perspective and argue that cross-gendering allows the players — both male and female — to experience identities and behaviours that are unavailable or socially undesirable in real life (Taylor 2006: 97–98; Krzywinska 2007: 114). On a less positive note, Yee refers to a forum survey on cross-gendering among male MMO players that he has conducted, and that has revealed a degree of female body objectification which led to male players being gratified, in some way, by looking at suggestively dressed, sexualised avatars (Yee 2014: 111–112). Further to that, Yee observes that men who use female avatars tend to choose the more visually appealing races for their character.[104] On the basis of the above, Yee maintains that male cross-gendering is a by-product of female character sexualisation in *World of*

---

[103] Though it is worthy of note that slutmogging is sometimes stigmatised, or at least used to support an ad hominem argument in a conflict between the gamers. Here is a somewhat typical example:

'Maybe less time crying on the forums and more time working on your rotation would help you be less terrible eh? Maybe fix up that transmog that screams "I jerk it vigorously to my toon on the reg" while youre at it, k cupcake?' (Funpolice, *World of Warcraft* community forums, 2018)

[104] It has to be said, in the interest of comprehensive examination, that *World of Warcraft* players have an overwhelming tendency to prefer conventionally attractive races regardless of whether or not they play women (Realmpop 2018). Less attractive races are altogether played less, the fact that may limit the value of Yee's observation.

Warcraft and is, if I am reading him right, brought forth by its capacity to afford the male player a kind of voyeuristic pleasure.

Apparently, the explanations above are indeed very viable,[105] and the reasons suggested are very likely the reasons why many players cross-gender. To these I may add a suggestion of my own — I think it is highly likely that a majority of players cross-gender because of trivial aesthetic preferences: a more proportionate body shape, a better-looking character animation and so forth. However, neither hypothesis seems to answer the question Yee himself concludes his argument on gender-bending with: 'Why is gender-bending among women so uncommon in online games?' (Yee 2014: 227).

4.2.3 Mimetic phenomenology of cross-gendering

It bears repeating, that the subject of gender in MMOs is extremely well-represented in literature. Not uncommonly, gender is dedicated a separate section in an authoritative monograph (e.g., Taylor 2006; Nardi 2010; Yee 2014) and it would seem excessive to list the many separate papers addressing the matter. More specifically, the subject of cross-gendering in MMOs and multiplayer videogames has been thoroughly considered (e.g., Bruckman 1993; Wright 1999; MacCallum-Stewart 2008; Huh & Williams 2010) and the existing commentary on the phenomenon is rather expansive.

Having said that, the fact that a scholar as influential as Nick Yee deems it necessary to look further into why the disparity between male and female cross-gendering exists, suggests that the topic is far from exhausted. Searle Huh and Dmitri Williams seem to share the same outlook when they argue that the reasons why cross-gendering takes place are an open question regardless of how well-established the phenomenon itself is (Huh & Williams 2010: 161). In other words, even though there is a body of study

[105] Even though it probably would not be an easy task to substantiate the optimistic perspective Castronova promotes.

concerning gender and cross-gendering in MMOs, there is also opportunity to produce new insight – if not in concern of virtual gender phenomenology as a whole, then with regard to female reluctance or unwillingness to choose male avatars.

The mimetic approach that this thesis seeks to introduce into video game analysis offers one way to unpick this phenomenon. To better accomplish that, we may want to rephrase the question as: 'Why do women mostly play female characters in online games?' This would be the question that can be — from the mimetic standpoint — answered immediately: women play female characters for more or less the same reason men do, because the mechanism that motivates their choice of representation is not gender-exclusive.

What seems to be a common observation in various MMO cross-gendering studies is better treatment or social attitude some male players expect to result from choosing a female avatar (Wright 1999; MacCallum-Stewart 2008). It is also important to note that the same expectations are shared by some female players: they likewise perceive that a female avatar warrants better treatment (MacCallum-Stewart 2008). Some female players are reported to use femininity, both their avatar's and their own, instrumentally, in order to secure this special attitude (Bertozzi 2008; Eklund 2011). In other words, a significant number of MMO players appear to believe, that female avatars are in somewhat privileged position, which is, to certain extent, connected to feminine appeal which these avatars represent (cf. Bruckman 1993).

The configuration of mimetic desire, as we have earlier discussed, is always triangular. In Girard's understanding, no desire — apart from those grounded in most basic physiological needs — may emerge independently and the desiring subject is neither autonomous nor self-sufficient (e.g. Girard 1976: 38–40; 1987: 352–361). The object of desire exists but is not determined by the subject themselves. Instead, the desire for whatever object they strive for is suggested to them by a model who is perceived to desire the same object — or is in possession of it and therefore believed to desire it.

Let us address male cross-gendering motivation in MMOs, specifically, cross-gendering accompanied by 'slutmogging', which may be the case exemplified by a male player quoted by Yee: 'If I am going to stare at a butt all game it might as well be a butt I'd like to look at' (Yee 2014: 11; see also Nardi 2010: 159).[106] Claims to autonomous desire, such as the one implied here by the construction of 'I'd like to', are always suspect when viewed mimetically. Attraction towards this particular object[107] and not some other one is, just like any other kind of desire, a product of suggestion, direct or otherwise.

From the mimetic standpoint, a romantic or sexual relationship is subject to the same triangular schema in which the position of the subject is taken by the lover, the role of the mediator belongs to the beloved and the object is the body which is in possession of the beloved and which the lover desires (Girard 1976: 105). In other words, a man desires the body belonging to a woman because she herself desires her own body and in so doing commands him to desire her body as well. In other words, he imitates her desire for herself and she suggests his desire for her to him.[108] As we superimpose this triangle over the voyeuristic practice of the male MMO player quoted by Yee, we can confidently discern the subject and the object of this interaction. The subject is the player himself and object is the sexually appealing representation of female body which he allegedly likes to look at, i.e. 'the butt'.

---

[106] A look through a few MMO-related fora reveal that this motivation is, indeed, predominantly claimed by gender-bending male players.

[107] In Girard's terminology, a manifest/physical entity which a desire is directed towards is always referred to as 'the object of desire'. Consequentially, in the context of sexual relationship, a body — female or male — is likewise termed 'object'. However rhetorically debatable such term may be, its usage in this thesis is justified and unavoidable.

[108] It is very important that triangular sexuality is by no means restricted to relationships in which a man pursues a woman. The principle is just as true in cases when the male body becomes the desired object that a woman seeks to come in possession of, or in same-sex relationships of either orientation. The example of female to male mediation was used to preserve the general tenor of Girard's 1967 work and to provide a fitting theoretical parallel for the virtual female to male mediation discussed here.

What of the third angle, however? The beloved/mediator position is not as easy to fill in this scenario, since no concrete woman, actual or televised, is attached to the virtual body of the player's avatar. Mimetic theory lends itself well to analysis of pornography or other such forms of remote eroticism, but in these cases a depiction (graphic or textual) of a sexual body is believed to share some mediating characteristics of a person this body is imagined to represent (Girard 1976: 160–161). I would argue against such presumption in the case of male player using a female avatar in a video game, since in the situation where erotic or pornographic imagery is consumed, the woman behind the depiction of female body is distinctly Other in relation to the viewer or reader. But as we earlier found out, character-centric immersion is unlikely to be functional in mimetic situations, the character does not qualify as Other and cannot be the model.

For all intents and purposes, the person behind the hypersexualised female body that the male cross-gendering player finds so pleasing to look at, is not a woman who would suggest his sexual drive for him, but the player himself.

However, the situation in which the roles of the subject and the mediator are filled by the same person is impossible under Girard's framework. We cannot rely on the traditional understanding of narcissism as self-projected sexual drive. We also cannot posit video game cross-gendering — however fitting it may appear in the context of a sexual object that players themselves create — as some kind of erotic attraction to inanimate objects of one's own making. Within the mimetic framework that we apply here, a desire can neither originate from Self, nor be directed at Self — at least not in a sense, different from exclusive possession. Instead, we will have to find the true mediator of this relationship, and that would not be hard to uncover once we took into account another crucial characteristic of object-directed mimetic impulse: a desire for an object is, in fact, a desire for a state of being that acquisition of this object is believed to bestow (Girard 1976: 53–58; Girard 1979: 143–149).

From the mimetic standpoint, the true fascination of the male player contemplating the attractive female 'butt' is not the 'butt', in and of itself, but the transformation into a different state of being that this sexually or romantically appealing object would grant

him: he has his own arousal to confirm that. The transformation that he pursues is not physical — the state of becoming a woman, but metaphysical — the *state of becoming desirable*.[109]

> I'm a dude who plays female toons. I cant really -identify- with the toons, but I do only play females because somewhere, deep down in my psyche, I want to look GOOD. (Pale, *World of Warcraft* community forums 2013)

In *World of Warcraft*, an environment predominantly populated by men, such desirability can only be suggested and legitimized by another heterosexual male, for whom the 'slutmogging' player unwittingly stages his spectacle. If there is truth to commonly accepted understanding that MMO representation of women is grounded in

---

[109] Intrinsic desirability of female avatars is something Bartle is highly sceptical of. He argues that male/female cross-gendering ratio was roughly the same in text MUDs in which female characters were not graphically represented and hence possessed no manifest, observable appeal (Bartle 2016a: 543).

The point of what I am proposing is slightly different: the state of being desirable which is the target of the male player's mimetic inclination is not about graphic sex appeal nor even the idea of eroticism. It is about the state of reciprocal desire imagined to be possible, it concerns the state of being loved, the state of being comforted, the state of not being alone. It resonates with the situation that Bartle poignantly describes elsewhere:

'So, it's a weekend in 1980. I'm in a computing laboratory with 15 students, all of whom are playing my game, MUD. This being 1980, and this being a computing laboratory, and this being a weekend, everyone here is male. The female computer science undergraduates have better ways to occupy themselves (mainly concerning male non-computer science undergraduates).

I look around at my friends and realize that chances are not one of us has ever had a girlfriend, nor have we any prospect of ever finding one. We regard all the female students on our course as people rather than as girls, and we'd no sooner hit on one of them than we would on each other. We're desperately short of social skills. The non-computing girls on campus are split between those who shy away in horror and those who laugh in our faces. It's pointless even trying: We're inexperienced and out-gunned.

None of us is happy with the situation, but we're resigned to it. We suffer in silence together.' (Bartle 2004: 158)

Unless I'm reading this wrong, the story is a description of male MUD players who are extremely well-aware of how desirable — physically, spiritually and socially — having a sexual partner is supposed to be. It is about the very idea of a woman, not merely her body. In such situation male MUD players do not need graphic representations that would crudely literalise the idea to them, they seem to know very well what it is that they want and what it is that they do not have.

the erotic interest of a heterosexual man — and there ought to be much truth to that — then it is taken for granted in this heterosexual male community that there is pleasure to be derived from looking at suggestively dressed female bodies, and that the beauty and sex appeal of these bodies is what makes them appealing. Our player's peers know that and he himself knows that. Seen mimetically, then, the butt the male player likes so much to look at is brought forth to please not so much himself, but his fellow male player, who may likewise cross-gender and dress his avatar suggestively, and whose desire evident from this activity our cross-gendering player strives to imitate and rival (cf. Nardi 2010: 158–159).

Such 'cross-referential' treatment of sexual affect is a common aspect of Girard's reasoning: 'In the birth of desire, the third person is always present.' (Girard 1976: 21). To provide examples of the phenomenon, Girard draws upon literary classics, Shakespeare (Girard 2000: 8–20), Dostoevsky (Girard 1976: 49–51) and so forth. A simplified real-world example of this situation may proceed as follows: let us imagine a long yet problematic marriage. The husband's dormant affection for the body of his wife is rekindled the moment another man starts desiring her. All of a sudden, his wife seems to him tremendously appealing and their failing relationship becomes precious to him (cf. Girard 1979: 145). However, the wife chooses not to reciprocate her husband's desire of her. She refuses him the metaphysical *state of being loved* that she ostentatiously lavishes upon his rival (or so the husband believes). A switch of the model occurs, the husband sees his wife as an object in possession of a man whose desire is superior to his own and focuses on the rival from whom he seeks to acquire the metaphysical quality he lacks. The rival does not leave his thoughts no matter how intimate the moment. What started like an affection for a woman mimetically transforms into a self-reviling obsession with a man.[110]

[110] I would like to reiterate, that mimetic desire is not gender-dependent. The roles in this example may be safely reversed. The reason an example was given from a male perspective is that the author is male and does not believe himself entitled to giving these kinds of examples on behalf of a gender that he does not represent.

The mimetic reading of the subject suggests that in some cases male *World of Warcraft* players who cross-gender may be subject to manipulations of the same nature and purpose that is widely believed to be directed at women. Owing to sexually objectifying tendencies of popular media, such as primetime television (Kim, Sorsoli, Zylbergold, Schooler & Tolman 2007) music videos (Vandenbosch, Vervloessem & Eggermont 2013), sports shows (Messner, Dunbar & Hunt 2000) and other video games (Ivory 2006; Dill & Thil 2007; Downs & Smith 2010), the male player is constantly aware of how inherently desirable the female body is and of his prescribed reaction to it — for this same media commonly *promotes masculine hypersexuality* (Tolman, Kim, Schooler & Sorsoli 2007). The male player has the object of his desire and the desire itself suggested to him, yet there is no woman to reciprocate his advances, which increases the value he endows the desired object with and urges him to seek an alternative mediator. Tantalised even more by female bodies appropriated by other men, the cross-gender player turns to his peers whose collective demeanour he borrows his inclinations from and seeks to posit his own desire as that stronger than theirs. To that end, some cross-gendering players collect and share slutmog outfits. Some male players remove the clothes of their female avatars altogether and play the game like this; some give their female characters sexually suggestive names that are visible to other players; some engage in verbal simulations of promiscuity and so forth.[111]

Further to that, some male MMO players may find the discrepancy between their male in-game representation and their off-screen self-conception to be a rather jarring experience. If we take a closer look at how men are represented in *World of Warcraft*, we will see that, in most cases, the characters are emphatically muscular, with the traditionally glorified areas — wide chest, lean abdomen and prominent trapezius — particularly accentuated. While there most certainly is a significant bias in how the game depicts women, most male characters are likewise exaggerated, idealised and carry, arguably, a somewhat similar aesthetic charge. This circumstance was

[111] 'Some' players is a crucial qualification here. Cross-gendering players not necessarily or always slutmog their characters or engage in what appears to be a kind of a misogynistic make-believe. Rather than that, they constitute an extremity of male cross-gendering in online games, or, in Girardian terms, actualise their mimetic disorders most explicitly.

numerously observed by MMO researchers and led some of them (Taylor 2003; Miller & Summers 2007; Yee 2104) to conclude that stereotyping of men in these kinds of games is more functional and less sexualised than that of women. This outlook is somewhat sweepingly summarised by Yee: 'In female avatars, the exaggeration tends to be sexual in nature—large busts, low-cut clothing, sheer or almost non-existent pants. In male avatars, the exaggeration tends to center on strength or athleticism, not sexual features' (Yee 2014: 105).

There is no gainsaying exaggerated male body may communicate superior physical prowess which is particularly meaningful in the context of the game's prevalent activity, its core gameplay of violent confrontation.[112] However, the apparent inclination to draw a resolute line between muscularity and perceived sex appeal may be lacking nuance and subject to discussion. There is ample evidence that men themselves tend to view a muscular, well-defined physique as a major predictor of possible sexual relationships (McCreary, Saucier & Courtenay 2005; Grossbard, Neighbors & Larimer 2011) and otherwise a very desirable quality (Brunet, Sabiston, Dorsch & McCreary 2010). Contrary, perhaps, to some common preconceptions, one study (Tantleff-Dunn & Thompson 2000: 244–245) has shown that male respondents were more concerned with the width of their chest — actual or lacking — than women were concerned with the size of their breasts. This is not as surprising if viewed alongside the prescribed male sexual hyperactivity mentioned earlier: a wide chest was found to be a factor of male sex appeal, regarded as such by men and women alike (Murnen, Poinsatte, Huntsman, Goldfarb & Glaser 2015: 26). In other words, we would do well to supply Yee's doubtlessly accurate assertion with a proviso: there may be cases when athleticism could be seen as a definite sexual feature, if not by game scholars who examine how male characters are represented in video games, then by men themselves, who play — or choose not to play — avatars characterised by hypertrophied muscularity or idealised physique.

---

[112] Even though it bears specifying that three out of twelve classes available in the game are, exclusively, magic users whose methods of combat are patently independent of athleticism or physical strength.

Lest I am misunderstood, I must emphasise that this elaboration is not meant to dilute the issue of how women are represented in *World of Warcraft* and, oftentimes, elsewhere in the media. The considerable disparity in gender representation exists and is symptomatic of stereotypes and conventions that are unproductive, unjustifiable and unwarranted. The reason to introduce these data was to point out that for some men their male avatars may be no less problematic than female avatars may be for some women. An average male body in *World of Warcraft* is neither average nor regular when viewed within the real-world frame of reference. A male character in the game is idealised or exaggerated to such an extent that we may not reasonably expect it to conform to the self-conception of an average male gamer.

In fact, what we can expect is the opposite: a study of 116 male online gamers found that video game screen time positively correlated to body mass and negatively correlated to frequency of exercise (Ballard, Gray, Reilly & Noggle 2009). The sample size of this study and the scale of its findings makes it unadvisable to extrapolate from it; however, it seems safe to assume, that a significant proportion of male MMO players do not possess the physical characteristics of their supposed virtual representations. It is not inconceivable, that the reason some male players may create female avatars for themselves is that they choose, deliberately, *a representation that resembles them the least so as to save themselves the trauma of being confronted by a representation that they do not resemble sufficiently*, an experience even more ambivalent for being enacted among other men who may or may not be of superior masculinity.[113]

Going back to the question that was proposed by Yee and inspired the analysis above: 'Why is gender-bending among women so uncommon in online games?' (Yee 2014: 227). An answer the mimetic perspective suggests would be that some women that play *World of Warcraft* seek a degree of metaphysical desirability, just like some men do. And, in an environment which is predominantly heterosexual and male, desirability can

[113] In all likelihood — and most of the time — a cross-gendering or 'slutmogging' player is fully aware of who his actual audience is; the overwhelming majority of men in online games playerbase is proverbial. In fact, it was the common practice of gender-swapping that gave birth to a popular gamer joke that transliterates the word 'girl' as 'guy in real life'.

be achieved by possession of a female body, a characteristic whose veracity and 'legitimacy' may render it quite easier for women than men to adhere to. Beyond that, the way some female gamers describe their avatar and the way it represents them seems to reveal the same telling signs of a mimetic situation. One study quotes a female gamer as saying:

> When I create a character in an RPG, I like to make them as sexy as possible. Haha! I love a sexy and strong female character. A character who is sexy and strong and can still kick a guy's butt 10 ways to Sunday! (Royse, Lee, Undrahbuyan, Hopson & Consalvo 2007: 564)

The player seems to find female sex appeal empowering — as long as the reference point of 'a guy' is present. There is always another in any mimetically driven process.

Girard's mimetic theory is, in some sense, deliberately gender-neutral, gender-ignorant, one may say. Mimetic desire affects men and women in equal proportion, and no man or woman is immune to it. Because of this, the proposed mimetic understanding of cross-gendering in *World of Warcraft* shifts the focus from the gender that is *a-priori* considered dominant to whichever gender is *actually* dominant in this or another playable environment. Working through the mimetic argument, if there was a MMO community dominated by women, i.e. one where women accounted for 80% of the game's playerbase, and where gender choice was of little consequence in terms of game fictions and mechanics, men might be expected to cross-gender a lot less, and women might very often play male characters, since 'being' male in such environment would constitute verifiable desirability.[114] Female or male, there are players who strive to comply with what can be described as the 'sexiness imperative' which drives them to seek sexual appreciation by any means available to them. The same popular media that dictates men to be dependably libidinous, also instructs women to self-objectify and view their bodies as an asset with which some desirable state of affairs may be

[114] Circumstantially, a real-world study of behavioural differences in communities characterised by different gender ratio reveals the following: 'We find robust differences between the competitive choices of girls from single-sex and coed schools. Moreover, girls from single-sex schools behave more like boys even when randomly assigned to mixed-sex experimental groups' (Booth & Nolen 2012: 542).

accomplished (Tolman et al. 2007; Murnen et al. 2014: 22–23). A set of conventions that Kim et al. describe as the *heterosexual script* (Kim et al. 2007) imposes such formulaic behaviours on men and women alike, and the intersections form a predicament that people of either gender seem to suffer from.

In such circumstances, hardline confrontation may be but one possible way to critically address the problem of representation bias and sexist tendencies in video game design. The mimetic approach to video game analysis that this work explores and advocates, offers the benefit of being more pluralistic and inclusive than more traditional critical approaches would allow. A slightly different viewpoint may be especially opportune when the debate surrounding the sexual politics of video games has become, in some respects, mainstream — the more male gamers acknowledge their own position within the same framework, the less inclined they might be to enjoy its workings.

4.3 Character race as a factor of differentiation

To reiterate: our search for mimetic patterns requires us to search for differences that may be evident in how modes of identity differentiation are designed (in terms of mechanics) and constructed (in terms of representation). Just like gender, race is a matter of player choice in *World of Warcraft*. As of this writing, there are thirteen races in all, divided into two groups of seven plus one race present in either group.[115]

Those two race-restricted blocs — the Alliance and the Horde — seem to be rhetorically peculiar, inasmuch as they force the into a quasi-political union, a placement they can neither challenge nor avoid. Character faction is inseparable from character race, a choice made in one department automatically presumes the choice

[115] When *Battle for Azeroth* content expansion was released in 2018, four more playable races became available.

made in the other.[116] This constitutes an interesting crossover between rhetorics and mechanics, effectively, the game equates the character's race with a preformed set of beliefs and behaviours, which is something we tend to be very worried about whenever we come across it in real world setting. Which may provoke the same feeling of uncanniness that we will often get while looking at race in *World of Warcraft:* unlike character gender and class, that seem to be well in line with the game's high fantasy setting, character race seems to lean on real world conventions and connotations, perhaps a little too heavily.

4.3.1 General observations on character race

Along these lines, some researchers observe that non-Caucasian ethnicities, in particular, black people, are marginalised by means of being represented insufficiently, or even not represented at all (Higgin 2009: 15; Monson 2012). Where playable races are concerned, the 'human' race[117] does allow the player to select from a variety of skin tones. However, since the selected skin tone is not in any way supported by the geometry of their facial features, the resulting dark-skinned avatar is likely to end up looking, as one of the players ironically describes it, 'like a white person dipped in chocolate' (Cihys, *World of Warcraft* community forums 2014). A different approach to how real-world ethnic minorities are featured in a MMO is possible and was implemented in *The Secret World* (Funcom 2012). The game not merely allowed the players to adjust their character's skin tone, but also to choose facial features within a number of presets that corresponded, if loosely, to some widespread African, East Asian

[116] With the exception of the pandaren race, who have the possibility to choose what faction to support. However, there is no option *not* to support any.

[117] Which represents the most conventional, normative approximation of people as species.

and Caucasian physical traits, as well as those that allowed an approximation of Native American or Middle Eastern look.[118]

There is, however, a reverse side to such fine level of detail, one making it seem like a bit of a 'damned if you do, damned if you don't' situation. A cornerstone principle of MMO character creation, including this particular feature, is the player's absolute freedom to choose every aspect of their virtual representation. Consequently, the inclusion of ethnic minorities as playable in-game races may formally be equated to what Lisa Nakamura describes as *identity tourism*: an opportunity to appropriate racialized identities without having to withstand any risks or restrictions linked to being a racial or ethnic minority in real life (Nakamura 2001: 229). It seems very plausible, that with considerations of insufficient representation of minorities on the one hand, and the notions of identity tourism and cultural appropriation on the other, both MMO designers and MMO players are forced into an inevitable *impasse*. The former has no reliable way of knowing if they may or should produce high fidelity representations of real-world minorities and make them available as playable representations. The latter have no reliable way of knowing if they may play these representations without committing what some would say constitutes an inter-cultural offence (see also Bartle 2004: 523–524). As a result of the two factors combined, designers are unlikely to introduce a potentially problematic feature that the players do not seem to be actively interested in.

Which seems to be the case with the representation of minorities in *World of Warcraft*. The issues that tend to attract academic attention do not not seem to stir much controversy with the players, which — and I don't mean this in a cynical or reductive

---

[118] It is worthy of note that the non-player characters in *The Secret World* were produced, apparently, within the same character creation presets. In other words, the player may partially owe their ability to create a Native American or Middle Eastern looking character to the fact that there are Native American and Middle Eastern non-player characters in the game. It is interesting how *The Secret World*'s backstory feeds into the game's representational affordances and how the developer's pursuit of production efficiency (technology being reused) results in much higher degree of racial/ethnic diversity than most games in the genre could claim.

sense — may have to do with insufficient demand. Considering this possible lack of interest, as well as a generous choice of 'non-human' fantasy races, some of them rather dark-skinned, it seems likely that the most pressing expectations the players have are met and that the players themselves do not see the marginalisation of minorities as a design decision driven by some deliberate subversive charge.[119]

The race that correlates to the only 'human' race formally acknowledged as such would inevitably be, to some extent, politically charged. However, we'd be justified to expect that fantasy races — that should be, in Bartle's astute observation called 'species' (Bartle 2016b: 414) but almost never are — to be devoid of these kinds of connotations.[120] Nevertheless, this is not the route the designers decided to take: some fantasy races in *World of Warcraft* are, to some degree, modelled on real-life ethnocultural subjects represented in a highly stereotypical and thus unavoidably regressive way. There is consensus among the researchers that the fantasy race of the trolls is based upon certain aspects of Afro-Caribbean culture and the fantasy race of the tauren borrows heavily from Native American ethnocultural tradition (Langer 2008: 89; Higgin 2009: 9; Monson 2012: 61-62). The representation of the tauren may be considered, in some sense, sympathetic — barring the fact they are a bovine race and not a humanoid one. They are portrayed as spiritual, traditional and, unlike the other races within their faction, quite peaceful. The distinctly Afro-Caribbean troll race, however, may be seen as the opposite of that. The lore fragment on the character creation stage describes trolls as 'fierce' and mentions their 'shadowy heritage' and 'powerful tribal magic' (Blizzard Entertainment 2004). In combination with the very obvious Black-Caribbean/Jamaican borrowings, this racial fantasy is exploitative if not derogatory. Remarkably, the current lore piece is a toned-down version of the original troll introductory voice-over that referred to this fantasy race in a much less ambiguous

---

[119] The low level of player awareness does not necessarily defuse or justify the ideological implications the exclusion of minorities may have. However, the player interest is pointless to disregard, the players drive the product's financial gain and their influence on who is and is not included will in all likelihood be a lot higher than the impact of peer-reviewed publications.

[120] Which seems to be a viable option: *The Elder Scrolls Online*, keeps its fantasy races outside real-world politics and is an undisputed commercial success.

way: ‘The vicious Trolls that populate the numerous jungle isles of the South Seas are renowned for their cruelty and dark mysticism. Barbarous and superstitious, they carry a seething hatred for all other races’ (Blizzard Entertainment 2004).

While the fact that the company chose to modify the introductory lore suggests a degree of awareness of the problematic relationship this fantasy construct has with the real world ethnicity implicated, the visual representation of the trolls remains ambivalent at best. The character model — both male and female — combines conventionally normative body with elements of deliberate abnormality; protruding tusks, deformed feet, oversized skin warts and so forth. The resulting impression is, by Langer’s incisive observation, ‘simultaneously hypersexualised [. . .] and repulsive’ (Langer 2008: 97). The pre-recorded snippets of troll monologue that get played randomly whenever a troll NPC is approached are acted out with pronounced Jamaican accent and reinforce the impression of a barbarous, outlandish community. Another case when the portrayal of what is ostensibly a fantasy race in *World of Warcraft* is linked to stereotypical views of a real world ethnicity is the goblin race. With their noisy, assertive behaviour, their monologue lines that forefront avarice and commercial savvy, as well as their oversized, prominent noses, goblins are a caricature no less straightforward and recognisable than that of the troll race. The connotations such portrayal may welcome seem to have escaped scholarly attention, but the community themselves are, apparently, well aware of them:

> ...the other day when I was in orgrimmar, a player on his goblin character, low level, was asking for gold, for whatever reason maybe he didn’t have a main to get some. But anyway the first response this guy got was “Ah ha, a goblin asking for gold, typical jew!’. I did tell the guy he was being a dick, but it made me think, is the way blizzard portrayed the goblins something that causes people to think this, since this is how comedy shows parody jewish people? (Trassk, MMO-Champion, 2012)

In other words, although the races in the game are meant to be equal some of them are modelled on real-world ethnicities that are, in many cases and aspects, not seen as such. This resonates with the mimetic idea of protected distinctions (see 2.1.4 of this thesis)

and maintains a portentous reminder of some groups being, in any case, superior to the other. Which brings us back to the human race.

With all *players* being human, the important consequence of setting apart human *characters* is the separate emphasis placed on the normative status of one 'master race', a specificity that makes it even more agreeable and desirable to the players. And as we approach the racial differentiation in the game from the mimetic angle we are bound to make a discovery: over the course of eight years, the human race was mechanically superior to all other playable races. The human race was not merely rhetorically and representationally distinct; it was objectively the most powerful race in the game.

4.3.2 Mimetic themes and patterns in race-related mechanics

While character gender has no gameplay consequence whatsoever, character races are mechanically differentiated by 'racials'. These are on-use abilities and character statistics adjustments that are unique to a particular race and always named in a distinct manner that reflects the correspondent race fictions. One of the goblin racials, for instance, is called 'Time Is Money', the name being a gesture towards the goblins' proverbial greed and the ability itself giving all characters of this race a minor increase of fighting/spell-casting speed. An undead racial, 'Cannibalize' allows the characters to replenish lost health by devouring corpses of the characters they have just killed and places a strong rhetorical emphasis on the alienated position of the race within the game world.

The human racial is called 'Every Man for Himself'. Before it was adjusted in 2016, the ability allowed the player to clear their character of 'control effects' — states that temporarily remove the player's ability to control their character — applied by human or non-human opponent and extremely important in any PvP context. As its main gameplay consequence, this racial allowed human characters to equip two items increasing the damage their character was capable of dealing, compared to only one

such item a character of any other race could equip. In PvP, the most competitive aspect of the game that, arguably, foregrounds individual playstyle far more than its PvE aspect, this racial ability gave players who played human characters an unfair advantage over players who chose any other race. This rather decisive gameplay imbalance persisted for many years, causing heated discussions among the players and, very probably, being one of the principal drivers behind the ever-increasing number of human characters in the game.

At this point, we will come across the phenomenon of mimetic self-revulsion. It is impossible to say in full confidence whether it was the 'privileged' — rhetorically and mechanically — status of the human race that promoted these kinds of concerns, yet many players were full of doubt about what race they should choose. In some cases, the problem seemed to be haunting the players well after the choice was made, a nagging uncertainty of whether they were of a right race, or if there was a race better than theirs:

> So I have a worgen death knight, which still isn't even 100 yet. I really want to play a death knight but I just never feel like leveling mine. I don't like worgen that much, they just weren't what I excpected. So I was thinking of race changing it into a human or maybe a gnome.
>
> If anyone else have race changed, please give me your opinions. I kinda feel like it would be weird just changing race when I've been playing as a worgen all this time, like I'm just throwing away the old character. But at the same time I know that I don't want a worgen. (Marileen, *World of Warcraft* community forums 2016)

Regardless of the fact the developer has numerously stated that races are, just like gender, primarily an aesthetic choice, some players seemed to be plagued by relentless self-doubt, always thinking that someone else would, for whatever arbitrary reason, be better than themselves at playing their character, at playing the game and, in some sense, at being part of the game.

Remarkably, players who chose their character to be human — objectively very powerful and least controversial 'normative' race — were not exempt from the same mimetic predicament. No race seemed to be good enough for some players to be quite

content with the choices they have made, which is a striking example of how mimetic desire functions internally. The subject will never be happy with themselves, because the model has to be, by definition, superior to them. For the model to be superior, the subject must find themselves lacking. In the mimetic account, the search for the perfect race, as well as the perfect class (discussed further in 4.7) is a desperate search for a model or inability to choose a model from the multitude of models around.

This instability is liable to be consequential on a rather wide scale: too many players constantly compared their race to some other one in order to figure out which one is better than theirs, seemingly confident that theirs is not the best one. The dissatisfaction with their race could have transferred, in some cases, onto the faction their race belonged to: a collateral effect of the human race being mechanically better was, at certain points, the supremacy of the Alliance faction in casual PvP and therefore, even more players being unhappy with their faction.[121]

A concrete example of how character race may function as a mimetic model has to start with a word of caution. Researchers who focus extensively on the matter of real world racial connotations run the risk of developing a rather narrow, if not skewed perspective that may, in some cases, lead to findings that may seem extremely suitable, but not necessarily genuine. Such was the case, perhaps, with Monson's assertion that 'Nick Yee (2006) found that the majority of players in WoW choose to play the whitest appearing races (e.g., Humans and Blood Elves)' (Monson 2012: 63).

However plausible such observation may sound, Yee found no such thing in the study Monson refers to. Indeed, he would be hard-pressed to make this statement: the playable race of blood elves was introduced in 2007, so players simply could not choose

[121] Apparently, the balance of the game had swayed too far. In 2016, after *many years* of players' requests, Blizzard Entertainment adjusted 'Every Man for Himself' to no longer provide the indirect competitive bonus it had, effectively nullifying the mechanical advantage of the human race. The model status of the humans was compromised, in part, but the faction balance was apparently restored. It is highly possible that any major disparity between the factions is completely unacceptable for the company because the very functioning of the game world is dependent on factions being constantly in conflict.

to play it in 2006. Another possible issue with Monson's argument is that it seems to conflate players with characters being played; with every player allowed to create up to 10 characters per server and a maximum number of characters per player account set at 50, it would be very difficult to prove that more *players* choose to play humans and blood elves than *all other races combined*. The 'choose to play' (Monson 2012: 63) part of the statement is likewise debatable; any number of players may have *created* a human or blood elf character once, and never actually *used* them, playing some different race instead. Unless a comparative study of *all actively played* characters is conducted all we have to work with are the data on what characters the players choose to *create*. Finally, Monson seems to be unaware of the 'Every Man for Himself' racial we have just discussed, and as a consequence disregards a huge impact a significant competitive advantage may have on the choice of race. It is beyond reasonable doubt that a significant part of the 'majority' that Monson alludes to, decided to make a human character not because the humans are whitest appearing — they are not, insofar as there is a variety of non-white skin tones available.[122] They chose to play a human character because they liked to PVP.

What Yee did report in 2005, however, is a curious phenomenon that does not necessarily fit within the problematics of real-world race relations and seems, therefore, in danger of being sidelined: the marked prevalence of undead characters among the players preferring the Horde faction. The undead race was what many players were inclined to choose to play, and this choice is not as easy to position within the real-world race relations matrix. The undead can be assigned a lighter skin tone — just like any other non-animal race in the game — as well as light blue, light green or light purple, but their 'whiteness' seems to be of a different kind: they are dead, disfigured and decomposing. Working through concepts of Kristeva, Langer argues, persuasively, that the undead are the abject of *World of Warcraft* races, in other words situated outside the customary premises of interpersonal relations and not necessarily racialised

[122] Unlike the gnomes, the dwarves and the undead.

at all (Langer 2008: 99–100). Whatever the reason for undead being this popular was, it does not seem to be directly related to the colour of their skin.

As soon as we apply the mimetic perspective, however, another interesting pattern immediately meets the eye. As Yee (2005) analysed the character race preferences against the dominant motivations reported by the players choosing these races, he found that the players who played an undead character most of the time scored significantly higher in the Advancement subset of player motivation than those preferring any other playable race, be it Horde or Alliance. Players who chose the undead also ranked second in the Competition subset. The mimetic logic of the phenomenon is straightforward: the players who prefer the undead and are motivated by Advancement and Competition correlate to Bartle's Achiever type and Killer type and therefore succeed in the aspects of the game, that are *particularly salient in terms of visibility and exposure*. Consequently, the more visible these successful players become, the more inclined the rest of the players will be to copy both their desire, which is to say their motivations to play, and this desire's objective attribute — their choice of race.

In other words, I argue that if the players have any meaningful preferences as to what race they choose to play, these preferences may not be based exclusively on its approximate 'whiteness', but also on whether or not the most visible successful players play it. A number of players, apparently, tend to pick the same character race that the most accomplished players have picked. I also argue that while race does play an important part in *World of Warcraft* player behaviour, the attitudes and preferences the players have are not necessarily or always linked to their possible out-of-the-game preconceptions of race and race-related politics.

Finally, although character race seems to exhibit more patterns of reflexive imitation and used to be a major distinction because of the human racial ability, it does not, currently, seem to influence proximity or player possibilities to qualify as a difference that may impact the development of competitive imitation. Regarding player types, since the advantage of the human race was removed, some links between races and types may exist, but are very subtle. For instance, my personal experience with *World of*

Warcraft open-world PvP community suggests that most accomplished player-killers often play gnomes. In fact, this seems to resonate very well with some aspects of Killer type mindset: gnomes are the smallest race in the game, and therefore, a player kill performed by a gnome would possibly feel doubly disappointing for a victim. There may be some other idiosyncratic dependencies of this kind, but hardly those we can observe with sufficient clarity and frequency.

4.4 Character faction as a factor of differentiation

The Horde and the Alliance are two geopolitical conglomerates engaged in persistent conflict, responsible, in fact, for the 'War' in 'Warcraft'. Simultaneously, as Esther MacCallum-Stewart very aptly describes it 'the two sides share an uneasy truce, supposedly united against common enemies' (MacCallum-Stewart 2008: 39). Crucially, the backstory of the original game and every content expansion thereafter relies on the presence of a third party, some larger than life opponent that could only be defeated by shared, if not concerted, effort. This common interest, however, does not negate the conflict between the parties; their mutual antagonism is ever more supported, stressed and accentuated by the game's various fictional devices.

Famous among the players, the video cutscene concluding the *Siege of Orgrimmar* content expansion (Blizzard Entertainment 2013) sees the chief representatives of the Horde and the Alliance facing each other after the common nemesis Garrosh Hellscream was destroyed. A tense discussion ensues, the opponents are visibly close to going for each other's throats. The conversation ceases, abruptly, with the leader of the Alliance thrusting his sword into the ground between them while uttering the iconic promise: 'We will end you.' (Blizzard Entertainment 2013). The dramatic impact of this threat was such that the players[123] have appropriated the phrase and turned it into a slogan. Emergent performances allegedly took place that involved massive numbers of

[123] Curiously, players of either faction.

players gathering by the capital city of the opponent faction, chanting ‘We will end you’ in the game chat. In addition to that, some PVP-focused players made custom chat commands that allowed them to transmit ‘We will end you’ whenever they killed a character belonging to the opposite faction.

The ability of the Alliance players to attack and kill Horde players and vice versa is a powerful mechanic differentiator that is supported, if not encouraged by the self-descriptive faction titles ‘of the Alliance’ and ‘of the Horde’ which are granted, exclusively, for killing characters of the opposite bloc. On dedicated PvP servers, where members of opposite factions may be attacked without restrictions and at any given moment, the players themselves tend to fictionalise and dramaticise the act of player-killing: ‘role-playing’ protection of their ‘native’ lands, repelling invaders and so forth. It is worthy of separate notice that the influence player-killing has on player experience and player migration is far from minor: a PvP server on which the quantitative balance between the factions is too uneven may become almost unplayable for those belonging to the minority faction. As soon as they enter a well-populated area of the game world, they are attacked by an overwhelming number of opponents, often higher level than themselves and almost always impossible to escape from. This somewhat customary behaviour has caused many players to transfer their characters to servers dominated by their own faction, or at least those where factions have a relative parity.

It is also of pertinence that player-on-player attacks seem to, in some sense, imitate the behaviour of fully fictitious, computer-controlled entities, the guards. In case if a Horde player approaches an Alliance-controlled territory — or vice versa — the guards attack them on sight. The guard’s combat parameters are deliberately set up to be much higher than those of the player character, so the latter will have to escape the confrontation or perish.[124] In *World of Warcraft*, these mechanics of open world hostility were always

[124] Unless they bring a large group of other player characters with them, which is what open world PvPers do.

present and go a long way to solidify the antagonism between the factions and the players' acute awareness of it.

This antagonism is understandable because the two factions are indeed in a state of war.[125] As a metaphor, however, it communicates obligatory inter-communal aggression, a mandatory condition that does not allow the opposing groups to amalgamate. One of the scripted in-game events in the *Wrath of the Lich King* content expansion (Blizzard Entertainment 2008) serves as a striking reinforcement of this necessary division: one pre-designed incident has the Alliance player save the life of an orc non-player character. 'There will come a day,' the thankful NPC begins, 'When the Horde and the Alliance will settle their differences and live together peacefully…' and then a lightning from the sky cuts his blasphemous utterance short. This 'nemesis divina' situation is an apt, if not literal enactment of Girard's mimetic crisis maxima: once differences and distinctions disappear, or are eliminated, the catastrophe becomes inevitable (Girard 1986: 12–13, 19–22; Girard 1989: 44–51). For the Alliance and the Horde, 'settling their differences' becomes an existential taboo, any notion of which is punishable by death.

4.4.1 Theorising faction differences

While some researchers make a case for the good against evil dichotomy represented by the Alliance versus the Horde conflict (Castronova 2005b; Higgin 2009: 9), such moral-centric approach is something we should resist as early as possible. A Manichean perspective like this does not align well with the notion of symmetry (see 2.1.4) that is central to our framework. More importantly, however, it does not seem to align well with reality. Castronova argues the following:

[125] Even though the backstory often refers to situations of truce or existence of common purpose.

> So here's my view: When a real person chooses an evil avatar, he or she should be conscious of the evil inherent in the role. There are good reasons for playing evil characters - to give others an opportunity to be good, to help tell a story, to explore the nature of evil. But when the avatar is a considered an expression of self, in a social environment, then deliberately choosing a wicked character is itself a (modestly) wicked act.
>
> Then when we look at WoW, it seems to me obvious that the Horde races are on the whole evil. One element of this is the fact that the words 'troll' and 'orc' and 'undead' have implied evil creatures for as long as those words have been in use in the English language (since the 9th century in the case of 'orc'). No one, not even mighty Blizzard, can un-do the meaning of a word in a matter of a few years. But more importantly, all you have to do is look at the values expressed by the cultures, and it should be apparent which sets of values are worthy of praise. The human race is the only one with children, and charitable giving, for example. Orcs, on the other hand, value warfare and power. In terms of public ethics, this is a no-brainer to me, really. (Castronova 2005b: para 2–3)

Castronova's argument may sound persuasive, at least if we accept what seems to be its central premise: choices made in a video game are of consequence in the real world. It is tempting to agree that the player should be conscious of what the cultural connotations of their choice may be, both externally and in the context of the game world. The problem, however, is that it is not a *should* situation. This kind of awareness is not something the players may be *forced* to have: if they do not want to see Horde as evil they will not. If they want to play antisocially while being Alliance — they certainly will. I will give two examples that indicate how meaningless the perception of factions as moral divide can be.

In 2006, a *World of Warcraft* player who had been popular on her server passed away. A forum thread was created to call together a server memorial meeting. The date, the time and the place were set, and several dozens of player-characters gathered together, most of them wearing their role-playing gear[126] and not carrying weapons. They formed a circle and commemorated their friend with a moment of silence. A throng of

[126] Before transmogrification was introduced, role-playing gear often meant equipment that had no combat properties attached to it.

characters from the guild called Serenity Now appeared and slaughtered the mourners where they stood. Serenity Now were Alliance, the mourners were Horde.

In 2018, the introductory pre-patch for *Battle for Azeroth* content expansion (Blizzard Entertainment 2018) introduced a new questline that culminated with Sylvanas Windrunner, the Warchief of the Horde, destroying one of the game's most iconic landmarks — the tree of Teldrassil. One of the biggest scandals in *World of Warcraft* history ensued (not that there were too few). Hundreds of forum posts, hundreds of twitter messages, threats to the company staff, allegedly, demands of free faction transfers and announcements of having terminated the game subscription. Hundreds of players worldwide were protesting the company's decision to portray Horde as evil when in the eyes of the players themselves they were, at most, morally grey.

Regardless of their faction's representational characteristics, its lore, the rhetorical charge of its gameplay mechanics and the common-sense perception of 'good' and 'bad' the players will think what they want to think and do what they want to do, Castronova's ardent appeal simply passes them by. However formally correct seeing the Horde and the Alliance in terms of the good and evil dichotomy is, it does not seem to be practically sustainable.

The categorisation of highest interest to this study, therefore, is the one proposed by Jessica Langer who suggests that we approach the faction-related differences in the game within a dichotomy of self versus other,[127] or, alternatively, familiar versus foreign (Langer 2008: 87–88). Drawing on notions of postcolonial theory, Langer argues that the Horde races are deliberately and consistently placed as other[128] and, unlike the Alliance races, will always be foreign in the eyes of a Western player (Langer 2008: 87–90). Such rigid division is not necessarily the best perspective, I believe, and some aspects of it can be scrutinized or even challenged. Particularly the way Langer posits all Alliance races as 'either Western or Western-approved' (Langer 2008: 90)

---

[127] Self and other — in the sense that adheres to postcolonial theory.

[128] This is a non-Girardian usage of the term, but a sociological one.

may prove to be too deliberate an attempt at squaring the circle. Whilst framing the night elves as east-asian is not necessarily convincing and the subsequent positioning of east-asian people as 'model minorities' (Langer 2008: 89) is dubious, ascribing western approval to the draenei and the gnomes is outright debatable, despite the lack of any race-linked connotations in either case.

To look at the notions of 'Western approval' today, we will have to assume a scope wider than strictly racial one. Ethnicity these days, or even statehood, is politicised to a very significant extent. Girard's well-articulated distinction between 'foreigners within' and 'foreigners from abroad' (Girard 2001a: 166) is especially relevant with the increasingly diverse ethnocultural composition of contemporary Western populations, as well as the anxiety this state of affairs seems to cause. Along these lines it is impossible to frame the Draenei as a western-approved race, not so much because of their biological peculiarities that include horns, hooves and tails, but because of their *strong Russian accent*. This jarring detail did not escape the attention of many players or some researchers (Monson 2012: 62). Effectively, it topples the edifice of Langer's categorisation: the Russians are not merely orthogonal, conventionally, to Western approval of any kind, but are somewhat commonly positioned as unambiguously villainous in Western-produced video games, MMOs inclusive. The *Guild Wars 2* example below is both typical and illuminating.

The race of the dredge in *Guild Wars 2* is not a playable race but a computer-controlled race of *monstrous moles*. Invariably hostile towards the players and therefore invariably destroyed by them, the dredge represent a parody of the Russians: wide of scope and elaborately executed. The underground habitat of the dredge is a stylistic mix of crude industrialism and Russian constructivist art. The general lore associated with the dredge race uses mildly distorted but immediately recognisable Russian toponyms (Molensk, Moleberia and so forth), Russian surnames (Koptev, Zadorojny, Volkov and the like) and even borrows real-life historical personae (Dostoev Sky Peak, War Minister Shukov). Remarkably, in line with the time-tested methodology of political propaganda, ethnicity gets conflated with and then equalised to state ideology: the dredge are a

communist society that is ‘ruled by a dictatorship of the moletariate’ and lives ‘in a state of permanent revolution’ (*Guild Wars 2* Official Wiki). These red-baiting stereotypes, laboured as they may be in the view of the contemporary socio-political situation in Russia, are reinforced by a generous helping of pre-constructed disdain: the dredge are mole-people, feeble of sight, markedly unintelligent, digging tunnels in the dirt. A concrete real-world ethnicity here is, literally, dehumanised in a deliberately warped manner: by being portrayed not merely as animals but those both mentally deficient and physically repulsive.

If this attempt at character assassination communicates Western approval, then I do not know what would be a reliable indication that the West disapproves. However, this is not the only Alliance race that does not fit within the postcolonial framework of Langer’s investigation. Gnomes are generally light skinned, yet the proportions of their body, the shape of their extremities and their walking animation form an immediately recognisable representation of dwarfism. It is questionable how Western-approved this kind of non-racialised physical difference is per se, yet in an often ableist discourse of video gaming subcultures — pejoratives like ‘retarded’, ‘brokenhanded’ and ‘lame’ are a customary part of a gamer’s lexicon — disability is, conceivably, just as divisive as racially defined difference. If we take a more subtle and nuanced approach we will have to acknowledge the gnome race as yet another ‘foreigner within’, preferrable, to an extent, than a ‘foreigner from abroad’ would be, but still far from normative or generally approved of.

In addition to that, not unlike the good and evil dichotomy above the rigid opposition between familiar and foreign does not seem to take into account the actualities of player experience. However foreign their chosen faction may appear in relation to the player’s real world ethnocultural milieu, it is members of this faction that the player will be seeing for the better part of their gameplay experience; nearly all of it if they do not PvP. Evidence suggests that players tend to play the faction of their choice exclusively: 87% of respondents that took part in my research played either as an Alliance character or a Horde character, but not both. Under normal circumstances, therefore, a player

would not regularly come in contact with members of opposite faction, which is to say most of the time Horde players will be surrounded by characters that represent Horde races and Alliance players will be almost exclusively surrounded by their Alliance compatriots. As a player, an American or West European person playing for the Horde may hypothetically theorise Horde as foreign, yet as a player character they empirically experience it as familiar regardless of what their real-world ethnocultural background is. Such is, this bears repeating, *the actual immediate situation* players find themselves in for the better part of their experience with the game. We would be hard-pressed to prove that the importance of this actuality is completely suppressed by the real-world preconceptions of race and ethnicity which the players may or may not share.

An alternative approach that I propose is to view the Alliance and the Horde as symmetrically Another[129] in the context of the game. As long as the game is actively played, the Alliance player-characters are, effectively, just as foreign to the Horde player-characters as the Horde player-characters are to them. What indirectly supports this assumption (and undermines the postcolonial assumptions that Langer proceeds from) is the fact that the number of Horde characters in both Europe and the United States is almost exactly the same as the number of Alliance characters. Conceivably, if the otherness of the Horde was truly this universal, the proportion would favour the Alliance a lot more. Symmetrical otherness[130] does, besides, a much better job of explaining significant degree of antagonism that some players exhibit towards player-characters belonging to a faction other than their own (Shwartz 2006: 320; Langer 2008: 92–93), i.e. while most players are very likely to see *any* race apart from the humans as foreign, to some degree, these formal distinctions became far less meaningful in the context of the game and their own player experience. In the context of the game, a race representing the opponent becomes another, and the race representing

---

[129] The term used in its mimetic meaning this time. It may be irksome for the reader to see these clarifications, but they are essential. In the sociological sense ‘other’ is highly negative. In the mimetic sense it is positive to such an extent that it results in negative outcomes.

[130] Used mimetically.

the ally — let alone the player themselves — is as familiar as the player's identification with the character would allow.

As long as we agree to accept the symmetrical relationship between *World of Warcraft* factions and in so doing to place the factions within the mimetic framework, we can pick out and interpret the conspicuous ambivalence informing the relationship between the Alliance and the Horde in the situation of actual gameplay confrontation. The striking pattern that I numerously observed in the context of randomly assembled instanced PvP sessions[131] was that the players of the losing team would very often blame their failure on their faction. Whenever defeat seems unavoidable on the Horde side, for instance, the players would often be very vocal about their disappointment with how this situation is 'typical Horde' or how 'Horde never wins' or how 'Horde can't play the game'. By implication — and often openly declared — the Alliance *can* play the game, the Alliance *always wins*, the Alliance wins because the Alliance is *intrinsically superior*.[132] Clearly visible here are mimetic factors of arbitrary revulsion that players project on the 'sociopolitical structure' they belong to and the arbitrary prestige that they invest their model opponent with.

The very same pattern is in place when the sides are swapped: whenever an Alliance team loses the game, they would very often belittle their faction and glorify the Horde, directly or otherwise.[133] However, the faction-related issue of highest importance to this thesis is evident in a striking recurrence of a single unique scenario in which the mechanism is *not* set into action. In other words, while the victory of the opponent is in most cases deemed deserved — granted by the perceived superiority the model opponent is endowed with — there is an exceptional situation in which the winning party is *almost always guilty*. The condition necessary for this situation to take place is

---

131 Typically, but not always, these sessions host 10 players from either side.

132 The pattern is precisely the same on the other side (I did play hundreds of PvP sessions as either).

133 Based on the author's first-hand experience of more than 1000 randomly assembled PvP battlegrounds: played both from the Horde perspective and on the side of the Alliance.

something that one of the players articulates explicitly: ‘I would rather lose every match to Europeans than play against Russians’ (Akalai, WoW community forum 2016).

4.4.2 Mimetic persecution in shared virtual environments

It has been widely argued that in-game aggression may percolate into meta-game quarrels and even direct interplayer antagonism (Shwartz 2006: 320; Myers 2008; Langer 2008: 92–93). To look at the possible mimetic underpinnings of this phenomenon, we need to address the issue of increased intolerance directed towards some real world ethnicities or nationalities. While battleground sessions between two English-speaking teams would normally proceed in the mood of fair, if not altogether amiable competition, the moment an English-speaking team sees they were randomly assigned a team of Russian-speaking opponents, something very different happens. Invectives — not necessarily ethnocentric ones — get posted into the game chat, some players express their protest by leaving the battleground, some others announce that the game is ruined and ostentatiously stop playing. The same kind of behaviour is sometimes observable in manually assembled PvE groups, some players may leave as soon as a supposedly Russian player is added to the team. Finally, countless threads on *World of Warcraft* community forums exist, in which English-speaking players urge the developer/service provider to remove Russian players from the PvP segment of the game (Ragnaroker, *World of Warcraft* community forum 2016), to ban the Russians from playing on European servers (Volenar, *World of Warcraft* community forum 2016), to isolate the Russians on a separate PvP server (Arenamustard, *World of Warcraft* community forum 2017), to ‘let them die in hell’ (Imlikeabird, *World of Warcraft* community forum 2015) and so forth.

The relatively common pretext for such exclusion of the game’s Russian-speaking community is cheating (xindralol, MMO-Champion 2016; Holbart, WoW community forums 2016; RelaZ, MMO-Champion 2017). In other words, a player believed to be

Russian is automatically branded a cheater, a situation strikingly similar to that described by Nick Yee with regard to the Chinese players in *World of Warcraft* (Yee 2014: 78–95).

The rapid growth of 'farming' activities[134] in 2005 and 2006 and the belief many players had regarding the geolocation/ethnicity of whoever was in control of the characters players perceived to be farming, led to the notions of 'Chinese' and 'farmer' being used interchangeably in the meta-game (Yee 2014: 83–85). As a result, a persistent stereotype emerged, presuming that any farming player is necessarily Chinese, and that any Chinese player is necessarily a farmer. It has to be stressed separately, that the players have no reliable way of identifying a Chinese player, since the real-world ethnicity of the player in control of a character is not in any way visible (Yee 2014: 88) and the game activities a 'farmer' player is involved in is entirely similar to what other players do (Yee 2014: 86–87). As a result, in-game means of picking out supposedly Chinese players were invented. The strategy was based on the stereotype of the Chinese being unable to speak English. The moment a 'suspicious' player was spotted, a 'concerned citizen' would try to engage in conversation with them and then harass or attack those who were not fast enough to demonstrate their knowledge of the language (Yee 2014: 86–89). The 'logic' of such behaviour — however perverse and ridiculous — suggests that anyone who does not respond in English cannot speak the language, that whoever cannot speak the language is Chinese, and anyone who is Chinese is guilty of unfair or illicit practices.[135]

Since Blizzard Entertainment launched separate *World of Warcraft* servers in China, Chinese players became, arguably, less of an 'issue' for the English-speaking

---

[134] In this case, the colloquial term describing the process where in-game resources and currency are obtained by means of increased, sometimes mechanised productivity applied over prolonged periods of time.

[135] Resource gathering is not the only 'crime' commonly attributed to players from China. Many players appear to be convinced that *World of Warcraft* account theft is likewise performed by the Chinese.

community.[136] However, the attitude the European community has towards Russian players seems to follow precisely the same route. Perceived complete inability of the Russians to speak or understand English — 'In russian schools (from what I have heard) the kids were taught languages like german rather than english' (Nisaliyah, *World of Warcraft* community forum 2017) — shifts into accusations of illicit behaviour — 'Russians tend to cheat in every * competitive * sport on the planet (see Olympics, WoW arena, LoL, CS:Go, etc)' (xindralol, MMO-Champion 2016); 'they're mostly exploiters and hackers' (Keyboard Champion, MMO-Champion 2014) — reinforced by the obligatory notions of Russian players being 'Fueled by vodka!' (Hashtronaut, MMO-Champion 2017) and playing the game even though 'by mid day Paris time most of them are drunk' (Cempa, MMO-Champion 2016). Just like the Chinese before them, the Russians engage with the very same gameplay operations and possibilities as everyone else, yet unlike everyone else their effort is delegitimised by means of an arbitrary pretext that may or may not be loosely based on real-world stereotypes and conventions.[137]

Speaking of stereotypes, we should pay separate attention to those most important for this study: Girard's stereotypes of persecution. A brief recap of those will show that at least two of three immediately meet the eye.

The second of the three stereotypes presumes that collective persecution picks out a minority whom it accuses of crimes that eliminate differences and by extension of causing catastrophic consequences. The first part of the stereotype applies insofar as the Russians are and the Chinese used to be a minority with regard to the English-speaking players that populate EU and US server localities. The second component of the stereotype also fits the situation: the Chinese and the Russians are accused of

---

[136] An imperfect categorisation like this may only be applied for the sake of expedience: indeed, not every player based in Europe speaks English and many non-European players speak the language very well.

[137] It is interesting to note that Russian players stereotypise European players too, referring to their opponents as 'bourgs' — a specifically Russian vulgarisation of the word 'bourgeois' used to imply unearned affluence and undeserved privilege.

eliminating the difference between fair and unfair play and in so doing of destroying the game's economy in the first case and compromising the casual PvP scene in the second.[138]

The third stereotype maintains that the persecuted minority is simultaneously accused of being different and not as different as they should be. This seems to apply too, because the central and primary point of these accusations is the fact that the Russians and the Chinese play on the same servers English-speaking users play.[139] Since they are in some important way very different from the non-Russians and the non-Chinese, they should not be allowed to.

What is no less interesting, however, is the divisive power of language that made the 'Chinese farmer' stereotype possible, and that makes 'drunk Russian hackers' an even better target since their Cyrillic in-game nametags make them reliably identifiable at a glance. We are approaching yet another mimetic anomaly here, the phenomenon that sees the targeted minority singled out by the manner in which they speak the language understandable to the majority or their own language that the majority does not understand. The mimetic totem — in Girard's somewhat unorthodox view, such a totem is not something the community is united *around*, but something that the community is united *against* (Girard 1987) — of this situation is the target's inability, actual or perceived, to communicate in English. This status of 'sacred divider' some players

---

[138] Whether or not Russian PvP players cheat and how often they cheat in comparison to non-Russians would be difficult to determine. I did not play in the RU zone, so I have no evidence from the other side of the conflict. The indirect evidence I do have, however insufficient, suggests that many Russian players may regularly play more than their opponents. 20% of my Russian survey respondents report raiding more than 12 a week. In the EN sample, only 10% report the same. In other words, it seems somewhat plausible, that the Russians may play slightly better, in average, on account of having trained themselves to.

[139] The Chinese no longer do but used to. The Russians have their own open-world servers, but instanced PvP servers are shared. Besides, the players from EU and RU language zones can be phased into each other's open world servers as well.

assign to language is not produced externally, rather than that, the idea is suggested by the game itself.

In the game there is simply no other way for players to make assumptions about each other. The person behind the character is both anonymous and invisible, which is a vital part of an online media experience (Suler 2004: 322). However racially prejudiced or ethnocentric a player may be in real life,[140] they are unable to work through their prejudice insofar as they have *no way of knowing* if the player behind the character is Asian, Black or White; East European or West European; Christian, Jewish or Muslim. Moreover, the most problematic part of such virtual experience is the lack of manifest distinctions between ostensibly irreconcilable parties: the Chinese and the Russians use the same character representations, engage with the same game mechanics and follow the same game rules as non-Chinese and non-Russian population. In the immediate context of the game, marginalised minorities are *undetectable* — unless linguistic differentiation is employed.

Writing on accents and language attitudes in mainstream videogames, Astrid Ensslin argues that one purpose of linguistic features being introduced into a video game narrative is 'the speedy formation of straightforward othering processes, which help define players' moral, social and cultural world pictures by creating clear-cut boundaries between friend and foe' (Ensslin 2011: 224). An astute observation of major importance, it is quite proximate to Girard's view on linguistic framing: 'The person with the accent, any accent, is always the person who is not from here. Language is the surest indicator of the being with.' (Girard 1986: 152). The same mode of differentiation seems to be reflected in the representation of the trolls in *World of Warcraft* that we have discussed earlier: it relies heavily on imitation of Afro-Caribbean accents and speech mannerisms (cf. Langer 2008: 97; Monson 2012: 62). The link between one particular ethnic minority and the ethically questionable fantasy race was produced by means of manifest linguistic differences. The Scottish accent the dwarves

[140] And, as we have earlier discussed, some degree of race-related bias may be implicitly stimulated by the game itself.

speak with and the Russian pronunciation of the draenei are likewise cases of linguistic connections being made, if less controversially.

Further to that, linguistics is responsible for what is, arguably, the most striking differentiation mechanic that sets the factions apart: the Horde and the Alliance *cannot communicate with each other*. Anything a member of the opposite faction types into the game chat is scrambled into illegible — if somewhat euphonious — gibberish. Feeding, rhetorically, into the fiction of perpetual conflict, the lack of shared language makes it mechanically impossible for the Horde and the Alliance to ever agree with each other. Most importantly, this game mechanic seems to condition a link between someone speaking, ostensibly, a different language and the speaker of different language being the enemy that has to be physically destroyed.

In other words, linguistic differentiation supports the game's conflictual fictions rhetorically and is enforced by the game mechanics. Seeing how easily in-game conflicts lend themselves to real-world antagonism we may be asking ourselves why the company behind *World of Warcraft* is so intent on keeping its Russian subscribers always within sight of its European community — in apparent disregard of ever increasing tensions that result in players on both sides complaining for years? Conceivably, it would have been easy to solve the issue by restricting the Russian playerbase to Russian regional PvP servers. At the very least, real-time transliteration of Cyrillic script into English should not have been much more difficult to implement than the real-time scrambling of in-game languages available for the Horde/Alliance interactions.[141]

Nevertheless, it seems somehow important for the company to nurture a virtual stereotype of the enemy who is both reliably detectable and always close at hand. Yet, while the thoughts this strategy may evoke are rather dark, we have to admit that even factions, however replete with mimetic patterns they may be, do not, in and of

---

[141] More difficult, to be sure, but not impossible.

themselves, constitute differences in the sense that would satisfy our framework. When factions are in relative equilibrium and their performance is sufficiently balanced, they are very close in terms of both proximity and possibilities. Which does indeed cause conflictual imitation observable in cross-faction PvP interactions and model-seeking behaviours that these interactions often entail. Speaking of player types, a clear-cut case where a strong link between factions and motivations exist is the case of a PvP-enabled server where the Horde/Alliance ratio is significantly unbalanced. To pursue their preferred playstyle with highest efficiency, some Killers, most Achievers and all Explorers would be inclined to choose the dominant faction. This is a good example of how differentiations of identity may instrumentally interfere with player motivations. However, the circumstances in which this differentiation applies are limited, particular, and impossible to transfer to any MMO that does not support open world PvP as *World of Warcraft* does.[142]

4.5 *World of Warcraft* endgame as mimetic crisis

In the course of the previous sections, we found that the three primary modes of differentiation in *World of Warcraft* do not constitute differences capable of affecting proximity. In other words, when everything else is similar, the possibilities of player characters that are of different gender and race and belong to different factions are equivalent. Consequently, we can define gender, race and faction as factors of diversity and not difference.

It seems to be helpful to elaborate on the meaning of diversity, which is a word this study uses for purposes much less political than its political gravitas may imply. In this investigation, the notion of diversity is understood in exactly the way Girard terms it: as

[142] 'As *World of Warcraft* used to do' would be a better choice of words. In 2018, the mechanics of open world PvP have changed, making player killing possible exclusively with their own consent.

ostensible variety that does not imply genuine difference. Rather than that, it serves to conceal similarity, or, more specifically, 'the opposition of the Same to the Same' (Girard 1976: 122). Diversity and difference, then, while not exactly unrelated to each other, represent two separate states which should not be confused. How could we distinguish between the two? Let us recall how proximity works.

As earlier discussed, external and internal mimesis differs by how the model and the subject are positioned within each other's spheres of possibilities. Once the two spheres of possibilities intersect, mimesis becomes internal, i.e. situated inside both intersecting areas. Difference is what keeps the model and subject separate. Diversity, in and of itself, does nothing of the kind. Difference externalises mimetic relationships. Diversity (unless accompanied by difference) has no bearing on mimesis and is of no practical relevance.

With MMOs, those perfect mimetic models, this state of affairs is overwhelmingly evident. Imagine two *World of Warcraft* player characters, say, two Rogues. They are of same gender and race, they look and sound the same, yet one's character level is 100 levels higher than the other's. The two characters, as we can see, are not at all diverse, but the difference between them is staggering: game progression possibilities available to the higher-level character are incomparably wider than those the lower player character has access to. The mimetic relationship between the two would be external, i.e. the lower level subject would imitate the higher-level model 'from a safe enough distance'.

Conversely, imagine two Rogues of different race and gender, whose level is identical. Clearly, they are diverse, yet the difference between them is, at least in practical terms, non-existent. Their spheres of possibility coincide, there is nothing available to one that is not accessible to the other. Their mimetic relationship will be internal, i.e. any imitation between the two is likely to be competitive and eventually antagonistic.

The section on player motivation to follow will take a closer look at how the mimetic conflict may proceed between diverse yet non-differentiated entities. Before we do that,

however, we must address the most obvious difference mentioned a paragraph earlier. Traditionally, the character level used to be the most reliable marker of where the character is positioned within the virtual world of a MMO. Almost everything else was dependent on it or secondary to it. In contemporary *World of Warcraft*, however, the factor of difference represented by character level was effectively removed. Most players reside in the state of perpetual 'endgame' where everyone's character is always the highest level available.

4.5.1 Conceptualising the endgame

> By my estimation, about 5 percent of my total life during the past year has gone into the *World of Warcraft*, perhaps 7.5 percent of my waking life. [. . .] During this same year, I watched the first two seasons of the narrative-rich, multisequential TV series *Lost* on DVD, forty-eight episodes, all in a row. That took about thirty-five hours total, about 8 percent of the amount of time I spent playing *World of Warcraft*. During the course of my life, I've read James Joyce's *Ulysses* three times, twice carefully. I estimate that took about six days of twenty-four-hour time, about eighteen full eight-hour working days, about 33 percent of the time I've spent playing *World of Warcraft*. (Rettberg 2008: 19)

The reason I used Scott Rettberg's tongue-in-cheek calculation above to introduce this section is not its ironic suggestion that some dedicated players may play relatively much more than they partake of any other entertainment or pleasure.[143] This is not a universal situation at all; there are players who play much less than that, and there are those who play a lot more. What makes the quote above genuinely illuminating is its juxtaposition of *World of Warcraft* against traditional entertainment media. While reading books and watching TV shows is a measurable, finite affair, playing *World of Warcraft* is, apparently, neither. While we cannot continue reading the book after it is over, and we

[143] Even though it is very likely that the time allocated for playing an online game will necessarily be subtracted from that available for other diversions for there is only so much free time an adult player has. Some evidence suggests just that: the majority of people playing *Everquest 2* spend much less hours a day watching TV and much fewer days a week reading a newspaper than the general population does (Williams et al. 2008).

are unlikely to be watching the film after the credits have rolled, something markedly different seems to be happening when we play MMOs.

What we owe this to is the so-called ‘endgame’, a state exclusive to MMO game environments. In formal terms, the endgame may be said to include the entirety of various game activities that are available once the player attains the highest character level available, ‘hits the level cap’, in gaming parlance. As soon as this level cap is reached, the player may no longer improve the abilities of their character by means of experience points awarded for playing. With no further levelling to be done, the tasks that were previously associated with it become explicitly obsolete: the reward is hardly more than a minuscule amount of game currency, a game item of no considerable value or an even less tangible gain of reputation. On the other hand, the content that used to be inaccessible at a lower level is unlocked. In other words, even though the game in its initial configuration is practically over, some different modality of interaction with the game enters the scene and keeps the players playing in a situation where readers would normally close the book and the film viewers would normally switch off their TV set.

For more than a decade, the endgame principle held true for *World of Warcraft*. A significant part of the game’s vast subscription base, in other words — millions of people — kept playing the game after the maximum level was reached, the central conflict of the backstory was, arguably, long resolved and the character’s in-game equipment was reasonably on par with their earlier accomplishments. The extent of how thought-provoking this state of affairs may be is reflected by the misplaced semantics of the word. A popular understanding of ‘endgame’ out of its online gaming context is not really that far off from what the chess term ‘endspiel’ describes — the situation on the board in which the game is expected to end very soon; there are merely a few moves left to make. It seems possible that for some players *World of Warcraft* endgame may have much in common with this state of suspended anxiety: the game should have ended, yet it does not end, so it is played more in order to reach the climax that gets ever delayed (cf. Bartle 2004: 441). A ludic *coitus interruptus,* in a way. It is, perhaps, to address this incongruity that *Wildstar,* a MMO often lauded for its innovative

approach and attention to small detail, preferred the term ‘elder game’,[144] in other words, the more ‘mature’ game that is played by the ‘grown-up’ player/character, as opposed to the term ‘endgame’, that connotes the game that either has ended already or very shortly will (cf. Bartle 2016a: 123).

This genre-specific discrepancy is exacerbated by the fact that most MMOs have various markers that point to them being a finite experience (Brown 2011: 76). The character reaching the highest level is certainly one of such markers, yet it appears that no more than a fraction of players stops playing after having accomplished that. Moreover, the opposite seems to be true, which is to say that for most players the intensity of the player’s involvement with the game increases. This may be the nature of the beast: MMOs are a service, not a one-time experience. They are meant to be played for a long period, which reflects the commercial interests of a service provider, as well as the player’s desire to keep making use of the virtual persona that they have invested in within a virtual world of their preference. In other words, the players would feel compelled to keep doing something with their newly acquired highest level character, which may, in some cases, result in very peculiar design decisions and player choices. A good example of such design is the mechanic of ‘true reincarnation’ in *Dungeons and Dragons Online* (Turbine 2006). When the player decides to true reincarnate, their maximum level character is destroyed, which is to say, reset to the very first level. Subsequently, a reincarnated character will take a lot more time and effort to level anew due to the twofold increase of experience points required to cap. After this character ‘incarnation’ is level-capped and subsequently deleted, the experience needed to level is multiplied by four. Counterproductive in each and every regard imaginable, this practice exists and suggests that it may be a non-trivial, sometimes challenging task to provide novelty content in line with the tempo at which players consume the content already available. More importantly though, it shows the customer’s strong inclination to keep playing, which may be — inasmuch as increased effort/delay is not a deterrent — *developing progressively with time*.

---

[144] Which Richard Bartle and Chris Crawford seem to prefer as well.

In response to that demand, as well as to retain the game's subscription base, the lifetime of *World of Warcraft* was regularly prolonged by means of a succession of content expansions. As of 2018, six such expansions were released. Invariably, every expansion included additional backstory material, which is to say a new 'existential threat' for the players to deal with. In each case an entirely new playable zone was added to the game world, together with an assortment of quests, challenges and tasks to be completed within it. Furthermore, since fulfilling these gameplay objectives resulted in experience points being awarded, each of the five expansions featured an incremental increase of the level cap. However, once the player attained that, the 'suspended' state of the endgame restarted anew. Accordingly, Douglas Brown's proposed definition of the endgame as 'the position in the game where the majority of the community is located, both within the game itself and within discussion of the game externally' (Brown 2011: 80) seems to hold true and signifies the transition to yet another mimetic phenomenon.

4.5.2 How the endgame affects differences

The privileged position of the endgame in the eyes of the designer as well as the players led to rapid devaluation of earlier content. The endgame, its group PvE segment in particular, was the content that every expansion seemed to have prioritised above anything, perforce neglecting the previous levelling experience. The entirety of the game that happened before the level cap was reached became a perfunctory period of transition required to join the endgame. Consequently, the general majority of the players were intensely focused on the endgame, as opposed to whatever it took them to get to that point. In effect, the players strived to maximise their level as soon as possible. From the mimetic standpoint, such urgency of player behaviour may be explained through visibility and exposure: a player's level is openly communicated by the game, all players would normally be aware of what level surrounding player characters have achieved. The more maximum level characters the player would see, the

more desirable the coveted metric would become. Getting to level 120[145] is not the most pressing goal in and of itself, the desire that is most abiding is to be like another player who is level 120, or at least not much lower than them.

The company responded to this demand by gradual streamlining of the pre-endgame gameplay. The overall intensity of game challenge was lowered, experience points gain was increased, the game's GUI was optimised to include quest tracking assists. The third content expansion, *Wrath of the Lich King* (Blizzard Entertainment 2008) introduced a set of special 'heirloom' items whose practical functionality grew together with the character level of the player wearing them and provided even bigger increase to the experience gain. As a result, the time it took an average player to reach the level cap had plummeted.

The gradual obliteration of *World of Warcraft* levelling gameplay is especially striking when viewed in retrospect. In 2005, when the level cap was set at 60, Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell and Moore found that 'the average Level 60 character has an accumulated play time of 15.5 days—a total of 47 8-hour workdays, or roughly 2 full months of workdays' (Ducheneaut, Yee Nickell & Moore 2006a: 288–289). If a player logged on for 2–3 hours a night, as many players do, it took them around 5 to 8 months to reach level 60.[146] In recent years, players quote 20 hours to reach level 60 and 50-70 hours to level cap at 110 (Kazooie, *World of Warcraft* community forums, 2018), some quote reaching level 90 in 23 hours playtime (Flufflepuff, *World of Warcraft* community forums, 2017), or taking 30-40 hours to reach level 100 (Aarna, *World of Warcraft* community forums, 2017). For level 60, this implies a 18–20x decrease of online time required. In 2005, only about 15% of the players were of maximum character level possible (Ducheneaut, Yee Nickell & Moore 2006a: 289). The other 85% of the players, therefore, had characters of a lower level, anywhere in between level 1 and level 59, to

[145] The current level cap as of late 2018.

[146] This is consistent with my personal observations and seems to be a general consensus in forum threads dedicated to the issue, e.g., "How long did it take to level in WoW vanilla?" (MMO-champion.com)

be precise. In 2018, with the average player reaching level 60 20x times faster, there ought to be a lot more players at the current level cap of 120.

With character level being, as we have earlier observed, the primary decisive difference between player characters in the game, the avalanche proliferation of maximum level characters led to dramatic decrease of differentiation in *World of Warcraft* community. As was discussed earlier, character gender, race and faction had no bearing on the possibilities of the player. Character level was the only characteristic that kept the players apart. Approached mimetically, *World of Warcraft* endgame abolished the only mode of differentiation that worked, thus setting the basis for the mimetic crisis:

> Because there is no real difference between the various modes of differentiation, there is in consequence no difference between the manner in which things fail to differ; the disappearance of natural differences can thus bring to mind the dissolution of regulations pertaining to the individual's proper place in society — that is, can instigate a sacrificial crisis. (Girard 1989: 56)[147]

From the mimetic standpoint, universal deterioration of distinctions is likely to result in undesirable consequences. In *World of Warcraft*, an extreme proportion of highest level participants placed the majority of the players within the same sphere of possibilities. This may have been a factor in decreasing customer satisfaction, which caused Blizzard Entertainment's recent financial misadventures.

Late in 2015, a year after the release of *Warlords of Draenor* (Blizzard Entertainment 2015) content expansion, the number of active player accounts in *World of Warcraft* went down to 5.6 million, the lowest value in almost a decade.[148] Some kind of steady decline was observable throughout the two expansions preceding the one in question.

---

[147] Girard makes this observation in regard of traditional cultures and the quote is much less reactionary than it may sound when presented out of context. In MMO circumstances it does apply: the mechanical restrictions there are on par with if not superior to any real-world cultural taboos.

[148] The figures were issued by Blizzard themselves (Activison Blizzard 2015). It is interesting to note, that these were the last data on subscription numbers to be officially disclosed by the company.

Understandably, subscriber numbers have soared with the release of *Cataclysm* (Blizzard Entertainment 2011) and *Mists of Pandaria* (Blizzard Entertainment 2012). Shortly thereafter, this initial burst of player activity has gradually — and consistently — waned, with the numbers in the end of the expansion considerably lower than they were at its start.[149] But having said that, never before did the numbers plummet as dramatically as they did in 2015, when *Warlords of Draenor* content expansion was, supposedly, at its zenith.

There is very little doubt that the reasons of why this had happened were many and various. The competition may have been growing, the preferences of the audience may have changed together with the audience itself, some design decisions were taken that the audience did not quite like and so forth. But whatever be the case, the issue remains outstanding: what used to be the most successful massively multiplayer game, the game whose subscriptions peaked at 12 million people, has somehow lost nearly two thirds of its players. According to the source above, subscriber numbers showed a steady 12 000 000 from October 2010 to February 2011. If nothing else, the very tectonics of these developments should give us pause.

The reason why a significant number of players were no longer satisfied may be described as insufficient motivation to keep playing *World of Warcraft* endgame. The endgame is the stage when subscribers leave; besides, the reason most often quoted on *World of Warcraft* community forums was lack of content, in other words, lack of things a player can occupy themselves with. However, some players took the issue further:

> People complain about content drought, but nobody has done everything there is to do. If you think you have, consider the following list, and if you think you are close to that, have you done it on all classes and 50 characters total that are allowed on your account?

---

[149] Based on subscriber numbers revealed by the company, mmo-champion.com reports the global playerbase of 10 000 000 in September 2012, when Mists of Pandaria was released and that of only 6 800 000 in June 2014 when the expansion was well underway: see “WoW Down to 5.5 Million Subscribers” (MMO-champion.com)

> Gotten to level 100
> Have full Mythic gear for all specs (if they require different gear)
> Have all mounts, pets, and toys
> Are Exalted with every faction in the game (excluding cases where you have to choose of course)
> Have earned every achievement point that was possible for you to earn from the point you character was created (some of them are impossible to get now) -- which also implies a lot of other activities were accomplished like exploring, buying certain items, and completing certain tasks, pretty much everything else there is to do
> Have the maximum amount of all currency types
> Have the highest rating in the Arena and RBGs
>
> I didn't think so. You couldn't do all those things even you played 24 hours a day, unless you've been doing so every day since the game launched 10 years ago.
>
> Every time you log in, you have to decide how you are going to spend your time. All of your choices throughout the life of your character add up to a unique (maybe not perfectly unique) experience for you and a distinct configuration for your character. I would be interested for Blizzard to comment on *whether there are any 2 characters who are exactly the same* on paper in regards to how far along they are on that list up there. And have the same xmog gear on, and all the other little things. I'm guessing that even with 5 million players, and even when there were 12 million, *no two were exactly the same*. (Leafowitz, *World of Warcraft* community forums 2015, emphasis added)

Without reading too much into the player's commentary, it seems that the player intuits the importance of difference: they stress that no two characters are or may possibly be the same and list the details in which player characters are supposed to be distinct. Having done 'everything there is to do' (or not having done something, or enough) constitutes the degree in which the player differs from someone or is similar to them. In line with this player-proposed goal we can rephrase 'lack of content to engage with' as 'lack of ways in which player characters may achieve meaningful differentiation from each other' and we probably would not be too wrong, considering that one of the innovations the unfortunate *Warlords of Draenor* content expansion brought forth may be described as an unprecedented attack on these differences.

In late 2014, when *Warlords of Draenor* was released, character levelling became a paid service that could be purchased from Blizzard Entertainment directly. When

activated, this ‘Character Boost’ brought the character to level 90 immediately, saving the player the need to invest the 50–70 hours of gametime that was required before. At £40 this ‘speed levelling’ was the most expensive paid service Blizzard Entertainment ever offered — compare to the £9.99 monthly subscription fee or £19 the player has to pay in order to move their character to a different server — but every purchased copy of the content expansion itself included one free character boost token. In other words, the moment the player started playing the new content expansion they could immediately bring a character extremely close to the level cap, even if they did not play the game before and had no existent characters of any level. For regular players, who were almost certain to have one or more characters at the previous level cap, this meant they were able to add another character to their pool of maximum level characters without having to spend the time levelling them.

To put it simply, this led to even more maximum level characters, even fewer characters who did not reach the cap yet and therefore even closer proximity between players. The first distinction the player refers to in the forum quote above was no longer meaningful, most players were level 100, character level was no longer something special. With regard to the rest of the endgame occupations, we should make note of two things. Firstly, they all seem to fall squarely within the Achiever quadrant of interests. Secondly, the goal state connected to each of these goals is explicitly quantifiable: player achievements are represented by a number of ‘achievement points’, Arena rating is a number which corresponds, in turn, to the number of PvP victories and so forth. As was the case with character level before, players are different insofar as the numbers that represent their in-game career are not the same. If everyone’s numbers are the same — we are involved in a virtual representation of mimetic crisis.

In Gordon Calleja’s astute observation ‘If a game rewards numerically quantifiable achievements, motivation and effort will tend to be directed toward increasing these numbers and thus toward one’s standing vis-à-vis other agents in the game world, whether human or not’ (Calleja 2011a: 59). This phenomenological perspective corresponds very well to the situation of mimetic crisis that *World of Warcraft* endgame

may, in some sense, be a virtual variation of. With most endgame activities being readily quantifiable, the objects of desire are ubiquitous and validated through someone else's possession of them. From the mimetic standpoint, the agent that the player is interested in the most is the other player whose numbers are higher than theirs (by implication, their model). The next steps in our search for a model, therefore, is first to define the object of desire — the most important number in the context of *World of Warcraft* endgame.

4.6 Objects and models in *World of Warcraft* endgame

Since its implementation in 2009[150] and as of this writing, the metric of 'item level' is, arguably, the most important parameter in *World of Warcraft* endgame. It represents the sum of numerical values correspondent to gear pieces (weapons, armour and jewellery) the player character has equipped. Just like character level, item level is directly related to the overall ability of the player: the higher the number — the more powerful the character. However, while character level correlates to the character's 'innate' ability which grows in a steady, predictable manner, item level stands for parameters defined not by what the character is, but by what kind of valuable equipment the player has obtained. The perceived value of the two attributes is dramatically different: a capped character level is something to be reasonably expected from any player who has been playing the game, particularly with the levelling process being constantly streamlined by the designers. In other words, it is always fairly safe to assume that most players who keep playing will get to the level cap sooner rather than or later (cf. Karlsen 2011: 197). A high item level number, on the other hand, is a marker of excellence, an indicator of accomplishment, competence and prior experience (cf. Malone 2009: 305). Unlike character level, item level is incomparably more difficult to acquire, both because the

[150] The metric was always present, allegedly, yet the number used to be hidden from the players. In 2009 it was made visible and the new respective number was added to the player statistics interface.

items are relatively scarce, and the process of their acquisition is, in several aspects, complicated.

The best items, which is to say those that score the highest on the item level numerical scale are almost invariably obtained by fighting increasingly powerful computer-controlled opponents, commonly referred to as 'bosses'. Of those, getting the most desirable, 'epic'[151] items requires the player to take part in lengthy, complex encounters that require a large group of player[152] characters (referred to as a 'raid) to resolve. However, even if the group was successfully assembled and the encounter was conquered, item level improvement is not guaranteed. Defeating the raid boss produces a limited[153] number of items randomly picked from the 'loot table'[154] of the encounter. This means that the opportunity to acquire the item is always subject to randomness: the item that the player wants may not have been the one that 'dropped'[155] and even if the needed item does drop, it may have dropped for someone else in the group. The factor of contingency which replaces the fixed rewards schedule of the levelling process with intermittent, unpredictable rewards schedule of the endgame is the key point of raiding as well as, arguably, one of its main attractions (cf. Karlsen 2011: 197; Nardi 2010: 40).

In and of itself, raiding is the quintessential aspect of MMO player versus environment experience. The centrality of raiding is so undebatable, that T.L. Taylor describes it as 'the only real option left for endgame players' (Taylor 2006: 41) and although she

---

[151] One of the most iconic concepts since *World of Warcraft*'s inception: epic items were colour-coded as purple and were both exceptionally powerful and very difficult to acquire.

[152] In different periods, the number was 40, 10, 25 and 20 players (which is current at the time of this writing)

[153] 4-5 items per a group of 20 players is a current guideline number.

[154] A large pre-set list of possible items that defeating a boss may produce, from which several items were randomly picked by the game.

[155] A common colloquial description of the process by which MMO items are acquired: the player kills the boss, the boss 'drops' whatever he or she was carrying with them.

writes about *Everquest*, there is no shortage of research that suggests that the situation looks much the same in *World of Warcraft* endgame (e.g., Malone 2009; Paul & Philpott 2011). In the latter case, the reason is very easy to comprehend: participation in raiding is the most efficient way to influence the most meaningful number that is still possible to increase and, as a consequence, the explicit goal of playing the game at this stage.[156]

If we accept that the explicit goal for playing the endgame is to increase the item level[157] — just like increasing the character level is the explicit goal of playing the game before the cap — our natural next step should be to examine the implicit incentives that are also in play. The importance of item acquisition is very well-established (Chen 2009; Malone 2009; Nardi 2010; Paul 2012) and supported by my modest survey sample. Most respondents (66% EU, 79% RU) report being either tremendously rewarded or very rewarded by getting new items. What we are more interested in, however, is *why* the players like epic items so much.

4.6.1 Desirable objects as factor of mimetic rivalry

Apart from providing direct numerical gain, equipment pieces the endgame players seek to obtain are an important factor of the character's mechanical efficiency as well as the cornerstone of the player's prestige. Unlike Girard's desirable objects whose practical value may be of no direct relevance, epic items in *World of Warcraft* improve the character's baseline mechanical characteristics. In other words, it would be correct to say the player's possibilities depend on how well-equipped their character is. However,

---

[156] This is not meant to downplay the importance of facing gameplay challenge as an organised group — certainly a major incentive for many players (Paul 2012: 125-126).

[157] In some sense, the structure of endgame gameplay is an embodiment of that. There are different item level ranges that correspond to different difficulty modes. A certain item level is both required to unlock a difficulty mode and awarded in process of playing it. In other words, the player's engagement with endgame content is represented by and actualised through fluctuations of their item level.

this dependency is both non-linear and uncertain: even a surface examination of worldwide player performance logs shows that item level and player performance do not necessarily or always correlate. In my personal raiding experience, there were countless times that I saw a lower item level player perform a lot better than someone whose item level was much higher. To put it bluntly, an exceptionally well-geared character may be controlled by an extremely underperforming player who happened to procure valuable equipment through 'boosting' or 'carrying' (discussed further in 4.8.4). Moreover, the frequency and stability of such occurrence suggests that many players are not necessarily invested in the possible performance increase using the items may produce. What they seem to be interested in, instead, is the high degree of prestige the ownership of these items endows them with:

> … playing WoW is therefore like playing pinball in a crowded arcade, where spectators gather around the machine to observe the best players. For instance, densely populated cities in WoW (e.g. Ironforge) serve as a meeting point where players can showcase their latest accomplishments. In fact, it is not uncommon to see level 60 avatars, wearing powerful sets of armor and weapons, simply left standing by their players in front of the auction house for everyone to admire! (Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell & Moore 20016a: 413; see also Castronova 2007: 143)

This curious player behaviour is something I numerously witnessed and participated in myself: it is somewhat customary with overachieving players to flaunt the markers of their status in public — be it a rare piece of character gear, an exotic mount or a respectable title. And since in a MMO of *World of Warcraft* scale the audience is always close at hand, the others are only too happy to accept the model and initiate the process of reflexive imitation. Specifically, having been exposed to a high-profile player character, the other players pick out the objective markers that make the model's status obvious to them — for instance, armour and weapons — and set themselves a goal of acquiring the same armour and weapons. It seems particularly apt here to reiterate the findings of the recent mirror neurons study referred to earlier: 'MNS activation may affect the observer's own motivational system, increasing the desirability of objects pursued by others' (Lebreton et. al. 2012: 7146). It is not currently known how mirror neurons function when the objects, the others, and, to an

extent, the observer are virtual, yet it is at the very least plausible that significant interest towards the items thus exhibited may emerge. And since the items of such value can only be acquired through raiding, the subject emulates the model's inferred desire to raid and seeks to participate in raiding.

Mechanically, the relationship between item level and raiding is circular. As Brown very aptly points out, 'The main reason to raid is to receive items that make characters more effective at raiding' (Brown 2011: 86). More specifically, different 'tiers' of item level accomplishment serve as checkpoints that 'unlock' various levels of raid content difficulty. For most raid difficulties, this practical gameplay consequence is not enforced by software limitations, but very stringently regulated by the players. In 2016, the consensus among the players who raided at the highest difficulty Mythic tier was that an item level of at least 710 is absolutely necessary for a group to have any chance to succeed. In consequence, a player seeking a spot in a raid team was very likely to be required to show an item level of 715 or even 720 to be accepted. This throws some light on how important the metric is as well as underscores the potentially restrictive nature of this mechanic.

With character levelling being consistently simplified and compressed, and the resulting surplus of maximum level characters in *World of Warcraft*, the endgame was, in some sense, overpopulated. Raid content, however, remained inaccessible for many newly-capped players who were short of item level as well as lacked player competence and social connections that would let them join a group of regularly raiding players. Accordingly, and as a consequence of what Brown argues to be the company's customer retention strategy (Brown 2011: 82–83) the endgame had to be streamlined and simplified as well. In late 2011, a new approach to raiding was introduced through the implementation of the 'raid finder' tool. The raid finder, also known as the LFR difficulty[158], was an automatic matchmaking system which assembled groups of 25

[158] An abbreviation of 'looking for raid'.

people from the pool of random players who checked themselves in as willing to raid.[159] Importantly, the difficulty of the raid this randomly assembled team had to engage with was a lot lower than that either non-random raid tier had to offer. The gear that dropped therein was formally epic, but significantly less valuable compared to the items the other raid difficulties gave access to.

In spite of 'LFR epics' being less valuable, the raid was fully available to the vast majority of maximum level players, regardless of what their competence, equipment quality or social connections were. Predictably, the number of epic-geared players increased and the differences between the players became even more scarce. There used to be a small proportion of maximum level characters and now the majority of characters were level-capped. Only a tiny minority of player characters used to have epic items, and now almost everyone had some. The first circumstance put the majority of the players in close proximity, the second circumstance increased the visibility of desirable objects. The more desirable objects are in constant circulation, the more players would acknowledge their desirability — a mimetic dependency that probably got the best out of Jill Walker Rettberg, as she recalls:

> For instance, when I saw that a friend just a level above me had a wonderful new axe, I asked her where she got it. She described the quest chain she had completed to earn it, and I had a new goal: copy her quest to achieve the same axe. Not only were the challenges in the quest chain identical for me as they had been for my friend, the reward was literally the same item, with exactly the same properties and appearance. (J.W. Rettberg 2008: 180)

The incident above is an excellent example of mimetic desire: Rettberg sees an object in possession of her friend, infers that the acquisition of this object is desirable and seeks to replicate the state of being in possession of the object. The transaction between the researcher and her friend was not conflictual, which foregrounds the fact that the object in question was as a fixed reward and therefore existed in unlimited supply. Consequently, Rettberg's friend did not mind her acquiring the same weapon she had.

---

[159] This function is the legacy of and in many aspects analogous to 'dungeon finder' — a matchmaking system that put together groups of 5 people who wanted to do dungeons, which is to say much smaller, much easier raids with less valuable loot.

However, where more prestigious items were concerned, the increased exposure that resulted from making raiding accessible for most players was likely to tap into more competitive, selfish attitudes. In particular, it became customary for a great number of players to describe the factor of randomness as 'not fair' and referring to items acquired by other players as 'undeserved':

> I have seen both the best and the worst from LFR. I understand it is a gearing up process, however, at least half the raid in LFR doesnt grasp this concept. They dont view it as a gearing up process, but rather as a way to gain quick easy epics. I have watched people get locked out of a boss on purpose, stand there in fire zones doing nothing, get debuffs and not move killing multiple people, and basically auto attack for most of the boss fight. These people still will get a chance at the loot rolls and still will get carried by the group. This very evening I inspected a player who was almost full LFR epics with not a single piece enchanted, gemmed, or reforged stand there and do enough DPS to beat the healers. This is beyond sad. Please put in place more strict gating, iLvL rules, etc to at least try and keep these people from simply being parasites within the raid groups. (Ezakuugorg, *World of Warcraft* community forums 2012)

If we consider the factor of randomness, we will see a pattern resemblant of Girard's magical thought (see 2.1.5 of this thesis): whenever an 'undeserving' player gets randomly assigned an item, some other players seem to think that this purely contingent event is wrong and may, or perhaps even should be corrected by social intervention. The others implicitly connect the notion of 'undeserved loot' to the optimisation of levelling process as well as instant character boosts, thus painting a very convincing picture of conflictual lack of differences:

> In every game ever you go from CAVE A to CAVE B to CAVE C and get better along the way. Blizzard said "Sod that!" and made everyone into the hero that can go to straight to CAVE C. The problem is - You are not prepared for CAVE C which results in you failing in CAVE C and blizzard turning around and saying "Oh noes ! You failed in CAVE C ? Let us adjust it for you / Give you more undeserved loot." Epics are not epic anymore. Every idiotic yahoo is geared up in full epics and they never saw CAVE A or CAVE B. (Hellmans, *World of Warcraft* community forums 2013)

The notion of some players being more deserving of items which the game distributes randomly is exceedingly common in *World of Warcraft*, perhaps since the second

content expansion and certainly up to the the time of this writing. More specifically and at its core, some players do not want the other players to have the items that they themselves either have or want to have. The situation is consistent with the mimetic model-obstacle relationship (see 2.1.3 of this thesis): the model pinpoints the object, in this case the highly prestigious item, to its subject, in this case the other player, and then forbids the acquisition: the other player 'does not deserve it'.

This apparent rivalry over desirable objects is not unexpected because it is, mechanically, an intrinsic factor of item acquisition. Since most valuable objects are in relatively short supply and distributed randomly, someone will get an item, and a larger number of people will not. The company's earlier attempts to make epics slightly more available were fraught with controversy and led to numerous outbursts such as the infamous 'welfare epics' incident which Chris Paul gives a detailed account of (Paul 2012: 116–130). This wide-scale confrontation took place in 2007 and was caused by how Blizzard's lead content designer Jeff Kaplan described epic items achievable by participation in instanced PvP. Unlike most PvE epics, PvP epics are not acquired randomly, but are a guaranteed reward for a large number of PvP matches completed. However, when Kaplan referred to those items as 'welfare epics', the game's PvP community took an issue, seeing that as a not-so-subtle insinuation of PvP players' inferiority to PvE raiders. In response, some PvPers argued that they were, on the contrary, superior to the raiders, because PvP gameplay is more challenging and time consuming (Paul 2012: 122–125). The backlash from the PvE raiders foregrounded two issues: the 'unearned' PvP epics are diluting the status granted by 'deserved' PvE ones, and secondly, PvE gameplay is more challenging because it requires a superior degree of group coordination (Paul 2012: 122–126).

It is especially interesting to note that the two groups of players in conflict seem to borrow their argument from each other: raiding is commonly stereotyped as extremely time consuming and PvP matches stereotypically correspond to increased need for teamwork. In terms of the mimetic theory such peculiarity suggests symmetrical mediation (see 2.1.4 of this thesis), a kind of relationship aristocracy and bourgeoisie

may have: the former want to be wealthy and the latter desire to be noble (Girard 1976: 121–125). It is difficult, if not impossible, to say if *World of Warcraft* PvP gameplay is more complex than its PvE gameplay — those are two very different modalities, either of which could be easy or difficult on a case to case basis. However, since both PvP and PvE can be extremely challenging and therefore have its champions and celebrities, it is very plausible that either camp has a reason to be jealous of their opponent. In fact, this seems to be the underlying idea of the conflict: in Paul's account, the significant part of the issue from the raiders' standpoint is that PvP epics do not look sufficiently different from theirs. (Paul 2012: 125). Implicitly, the raiders accuse the PvP players of trying to copy them by wearing similarly looking regalia, in other words — of being jealous, which seems to bring to life Girard's observation that 'in double mediation it is not that one wants the object but that one does not want to see it in someone else's hands' (Girard 1976: 102).

As of this writing, Kaplan's turn of phrase is still used by the players — in contexts, different from PvE and PvP gameplay but with the same distinct connotation: 'I swear the amount of welfare epics and catch-up mechanics are getting more ridiculous by the day. Some dude just looted 385 plate gloves[160] in a HEROIC DUNGEON' (Amtharius, *World of Warcraft* community forums 2018). A degree of mutual antagonism between PvP and PvE players still seems to exist. I asked my raider respondents if they thought the attitude of PvP players towards them was positive, negative or neutral, to which some respondents (37% EN, 15% RU) replied that they felt the attitude was negative. Only a small minority of respondents (5% EN, 7% RU) thought that PvP players liked them. Respondents filtered by raiding on mythic difficulty (currently the highest), show stronger inclination to think that some negativity exists — 41% EN, 18% RU.

[160] Note how the item level of 385 is used as the universally recognisable denomination of value; after the LFR difficulty was introduced, epic items were no longer special because most players had some. The item level of the item becomes the most reliable sign of its value because it indicates what raid difficulty it was obtained at and therefore communicates the wearer's prestige.

Symmetrical mediation between two large communities is, in and of itself a sign of increased proximity between the members of these communities which is, in turn, a characteristic consequence of the mimetic crisis. However, the phenomenon of rivalry over desirable objects is not restricted to server-wide interactions — the same competitive relationships complicated by formally magical thought are present in closed player communities, the so-called raiding guilds. In these communities, randomness of gear distribution is especially detested; prior to late 2018 guild groups opted for the recently retired ‘master looter’ mechanic which restricted the access to the pool of randomly generated items to a single player the group has chosen. Acting as an intermediary, this player then could transfer the item in question to a group member of their choice. The method is fundamentally identical to that of group loot, but the competitive element of randomly generated numbers is substituted for arbitrary, controlled arrangements.

4.6.2 Intra-communal regulations and reemergence of conflict

These kinds of arrangements — fundamentally a way to correct randomness on the social level — are an important aspect of MMO culture (cf. Nardi 2010: 73–75) and may be actualised by the group leader’s unilateral decision (Silverman & Simon 2009: 365–366) through ‘redeeming’ the items with points accumulated by the player’s participation in raids previously completed (Malone 2009: 302–305; Karlsen 2011: 202–203) or, in more recent years, by the decision of the guild-elected ‘loot council’. Arguably, the least precarious approach to redistribution, the latter method selects the recipient of the item by vote of several respected members of the group. The loot council I took part in personally, was a group of four people, one of them with a ‘tiebreaker’ vote. It is interesting to note, that some kind of balance in councillor attitudes was achieved. Firstly, there was a ‘utilitarian’ councillor, who preferred to

invest the best pieces of gear, exclusively, into highest performance players.[161] Secondly, there was an 'egalitarian' voter who cared the most about the loot being uniformly and equitably distributed. Thirdly, there was a 'humanitarian' councillor who liked to vote for giving the item to someone who had less powerful gear than the rest of the group. Finally, the tiebreaker voter was profoundly neutral and added his vote to whichever side he found most convincing in each particular case.

As a kind of emergent gameplay in its own right, the players took care to set up a loot distribution system that seemed to be relatively robust because it incorporated three distinct, if not antagonistic raider attitudes that were, to some extent, manifest in the other members of the group. Specifically, the utilitarian always tried to overgear the top 5 players in order to compensate for the underperformance of the other 15 on whom valuable items would have been 'wasted'. The egalitarian believed that 20 players whose item level is approximately the same make a more reliable unit than 5 players whose item level is a lot higher than that of the rest. The humanitarian argued that mistreating the weaker members of the team is unfair and that they deserve to be cheered up and inspired, rather than sidelined. The council discussions took part in a restricted voice communications channel, the rest of the raid did not know what the votes were, yet each of the three councillors had his supporters within the guild.

The fact that three very different mindsets could coexist in the same community suggests that different approaches to item distribution may correlate to different player types.[162] In this case, the raiders belonging to either type are likely to align themselves with the distribution approach that represents the interests of their type the best. As someone who played with each loot councillor described above for a long time, I can place them in Bartle's quadrants with a fair degree of accuracy: the utilitarian was an overt, outspoken Killer, the egalitarian was an Explorer of substantive variety, and the humanitarian was an accomplished, high profile Achiever. These correlations may not be immediately obvious but are explicable under player types theory. Killers are likely

---

[161] The distribution strategy commonly referred to as 'funneling'.

[162] Insofar as player types are all-inclusive.

be interested in creating as much asymmetry as possible, because they, in principle, seem to enjoy asymmetrical outcomes — a Killer would rather see *anyone* at the top than everyone at level. Explorers may be interested in a balanced approach because it allows them to work through the content in an orderly, controlled manner — as opposed to the hectic, contingent and non-linear experience a Killer strategy would introduce. Finally, Achievers may be inclined to foreground competence over item level, implying that they *do not need* powerful gear to succeed and are therefore willing to share.

These possible links between player types and loot distribution approaches are largely conjectural and in need of further research. But what remains pertinent is the visibility of different player preferences being represented, which may lead us to believe that inter-player antagonism caused by random accrual of valuables would be sufficiently mitigated. The DKP or EPGP point-based systems that allow players to accumulate points which they then use to redeem an item of their choice may give us the same idea. However, these safeguards do not seem to be sufficiently reliable to offset the competition for desirable objects: this time — within an isolated group that comprises a limited number of people.

There is, first and foremost, competition for raid spots (cf. Paul & Philpott 2011: 191). An active roster of a hardcore raiding team almost always includes more players than the requisite 20 — with a number of 'bench warmers' ready to step in whenever the players from the regular roster is absent. The problem is that the regular players are normally present and backup players do not get much chance to raid, which may be more of an issue than it sounds because they are constantly challenged mimetically. Their position within the community ensures that the backup players are perpetually aware of the fact that someone is raiding, and they are not. Further to that, the divide is increased by the players' preferences that have to do with efficiency and performance — Bonnie Nardi's account of the consequences of raid team reduction is remarkably precise, illuminating and helpfully corrosive to what I earlier described as the Rousseauist attitude:

> Within Scarlet Raven, considerable disturbance ensued. Incipient guild cliques became more visible. Players advancing quickly wanted to play with others doing the same. They expressed irritation at slower or less skilled or geared players. The advanced players did not consider it their obligation to help the slower players, who were described in Scarlet Raven website posts as "less dedicated." The design change from 20- and 40-man raids with some latitude for error, and openings for nearly all who wanted to raid, to a 10-man raid requiring better performance and precise class composition, generated a situation in which the rich got richer and the poor got poorer. Skilled, geared players preferred raiding with skilled, geared players. They did so, getting better and better equipment. Others, squeezed out of the raids, progressed even more slowly. (Nardi 2010: 63–64)

The situation is not at all unique. Christopher Paul and Jeffrey Philpott describe the same competitive dynamics between two high-profile guilds working together (Paul & Philpott 2011: 190–191) and Krista-Lee Malone reports intra-communal confrontation caused by loot distribution decisions (Malone 2009: 305–313). My personal long-term observations as well as my survey responses lend some support to Malone's argument: only a minority of the respondents (36% EN, 18% RU) said that they felt no disappointment when their teammate received an item they themselves would have benefited from.[163] In a mimetic crisis which *World of Warcraft* endgame seems to reproduce, model-obstacle relationships — where someone is in possession of something they simultaneously exhibit and guard access to — intensify and become ubiquitous. With rivalries themselves being noted, the one thing that is left to do is to define 'the rich' in Nardi's 'the rich and the poor' dichotomy, in other words, to find who the models are.

[163] A huge variance across the two samples suggests that some responses are skewed or insincere. It is difficult to say why the players would want to misrepresent their attitudes to loot distribution, but it has to be saying that being too concerned with loot is socially undesirable and sometimes described, in a derogatory manner, as 'loot whoring'. It is also interesting to note, that the English-speaking sample often seemed to prioritise socially desirable responses, which might suggest that virtue-signaling may have been a stronger factor with them than it was with the Russian-speakers.

4.6.3 Mimetic models in *World of Warcraft* endgame

Having described the loot distribution controversies as possibly model-obstacle, we need to take a closer look at the parties of this mimetic conflict. 'These [distribution-related] differences', Malone incisively observes, 'came to be drawn along the lines of distinction between casual gamers and power gamers. The casual players accused the power gamers of elitism. The power gamers accused the casual gamers of coattail riding' (Malone 2009: 311). In other words, the 'casual gamers' wanted to have the same objects that 'power gamers' have, and the latter did not want to share these objects. This constitutes a straightforward model-obstacle relationship, uncovers the model that we were looking for, as well as brings into focus another vital dimension of MMO differentiation; the ever-present divide between 'power gamers' or 'hardcore gamers' and their opposite represented by the so-styled 'casual gamers'. It is interesting to note that power gaming is what the members of the community themselves evoke in conjunction with the endgame and its specific shortcomings:

> There are two basic kinds of game players; those for whom the most important aspect of the game is winning, and those for whom the most important aspect of the game is playing. For the former, the end-game is the destination; for the latter, the journey and not some final goal is the most important. . . . And so the MMORPG genre is stalled out, not because there is no more room for new, different, successful games, but because the powergamer oligarchy cannot imagine outside of their theme-park, linear progression, end-game, group-oriented, online-time-centric box. (Meleagar, MMORPG.com member blog 2009)

This somewhat unsympathetic attitude towards power gamers and their preferred modes of engagement with the game is what MMO researchers rather commonly observe. Along these very lines, T.L. Taylor points out that 'power gamers, while sharing the same world as their fellow players, seem to be at times too focused, too intent, too goal-oriented' (Taylor 2006: 71) and that 'power gamers play in ways we do not typically associate with fun and leisure' (Taylor 2006: 72). Indeed, a noticeable part of the power gamer stereotype within the player community, or the perception of 'problematic

gaming' in some more academical venues is formed by habitual juxtaposition of play and work in terms of how much time and effort either may take.

The aspect of increased time expenditure that a power gamer is supposed to spend playing seems to inform many players' as well as some scholars' view of hardcore gaming. In the context of the study at hand, this long-time tradition may be ill-advised for two reasons. Firstly, *World of Warcraft* players do not seem to be playing that much at all; a minority of my survey respondents (6% EN, 20% RU) reported playing more than 12 hours a week, and a significant proportion (55% EN, 40% RU) said they were playing 6 hours a week or even less than that. Secondly, while many hardcore gamers may play very long, their time expenditure is mimetically meaningless because this is, in most cases, something that is not visible to the other players. For the same reason, a versatile and apt definition of power gaming as 'a specific player subjectivity that values detailed system knowledge of how the game works, a rational-instrumental approach to play, and an intense commitment to the functional social organization of play' (Silverman and Simon 2009: 357) cannot satisfy us. It is easy to see how the three characteristics spelled out by Silverman and Simon are conducive to endgame playing: the detailed system knowledge may help the player in coping with the increased complexity of the game; the instrumental approach keeps the player focused on achieving specific endgame goals and the commitment to social organisation of play is simply a necessity — the endgame is exclusively group-oriented, it is impossible to play it alone. But while the characteristics of the model listed above are most certainly relevant, they do not designate the model as such *unless the factors of visibility and exposure are also present*.

To reiterate my proposed approach to player character identity under the condition of mimetic desire: the player views their virtual world neighbour as another player, perceived as an idea of an individual agent contextualised by a combination of manifest or inferable distinctions that constitute their virtual persona which is persistently validated by the game's shared social environment. Consequently, for a neighbour to become the model, the distinctions that designate them as such should be manifest or

inferable. In other words, it does not matter how long a hardcore gamer plays, or how committed they are to the game — unless their character clearly shows the visible markers of being a successful, accomplished raider, their status as a hardcore gamer will be, at the very least, inconsequential.

A successful hardcore raider as a preferred model type of *World of Warcraft* endgame may be, in some sense, originating from endgame raiding progression at its furthest extremity, a proto-model, if you will. The moment a new tier of raid content is released — either within a new content expansion or as a standalone update — a number of highest-profile raid groups enter an emergent raiding competition. The winning condition is simple: the group should be *the first in the world* to complete the current mythic difficulty raid. To put matters in perspective: in late 2014 it took Paragon (a hardcore progression guild) *twelve days to complete* the Highmaul raid at mythic difficulty and attain the 'World First' title. At the same time, it sometimes took a dedicated endgame guild *six months or more to even start* raiding the mythic. Regardless of this jarring discrepancy, raiding progression became an ethos of sorts, a set of aspirations and motivations that enabled a kind of elevated purposive collectivity characteristic of raiding at higher difficulties. Apart from the 'world top ten guilds', there were 'server first guilds', which represented raiding elite on a more local scale and seemed to resonate with Taylor's assessment of the attitudes some less successful players may have had:

> To admirers these top characters are seen as playing the very essence of the game — taking on the toughest mobs and conquering the exclusive zones. In these instances they can even symbolically act as proxies, standing in representationally for all the other players on the server. (Taylor 2006: 44)

This was the line of thought that informed a particularly important segment of my quantitative research — a set of questions related to how inspired the respondents were by hardcore progression raiders on different scales of proximity. Surprisingly, the findings did not support my initial assumptions: a significant number of respondents (66% EN, 50% RU) claimed to be uninspired by server first raid teams. The inspiration instilled by the top players in the world was only a slightly higher than that (56% EN,

44% RU). A satisfying discovery was a much lower degree of indifference reported in regard of the best performing players that played in the same team as the respondent who gave the answer: a minority (19% EN, 19% RU) claimed to be uninspired by teammates, and a significant part of the respondents (51% EN, 31% RU) said they were either ‘extremely’ or ‘very’ motivated.

In some sense, and in the context of *World of Warcraft*, the evidence did not support external mediation and supported internal mediation and the impact of proximity. In regard of external mediation, it is difficult to say if this kind of imitation genuinely does not exist or is underreported. Ironically, the majority of my respondents (59% EN, 74% RU) said they were ‘often’ or ‘always’ perusing the raid strategies offered by the world’s best players. The proportion of respondents who ‘often’ or ‘always’ referred to character-playing tactics prepared by the best players was likewise relatively high (66% EN, 70% RU). In other words, a case can be made that while some players refuse to imitate the model externally — by means of admiring it — they are eager to imitate the model literally — by carbon-copying its choices and gameplay decisions. Another circumstance that we may derive from these data is the increased importance of proximity in model-obstacle relationship. If no external mediation is present in *World of Warcraft* endgame, the mediation we are left with is of the internal kind, where possibilities of the subject and the model intersect (as model-obstacle complications of loot distribution suggest). In other words, while status of a hardcore gamer is sufficient as a model it is not sufficiently remote to serve as a safeguard from the mimetic crisis. Consequently, we have to look elsewhere for the distinctions that may still exist.

4.7 Character class as a factor of differentiation

Character gender, race and faction were discussed earlier, so character class is bound to be conspicuous by its absence. The reason this mode of differentiation was not addressed together with the other three is that it functions otherwise and, unlike the

factors of diversity examined above, does provide a degree of differentiation — both instrumentally and in terms of proximity and conflict. *World of Warcraft* character classes can be very loosely compared to real-world professions: each of the 12 vocations has a unique set of abilities and proficiencies, as well as associated with the intended role the character would occupy in collective gameplay activities. Character gender, race or faction do not delineate player character possibilities in any significant way, so character class is instrumentally separate from the other initially assigned parameters. In addition to that, another thing that sets character class apart is the impossibility to instantly change it.

Apart from the Character Boost mentioned earlier, *World of Warcraft* paid character services allow the player to change their character gender, race and faction — immediately and for a fee that is comparatively modest.[164] Character class, however, is impossible to modify like this. Mechanically, the stockpiled character equipment is often class-based and therefore quite likely to be incompatible with a different class the player decides to switch into. Rhetorically, this implies that class is something deeply essential to player-character identity, something they cannot renounce without ceasing to be that character and something that the player has to 'work for' rather than purchase for real-world money. In other words, a player cannot acquire a maximum level endgame character without practically playing the class of their choice for at least some time, which is not the case with gender, race and faction that are modifiable at will. In cases when *World of Warcraft* character identity is viewed in terms of player possibilities, or, borrowing Bartle's more nuanced term, the 'options to behave' the virtual persona grants the player (Bartle 2016a: 436), class becomes, in a sense, the central idea of the avatar; something the player gets to engage with — perchance to associate themselves with — the most.

Beside its role in player character identity formation, a crucial property of *World of Warcraft* character class is its increased importance for identity mimeticism. Regardless

[164] As of this writing Appearance Change costs £13, Race Change costs £19 and Faction change is priced at £27. All three services include the opportunity to change the character's gender.

of the class a beginner player decided to start with, their subsequent choice is sometimes instantiated by straightforward imitation. Madseason, a popular video blogger who focuses on classic *World of Warcraft* experience in the early 2000s recalls recalls the following:

> Once I saw a high-level paladin I knew then I had to play as much as possible, take it to that guys level, and I think it was this moment, really, when the game had me hooked. So I went around the city and started looking at all of the characters and the coolest ones I wrote down in a notepad since I wanted to make that class someday. (MadSeasonShow, Online video 2018)

The same mimetic aspect is likely to affect the choice of most players who joined the game recently; regardless of what class they decided to go with first, they will find themselves surrounded by, or interacting with classes yet unknown to them. In terms of mirror neuron imitation, some players are likely to develop increased interest towards character classes someone else is observed playing. From the mimetic standpoint, the classes that would appear most attractive are likely to be the ones represented by characters of higher level whose markers of distinction are most visible. I earlier suggested that to a *World of Warcraft* player another player character may appear as a portable collection of cues, signs and objective properties that may, together or separately, constitute an object of desire (see 4.1.2 of this thesis). Mechanically, as we will see, it is character class, and not race, gender or faction that is the vehicle of these signs and properties and, in some sense, the only formalisation of difference that is at least partially functional.

4.7.1 Raid mechanics and role separation

As the player's experience with the game increases they develop better understanding of class specifics and often acquire a preference for one playstyle over the others.[165] For

[165] Which often has to do with how the class feels mechanically: what its effective range of engagement is, how fast the abilities can be used, how many abilities are to be used constantly and so forth.

many players, their class becomes the central aspect of player character identity, which seems to safely coexist with an approach that views character classes in terms of their specific affordances. A forum thread titled ‘Does your WoW character reflect your personality?’ starts with the following explication:

> I’ve rolled a BElf Warlock (affliction spec) and a Tauren Druid (feral spec). I feel that the affliction ‘lock reflects my desire to do damage to enemies - I’m the kind to bear a grudge, I’ll admit - but also to stay out of the direct line of fire. The feral Druid is a mirror for my nature-loving side. Both feral and affliction were chosen on the basis that they're good for soloing - I’m a very independent person. My husband has rolled a BElf Paladin (protection spec) and a Tauren Warrior (also protection spec). These were chosen on the basis that he loves being a tank. This very much reflects real life - he'd far rather take damage on behalf of someone he cares about than for them to take it themselves. (Kamaaki, Wowhead.com forums 2008)

The other posts in this thread and many other forum threads concerning the subject reflect the same tendency: when *World of Warcraft* players describe their characters in terms of their character classes, they refer to what these character classes can do — deal damage, take damage, sustain themselves and the characters surrounding them and so forth. Class fantasy — being able to use magic — seems to take second place to class functionality — being able to deal damage from the range sufficient to avoid the enemy’s melee mechanics. Where character class is concerned, player choice is often instrumental rather than substantive, players choose a specific playstyle, particular role in group activities and, which is especially true for Achiever players, have certain expectations regarding performance efficiency (cf. Bartle 2016a: 468).

Because of some players’ concern for efficiency their choice of a character class is not guaranteed to remain stable. There is a peculiar paradox at the core of *World of Warcraft* game design: character classes have to be relatively similar to secure balanced collective gameplay and yet different enough to maintain sufficient variety of player experience. The task of keeping *player mechanics* in balance is complicated by the proliferation of new *raid mechanics* in every content expansion and therefore every following raid tier. To accommodate for these newly introduced mechanics, character classes are consistently adjusted and rebalanced, with some classes being made more

powerful and others less so (cf. Brown 2011: 80). In consequence, some character classes end up significantly stronger than the rest and thus become most desirable in the raiding context of the ongoing content expansion. These classes — commonly described as 'flavour of the month' — are often the ones that the players especially focused on the endgame tend to switch to, which leads, once again, to differentiations provided by class distinctions being gradually reduced.

The resulting state of affairs is reminiscent of the situation with the human race before its racial ability was adjusted (see 4.3.2 of this thesis). The expected superiority of some classes leads to even higher prominence of model-seeking and self-doubt than that manifest in connection to character races. The forum threads requesting advice on which class is the best to play in the current expansion are too many to be worth citing from, and threads in which players complain about their class being too weak, or someone else's class being too powerful are even more abundant. From the mimetic perspective, this means that a very significant number of players are persistently not satisfied with their own being — which here refers to their virtual player-character identity — and seeks a superior state of being with which to replace their own. In the context of *World of Warcraft* endgame this constitutes yet another sign of mimetic crisis; the initially effective differentiations provided by character class distinctions give way too many players choosing to play the same class in more or less the same way in order to be more efficient in raiding. The instability of primary class differences foregrounds the salience of another class-based distinction, the cornerstone MMO mechanic that divides the players within a group by their raid function which is to fill either of the three roles elaborated below.

The baseline mechanic of most raid encounters, the core factor on which the gameplay is based may be conceptualised as the damage/time dependency. The computer-controlled actor — the boss — deals damage to the human-controlled agent — the player character and in so doing reduces their health pool. It works towards the maximum amount of damage a player character may take before they cease to function. In some cases, the damage dealt by the boss is complemented by that produced by

hostile environment or additional computer-controlled entities. Simultaneously, the player — or rather a group of player characters — deals damage to the boss, therefore reducing its health pool, while avoiding the harmful effects caused by the environment. The encounter is timed: unless the players are able to complete the fight within a set allowance, the boss 'enrages' and becomes, effectively, impossible to defeat.

This damage/time dependency is perhaps the closest we can get to defining the raid's irreducible, groundwork component. In most raid scenarios, everything else is either built upon its basis or stems from it: the more damage the players take — the less damage is dealt to the boss — the longer it takes to bring the boss down — the more damage the boss would deal to the players within this extended timeframe. The winning strategy of most raid encounters[166] is — implicitly or explicitly — causing as much damage as possible as fast as possible while managing health pools and other expendable resources in play. Some raid encounters are specifically described as a 'dps [damage per second] race': the group either destroys the opponent in as little time as possible or fails the encounter. To support the most efficient damage/time ratio, different group roles are necessitated through another core gameplay mechanic the threat/aggro dependency.

Fundamentally, the boss tends to focus its attention on a single player character who will therefore receive the highest proportion of computer-controlled damage. This player character is the one the computer-controlled entity believes to be the most urgent threat to itself or otherwise the biggest obstacle for its goal of destroying the opponents. The damage the boss is capable of dealing is far beyond what most raiders can withstand so it becomes imperative that the boss never attacks the raider, or raiders, who are indeed most dangerous for it. Recall the damage/time dependency: the highest threat to the boss is caused by the player who does the most damage. If their character is eliminated the boss will receive less damage, more time will have to be expended to reduce its health pool and so forth. In order to prevent the boss from attacking the raider producing the greatest 'threat', the players employ a counter-mechanic known as

---

[166] Most of them, but not all of them, there are exceptions, however few.

'aggro', which involves the usage of special abilities that 'trick' the computer-controlled entity into thinking that the highest source of threat is not the players who do the most damage, but some other player. In other words, while threat represents how dangerous a player is to the boss, aggro refers to the impression, erroneous or otherwise, the boss has of who exactly is the highest threat player.

The fundamental gameplay of a *World of Warcraft* raid encounter, then, involves doing most damage to the boss in a shortest amount of time, while counterbalancing threat caused by doing damage with aggro that distracts the boss from whoever does it. In line with this strategy, the raiders within a group are divided into three roles that differ from each other functionally but serve the same purpose of sustaining the best damage/time ratio possible. The first role, commonly referred to as the DPS represents damage dealing raiders whose function is to maintain the highest damage/time ratio possible while taking as little damage as possible themselves. More specifically, the role requires the DPS players to use offensive character abilities in a rotation allowing continuous production of high damage as well as to avoid environmental damage/area of effect attacks.

The second group role, the tanks, refers to damage receiving raiders whose role is to keep the attention of the boss on themselves, so as to force the boss to attack them instead of the damage dealing classes. As the name suggests, these player characters are particularly robust and able to cope with much higher damage than any DPS class. More specifically, the tanks' function within a raid group is to use aggro-generating abilities in order to keep the attention of the boss on themselves as well as defensive abilities that enable them to survive periods of peak damage. Importantly, since the computer-controlled entity is supposed to be following a tank player character, there is also the responsibility of moving the boss around and positioning it in the way that would enable the DPS to attack with highest efficiency.

The third role corresponds to players that heal, prevent and mitigate the damage done to the tanks or damage dealers. More specifically, being a healer involves using healing abilities to replenish the health pool of the tanks and damage dealers being attacked

and/or predictive shielding abilities to absorb the incoming damage. At certain times, healers are required to use especially powerful abilities to counteract peak raid-wide damage or cleansing abilities that remove harmful damage over time effects. Finally, just like the two roles above, healers have to avoid environmental damage and area of effect attacks.

In most MMOs where raids or collective forms of collective instanced PvE are present, the groups are formed by players responsible for one of the three functionalities above (see also Brown and Krzywinska 2011: 39; Yee 2014: 18; cf. Bartle 2016a: 118). In *World of Warcraft*, the size of the raid group fluctuated, historically, from 40 to 25 to 20, then 10 and then up to 30. As of this writing, the size of the highest difficulty raid group is 20 players. From this baseline number an optimal role ratio is calculated: a raid group of 20 would normally include 2 tanks, 4 healers, and 14 damage dealers. This proportion reflects and is affected by both the role preferences that players in general seem to have and the mechanic demands of most group PvE scenarios. The distribution of my own survey responses is consistent with this: most players (59% EN, 68% RU) play damage dealers and the tanks are the least played role (13% EN, 11% RU). The two consequences of such pronounced predilection for doing damage is the normative composition of the raid group above, and the emergent aristocracy of scarcity whose possibilities are, in certain aspects, wider than those the rest of the players enjoy.

4.7.2 Raid roles as protected differences

The increased availability of raid content that followed the introduction of the LFR and, later on, additional recruitment systems that allowed the players to make normal and even heroic difficulty raid groups led to more teams being formed. Since every such team requires tanks and healers to proceed and the majority of the players tends to pick damage dealer classes or specialisations, there is a shortage of the former and a surplus of the latter. Because of that, a separate incentive was brought in: if a tank or a healer

agreed to join a randomly assembled group, the game would often reward them with currency and valuables. Regardless of this apparent disparity, this did not seem to cause much controversy with the players, the fact that some group roles are entitled to additional reward was sometimes linked to perceived importance of these roles. In a forum thread titled 'Tanks deserve better loot' a player posits:

> Its not that its more difficult...Tanking isn't hard. Its more stressful because the tank, by the nature of the game, takes on the stress of leading the group. The Healer takes on the stress of keeping the group alive. Neither are harder than doing good DPS while interrupting and staying out of bad stuff.
>
> So in the group, the heals and the Tank take on the leadership roles. When something goes wrong, the majority of the group will point to them.
>
> Humans as a whole are creatures of following. True leaders are far and in between and when those leaders have to lead people who think they can float through everything, the tanks tend to get burned out. (Attillian, *World of Warcraft* community forums 2011)

The observation cited above is notably consistent with the mimetic pattern of 'first stone to be cast' and its parallels in *World of Warcraft* PvE gameplay. Because of the threat/aggro mechanics it became customary to let the tank always strike the boss first. This used to be a very serious rule in terms of both strategy and game etiquette, an attempt where someone other than the tank stroke first was normally cancelled immediately. Not uncommonly, the player who broke the first strike rule was removed from the group. In 2011 threat generation was adjusted to such an extent that letting the tank lay the first blow was no longer crucial. However, the majority of my survey respondents (79% EN, 74% RU) seem to honour the tradition and insist that the tank should strike first. In the mimetic terms it corresponds to a killing of scapegoat, which should always be initiated by a single person who performs the first strike or casts the first strike, after which the rest of the community will follow. Mechanically, the mob instigator in a scapegoat process — or the tank in a MMO raid — serves as a model for the crowd to imitate. It is, therefore a leadership role, just like the player above suggests.

Remarkably, regardless of how well the theory seems to fit, the player's sentiment is not really supported by the data obtained from raiders themselves. I asked my respondents what role they believed to be more important than the others, if any. With the exception of the socially desirable response that all three roles are important (67% EN, 80% RU) the situation was not as clear cut. While some players thought that tanks had certain extra weight in a raid group (12% EN, 7% RU) the perceived importance of damage dealers was not that far off (11% EN, 11% RU). Further to that, when asked which of the roles was most likely to cause the group to fail, most respondents (65% EN, 54% RU) chose the most socially desirable response that raid failure is not really role-dependent, the second popular option (18% EN, 25% RU) was to suggest that damage dealers represent the highest risk of failure. In other words, unlike the player cited above suggests, tanks, let alone healers do not seem to be particularly revered or undermined by the rest of the group. The factor of uneven role distribution, however, makes the additional incentive justified because if no such incentives were present, it probably would not be possible to keep endgame PvE content available for the majority of the players. Another player posting in the same forum thread observes:

> Blizzard isnt saying Tanks are more important than DPS or Healers and thus deserve special loot, they're saying most of your mouthbreathers are @!@*ing it up for the rest of you. So to counteract this they're giving tanks a reason to stay and keep running past our dailies, because honestly, once we got heroic geared, which was fairly easy with the insta queue, we had no reason to requeue past the daily, and even less a reason if your a raid tank. No one person is more important in the group, but we have no reason to take a chance on half of a group being crap after we've already gotten our VP for the day. While there's a mass shortage of tanks this is necessary to hopefully goad some of us out. (Tÿchus, *World of Warcraft* community forums 2011)

What matters the most mimetically is the fact that the shortage of tanks and healers seems to persist regardless of additional social and material incentives attached to playing these roles. In other words, tanks and healers are not imitated by the rest of the players, even though some aspects in which their states of being may be perceived as desirable are very easy to apprehend. Moreover, inter-group tensions that complicate the relationships between casual and hardcore players and sometimes set PvE players at odds with PvP ones, are absent in the case of tanks, healers and damage dealers. In

terms of Girard's theory this situation indicates the presence of *protected differences* (see 2.1.4 of this thesis) which the community themselves concedes to and agrees to support. In practical terms, the proximity between tanks, healers and damage dealers is never close enough for their spheres of possibilities to intersect. While being physically proximate — regardless of their role, the players form a group of co-located player characters acting together — the roles are sufficiently distinct from each other to prevent direct competition between them. Indeed, while damage dealers compete with each other a lot, and so do healers, it is mechanically and pragmatically unfeasible for healers to compete with damage dealers and vice versa. Along the same lines, there is no mechanical or practical possibility for tanks to compete with healers or the other way around.[167] In Girard's view, these kinds of differences protect the community from being overwhelmed by competition of everyone against all. In *World of Warcraft* endgame PvE which is, in many aspects, an environment prone to critical levels of competition, distinctions engendered by role separation may contribute to the group's ability to exercise teamwork.[168]

In other words, we seem to have come across the endgame's safeguard against its own mimetic crisis. While gender, race and faction are a factor of diversity which does not affect endgame player possibilities, class-based role differentiation — there are classes who can function as either of the three roles, or two out of three, or just one of them — represents difference that has meaningful gameplay consequences. From the mimetic

---

[167] When such incidents do happen, they are usually frowned upon. One of the most famous incidents of 'raid drama' captured on video had to do with the healer player doing damage and, as a consequence, neglecting their healing responsibilities (Rechizit, Online video 2013).

[168] This suggestion is, by and large, theoretical and very difficult to verify. There are not many MMOs where class-based roles are not implemented and those that may be described as role-independent do not have endgame PvE gameplay of *World of Warcraft*'s scale and centrality. For instance, *Guild Wars 2* does not require the group to have a dedicated tank and healer, but the game has no raids as such and is, arguably, more PvP-focused. However role-independent group PvE gameplay is very common in other online video game genres, be it multiplayer action role-playing games like *Diablo 3* (Blizzard Entertainment 2012) or MMOFPS like *Destiny* (Bungie 2014) and although these kinds of games do not require the amount of teamwork and coordination needed for *World of Warcraft* raiding, and the groups are usually a lot smaller, those groups are apparently well-able to function together.

standpoint, the weight that one of two tank players has in a group of 20 is incomparable to that of the other 18 players. Role scarcity results in higher status: if one of the tanks leaves the raid, the whole group will not be able to proceed, the group depends on the chosen few. Owing to the same factor of scarcity, a competent tank will often be valued somewhat more than a proficient healer[169] and a lot more than a capable damage dealer. Besides, the rhetorical charge of either role — tanks take damage on behalf of the team and healers take care of the team — leads to tanks being slightly more respected and healers slightly better liked than their damage dealing counterparts.[170]

In turn, the uneven distribution of the roles the players choose to play may result in a slightly different spectrum of opportunities available to them. Although a player of either motivational type is free to pursue goals or goal states which are relevant within their playstyle, a tank or a healer will often have easier time doing that. For instance, an Achiever or an Explorer would benefit from playing these roles since it is normally a lot easier for a tank or a healer to get a spot in a raid group than it is for a damage dealer. In some cases and up to a point, taking on those roles represents the shortest route to the goal of conquering content for the former and the goal of experiencing content for the latter. In other words, role distinctions both constitute an important difference in terms of Girard's competition of possibilities and may be a factor in how *World of Warcraft* endgame accommodates different player types.

---

[169] This refers to highest difficulty raiding: a healer is considered truly valuable if their healing output equals to that of two regular healers and therefore enables the group to bring in an extra damage dealer. With medium or low difficulty raiding the value of a tank is a lot more than that of a healer.

[170] This may be subject to debate, but my long-term personal experience with many different MMOs suggests that the social implications of tanking and healing are extremely powerful.

4.8 Dysfunctional motivations in *World of Wacraft* endgame

According to Bartle, a stable virtual world is likely to allow all four player types to influence each other as well as the shared experience of collective play. This does not imply that the types are distributed in equal proportion, but rather that the capacity to shape the game that players of either type have is comparable (Bartle 1996: 21). In *World of Warcraft* endgame PvE such parity of influence seems to be compromised by the dramatically uneven ratio of goal incentives that correspond to each of the four player types. Moreover, there seem to be multiple tensions that complicate the pursuit of either playstyle in *World of Warcraft* endgame and, in some sense, derogate the formal integrity of each type.

If we are to understand the possible practical implications of existent motivation classifications, we need to pay special attention to how our theories correlate with the way actual games are designed and then played. If the game we are looking at prioritises one player type at the expense of the other three, then this is something we should take into account. If the game does very little to support a particular game activity or player approach, we should not be trying too hard to find a significant presence of this type within this game's playerbase — perhaps regardless of what the players themselves may report.

Instead, we should be looking for what constitutes the mechanical obstacle for playstyles an MMO does not proportionately support. For instance, it is hardly controversial to say that *World of Warcraft* core gameplay may impede motivations consistent with Socializer and Explorer types (see Brown 2011: 83). But how exactly does the game prevent those two playstyles from being conveniently and straightforwardly pursued? We would do well to make note of something that Explorer- and Socialiser-friendly MMOs do not have: an endgame.

The Elder Scrolls Online can be very welcoming for a substantive Explorer — the game world is more or less equal in size to that in *World of Warcraft*, but its diversity and level of detail is vastly superior. The game is incomparably bigger in terms of story and lore, there is a lot more content for an Explorer player to engage with. However, there is no raiding in *The Elder Scrolls Online*, and the highest difficulty PvE challenge is performed solo.

Speaking of Socialiser type, *Dungeons and Dragons Online* may be confidently described as one of the most Socialiser-centric MMOs ever — for reasons too subtle and too many to be addressed here. Raid zones are few, however, raid groups are a lot smaller than those in *World of Warcraft,* and raid participation is not directly dependent on the level cap. Instead of raiding, *Dungeons and Dragons Online* is well known to support counterproductive gameplay practices like true reincarnation (see 4.5.1 of this thesis) or permanent death.

This taken into account, it seems highly likely that the endgame in *World of Warcraft* large-scale raiding sense is the gameplay approach that detracts from Explorer and Socialiser playstyles or at least does not sufficiently incentivise them. The next step we may take is to find out what playstyle is incentivised instead, since many people do keep playing *World of Warcraft* still. Before that, however, we need to address the most frequently referred to and, arguably, the least useful argument: that players play ‘simply’ because they are having fun, that they play the game because they ‘just’ enjoy it.

4.8.1 Intrinsic enjoyment

A separate class of player motivations that is, in some or other interpretation, included in a number of studies (e.g., Hsu & Lu 2004; Lazzarro 2004; Koo 2009; Lee & Tsai 2010; Wu, Wang & Tsai 2010) is intrinsic pleasure. A good example of this approach is the factor of perceived enjoyment that surveys encapsulate into confirmatory statements

like: ‘Playing the online game is exciting . . . Playing the online game gives me a lot of pleasure . . . I enjoyed playing the online game’ (Wu et al. 2010: 1867) and so forth.

It is hardly a surprise that positive response rates for this motivation are comparably high: people like playing an online game of their choice — or at least they believe they do — therefore they keep playing it. What makes this category especially uncomfortable from the mimetic perspective is the original (unrelated to MMOs) definition of perceived enjoyment that is phrased as ‘the extent to which the activity of using the computer is perceived to be enjoyable *in its own right*, apart from any performance consequences that may be anticipated’ (Davis et al. 1992: 1113, emphasis added). Building from this original concept, Ming-Chi Lee and Tzung-Ru Tsai suggest that the primary motivation for MMO playing is intrinsic, meaning that pleasure is derived exclusively from the process itself, and not results from a specific goal being met or specific state being achieved (Lee & Tsai 2010: 605).

Recalling the theoretical framework laid out above (see 2.1 of this thesis) we will see where the two perspectives contradict each other. The perceived enjoyment hypothesis posits that the main purpose of playing MMOs is an autonomously apprehended, mechanistic sensation that does not in any way depend on events and interactions which may take place both in the game and in real life. For the mimetic theory, on the other hand, an autonomous goal state is either grounded in most basic physiological needs or a product of self-delusion. The former condition does not apply to *World of Warcraf*t endgame for reasons both obvious and implicit: the experience is not merely disembodied, but often less capable to produce the visceral response commonly associated with perceived pleasure. A good example of a crucial scenario in which perceived enjoyment would often be compromised is endgame raiding, specifically, collective PvE gameplay performed at the medium/high level of game difficulty.

To begin with, the very things that make human-computer interaction intrinsically pleasurable — which we may view conventionally as clarity, usability, aesthetic and so forth — is something a raiding *World of Warcraft* player is very likely to have dramatically diminished. Some players will have their game camera perspective

adjusted to a bird's eye view resembling that in a real-time strategy game. Some players will have the graphic fidelity of the game set to a minimum to ensure the lowest hardware delay achievable. Almost invariably, the players will have vast proportion of their screen space obstructed by an array of third-party software modules that extract and visualise the numerical processes which are otherwise hidden. The soundscape of the game, which was found to be a significant factor of intrinsic enjoyment, is generally set to a barely audible minimum, if not altogether disabled: in this scenario the hearing of a raider is fully occupied by voice communications between team members as well as a variety of sound effects that numerous third-party scripts, sensors and timers produce. In other words, while intrinsic kinds of software-related enjoyment may exist in and of themselves, their saliency is at the very least questionable in the context of *World of Warcraft* endgame raiding whenever it is pursued by a group of even moderately advanced players.

A worse problem for perceived enjoyment, however, is the fact that this gameplay activity results in the overwhelming prevalence of failure for the overwhelming majority of players. To put matters in perspective, here are the outcomes that I have logged over the period of four months in early 2015 (*Warlords of Draenor* content expansion, Blackrock Foundry raid tier, mythic difficulty). Clearing the raid tier completely took 812 attempts, of which only 118 attempts were successful. The break-point of the raid, where the difficulty escalated, required 177 attempts, of which only 7 were a success. Finally, it took 186 failed attempts to complete the final, most difficult encounter *once*.

To elaborate what a futile attempt may entail: some hardcore raid encounters may take as long as 20 minutes, and the fatal mistake made by either of the group may happen at any moment. Failures by an extremely narrow margin are a common occurrence, which, according to one of the world's strongest *World of Warcraft* players, gives birth to additional tension:

> When a boss fight is over 15 minutes long, all the mechanics in the encounter can be intense. Especially the ones in the last couple of phases. You don't want

> to mess it up when the first 10 minutes have been great in a particular pull. (Yliajo 2014)

This gaming situation may be described as very stressful: the goal is assigned extreme importance and a smallest misstep on behalf of a single participant is very likely to result in the whole group failing to achieve it. Conceivably, some hardcore gamers may derive some kind of pleasure from the intense excitement of negative probability. However, it is difficult to place recurrent reiterations of defeat as something intrinsically enjoyable, still less to assume that enjoying countless reiterations of failure is the main motivator for a significant number. In most cases, the unrewarding failure/success ratio would be very discouraging to many players, especially in the view of well-documented (see e.g., Chen 2009; Paul & Philpott 2011) interpersonal frustrations collective failure brings about. It is, perhaps, to address the problem of raiding being *intrinsically rather difficult to enjoy*, that some communities introduced what may be described as resistance practices such as collective inebriation. The tradition of drunken raiding on the Khyber server in *Dungeons and Dragons Online* is an apt explication of this social phenomenon:

> Saturday night @ 10 Eastern 7 Pacific is what we're set for.
>
> As usual the people who have ran it in the past get first dibs until Friday. Then it’s open to anyone. You can sign up now even if your new to the runs and I’ll put you on the reserve list. If it hasn't filled by Friday I’ll move you to the main list. Also if the main list is full feel free to sign up for the reserve list as there’s always a no show or two and if there isn’t there’s always 1-2 people who end up passing out within the 1st hour from too many shots.
>
> We run the basic raid stuff Reaver, VOD, Shroud, Hound, etc. then we start the rotation all over again. Switch toons as needed. The rules are as follows. Novice level people do shots of their choice before & after every quest and drink their drink of choice along the way. Advanced level people do the same but they also do shots as we go thru ANY portal. That’s the portals in every part of the Shroud all the ones in the sub on the way to Hound/VOD etc. The main rule is have fun and prepare to fail a raid or two at some point once we get too drunk. Once that happens there’s no finger pointing or yelling. We just laugh at how stupid and drunk we are and rerun it. (Beer_Dude, *Dungeons and Dragons Online* community forums 2011)

The possible lack of intrinsic enjoyment attached to raiding is underscored by some players' resistance to it. The drunken raiding is a deliberate profanation of something so weighty, serious and eventually tiresome, that it gets only better from being subverted.

There is, by all means, a consensus that a gamer's conceptualisation of fun is non-trivial (e.g., Bartle 2004: 129), especially so in the case of hardcore gamers (e.g. Taylor 2006: 72). However, there ought to be some kind of plausibility threshold, past which we would be prepared to consider alternative explanations. Instead of trying to figure out what makes this apparently excruciating activity so enjoyable, we should be asking ourselves is why players persevere. In answering that we could resort to circular reasoning — they persist, therefore they must be enjoying it — but this would probably be as convincing as declaring a visit to the dentist intrinsically pleasurable on the basis that it is something that many people regularly do.

4.8.2 Socializer motivation

The fact that MMOs are a highly social activity is both well-established and extremely consequential for the well-being of the title. A 'dead game' is a colloquial description of an MMO with a playerbase insufficient to maintain a community, which is an integral part of a shared virtual world experience. Having said that, however, the prevalence of socialising seems to be sometimes overestimated, perhaps even overinvested in. More often than not, community-centric implications tend to be drawn, which leads to possible overvaluation of Socializer type behaviours. With *World of Warcraft*, however, we can observe a discrepancy between the degree of socialisation that is expected or desirable and socialisation that is actually present. The endgame, in particular, seems to be an environment that is increasingly challenging for Socializer players — mechanically, instrumentally and socially.

The elephant in the room should be addressed first. From both technological and performative points of view, the combination of playing and socialising is at best

suboptimal and at worst detrimental with regard to either component. Where *World of Warcraft* is concerned, Bartle's thinly veiled insinuations that Socializers, in general, are less competent players (Bartle 1996: 17, 19) ring perfectly true: in many cases playing the endgame efficiently and socialising are more or less mutually exclusive.[171] Unless some means of voice communication are used, players socialise through typing which severely curtails their ability to control their character in-game. Further to that, socialisation and gameplay may interfere with each other cognitively: an empirical research by Anders Drachen and Jonas Heide Smith has found an inverse correlation between speech intensity and gameplay complexity (Drachen & Heide Smith 2008: 33; see also Drachen 2011: 220). Remarkably, the participants of Drachen and Heide Smith's study did not even have to type, as voice communication was used instead, so the communicative impairment caused by the process of gameplay is not merely mechanical.

I am convinced when Yee quotes a respondent as describing an MMO of her choice as a 'pretty little chat room with avatars' (Yee 2005: 24). What I am less convinced of is *World of Warcraft* being the most convenient and functional chat room possible. In terms of 'socialisation through gameplay' the picture is not that clear cut either. On the one hand, the game does offer the players software-assisted means of playing collectively, as well as incentivises them to play as a group (certain challenges are too difficult for just one player to tackle). On the other hand, this does not necessarily suggest that the players are universally predisposed to group play. In fact, the evidence suggests the opposite: *World of Warcraft* players tend to stay ungrouped most of the time, steadily prefer character classes with increased ability to and have relatively low level of commitment towards their guild, if they even join one (Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell & Moore 2006a). What these findings underscore is that some traditional views of MMO players social interaction patterns may be slightly too idealistic. Contrary of

[171] This seems to hold true with most contemporary MMOs. *EVE Online* (CCP Games 2003) may be a conspicuous exception because the average tempo and pacing of its gameplay is dramatically different from that in most multiplayer online games.

what the popular consensus seems to imply, many players do not, really, enjoy each other's company *that* much.

When players do group, forming parties or guilds, it is instructive to keep in mind that a vast proportion of them view their 'teammates' or 'guildmates' in strictly instrumental terms (Williams et al. 2006: 353). This is hardly surprising, if we assume that people do not necessarily group solely for the pleasure of grouping: the raiding aspect of the endgame is more or less impossible to engage with alone. Do communications between guild members go any further than using each other to advance further in the game? The evidence is contradictory. Constance Steinkuehler and Dimitri Williams argue that 'feelings of rootedness within MMOs help create a shared sense of home, and with it the sense of support and warmth that some folks may very well lack in their own ''real world'' households and work places' (Steinkuehler & Williams 2006: 900).

Regrettably, this seems to be the very case which quantitative evidence does not bear out. A study of 88 online game players by Erin Dupuis and Matthew Ramsey paints a much less optimistic picture. In particular, Dupuis and Ramsey reveal that players suffering from depression, who felt extreme social isolation in real life and sought emotional support from their online game contacts, reported they had none (Dupuis & Ramsey 2011: 2486–2487). Sceptical as we may be in the face of numerous anti-gaming exploitations[172], we will have to admit, that these data appear to be consistent with the clause which many (if not the most) hardcore raiding guilds include into their code of conduct explicitly: real-life troubles should under no circumstances be brought into the game. When Steinkuehler and Williams's argue for socialising opportunities virtual worlds provide, they stress the separate advantage of no actual obligations being undertaken (Steinkuehler & Williams 2006: 890–891). If we consider this factor alongside the evidence Dupuis and Ramsey present, a particular cost-benefit ratio would seem to be in place. More specifically, as long as the benefits of socialising — social interactions, but also signalling of amiability and extroversion — remain low cost,

[172] Which have to do with the general attitude of moral panic that is often characteristic of various external discourses: mainstream media, policy-makers, non-gamer members of the public and so forth.

socialising goes on. However, as soon as there are costs or liabilities to incur — for instance, those attached to socialising with depression-sufferers — the communication seems to discontinue.

Finally, to add insult to injury, the game has no metrics to account for Socializer play. In other words, there are no points that can be accumulated by performing Socializer activities. And with the importance of metrics in a metric-focused endgame, this means that pure Socializer players are, effectively, refused the possibility to socialise *productively*. As much as they enjoy being a part of the community, the community may be less likely to accept them because they do not conform to the prevalent standards of how this community interacts with the game.

In *World of Warcraft*, at its current state, the answer to Yee's seemingly rhetorical question 'Aren't members of raid-oriented guilds both Achievers and Socializers?' (Yee 2005: 2) may be a resolute 'no'. The organised PvE communities are profoundly instrumental and socialising has little instrumental value. Moreover, pure Socializers are somewhat unlikely to have accrued the metrics needed to join a serious progression guild. The problem with Socializer type is that *World of Warcraft* endgame has relatively little to offer them — as some data above suggest — and they have little to give back. As a result, a Socializer player who wants to advance in any area apart from collective organised role-playing would often have to adopt a playstyle different from their own and may be somewhat likely to develop behaviours characteristic of other player types. This does not, in and of itself, constitute change of type – concrete gameplay activities are not central in Bartle's theory, in the sense they can be performed in service of either motivation. It does, however, indicate the comparatively little influence the type has: it is difficult to actualise it straightforwardly, by means of socialising alone.

4.8.3 Explorer motivation

Speaking of the Explorer type, we have to revisit the two kinds of game exploration proposed earlier: instrumental exploration that has a bearing on gameplay and substantive exploration which is performed for its own sake and has no such impact. Within *World of Warcraft* endgame, both subsets of this motivation are in a questionable position.

The problem with substantive exploration is twofold. Firstly, both depth and breadth of game world topology seems to be increasingly de-prioritised by the developer: in general, the playable zones that come with every other content expansion are relatively smaller than those in preceding expansion were.[173] Together with the game world — however spacious — lacking detail and questionable in terms of scale (cf. Aarseth 2008), this means that the players have less to explore, and the ongoing tendency in *World of Warcraft* development suggests that this might not be seen as financially detrimental. In other words, pure Explorer type players do not seem to form a proportion of the game audience sufficient to deter the developer from curtailing their goal possibilities.

Secondly, whatever space Explorer type players do get to explore, they are likely to be wearing Achiever hats while doing so. A proportion of game zones are, to various degrees, restricted to players of higher item level or player ability (in which case they may be exercising Achiever approach), or players accompanied by a competent group (which means that their Achiever metrics are high enough to be able to join such groups). This derogates the core priorities of Explorer type and makes the players, as Holin Lin and Chuen-Tsai Sun's study suggests, more willing to obtain Explorer goal states illicitly:

> Our interviewees frequently described fun on private servers in terms of visiting places they are denied access to on official servers because of their current

[173] This may have to do with the increasing costs of content production: in general, every other expansion is of higher visual fidelity than the previous one.

> levels. They enthusiastically described the places they visited, the bosses they had pictures taken with, the magic creatures they rode, the cuteness of the non-player characters they saw and the breathtaking landscapes they 'flew over'. To have the same experiences on official servers, players must have top ranks, wear the best equipment, and have experienced teammates. (Lin & Sun 2011: 67)

In other words, to pursue the goals delineated by their type, Explorer players have to either adopt Achiever approach or resort to cheating, which compromises the type's internal consistency and makes the player's genuine motivation somewhat blurred. With the increased availability of content, on the other hand, the substantive aspect of exploration is almost entirely devalued. A new raid tier is, formally, a new geographical location that is populated by new characters and adds new elements to the backstory. However, this content is easily accessible by way of a randomly assembled LFR group and can be fully explored within several hours of playtime. What further contributes to this dilution of the type is the fact that activities which pertain to this mode of exploration are numerically rewarded, which is counterproductive within Bartle's model which proceeds from the assumption that Explorer players are not in any way interested in acquisition of these rewards and should not be offered them (Bartle 2016a: 468, 470).

The situation with instrumental exploration — theorycrafting, practical experimentation and so forth — is influenced by the same factors of explorable material being curtailed and type dilution. Character mechanics that are, arguably, the pinnacle of game mechanics exploration, have been progressively simplified, allowing fewer and fewer possible combinations. Whatever little permutations remain available to discover are immediately disseminated by means of specialised websites and become, in a sense, common knowledge, which reduces Explorer goal incentive even more.

Restriction of game mechanics exploration is, perhaps, far more stringent than that affecting exploration of game topology. Once exploration grows instrumental, it is very likely for an Explorer player to become, de facto, an Achiever, or get co-opted by a group of Achievers: in order to test out the highest level equipment in the highest difficulty setting, an Explorer needs to have access to both the equipment and the setting and this is something that cannot be obtained without a team of twenty

extremely competent players.[174] Further to that, it has become customary to disseminate these discoveries with an implied connection to a strong public persona of an Achiever type: the credibility of information is deemed to be higher if the expert is actively engaged in the activity they pass judgement on. As a result, the status granted by pure Explorer type is less valuable, regardless of the fact that Explorer-produced insight is almost invariably deeper.

The above taken into account, the position of Explorer type in *World of Warcraft* endgame seems to be rather unstable, due to restricted possibility to pursue Explorer goals and lack of incentive to forefront exploration. The game's disproportionate focus on Achiever type is somewhat likely to force the Explorer — Achiever type change, even though the proportion of players who would undergo the transformation is impossible to predict.

4.8.4 Achiever motivation

In turn, the problem related to the Achiever type is not the lack of incentive, but disproportionate overabundance of it. As we have discussed earlier, the metrics of achievement are both very visible and universally present. They are also a prerequisite needed to advance in most areas of organised collective gameplay, especially endgame raiding. Inasmuch as these metrics — item level in particular, and, on a situational basis, total achievement score — are the main, if not the only status currency that is of value, the game seeks to ensure greater number of players are able to increase them. One consequence is game design prioritised for uniform distribution of measurable rewards by means of making raid content more accessible. More crucially, however, disproportionate investment in Achiever motivation results in two complications, both

[174] Unless they operate on test servers instead of live game servers, which some instrumental Explorer players are known to do.

of which seem to be rather corrosive for the Achiever type and may be problematic in terms of Bartle's player motivation theory as a whole.

First and foremost, the levelling / early endgame process streamlined to accommodate all four types (cf. Brown 2011: 83) results in pure Achiever players being disproportionately productive. In other words, they maximise their metrics much earlier than the rest of the players. Their objective of further advancement in the game, however, requires them to keep playing. As a result, they may have to suffer countless replications of the same collective gameplay from which they have already collected their item level upgrades and achievement points. Consequently, the regular game metrics having been filled, *the metric of relative individual performance* becomes the most prominent factor.

More specifically, the status of an Achiever type player involved in group endgame PvE gameplay would, in most cases, be defined by their *logs* and their *parses*, both provided by the third-party 'Warcraft Logs' database. The player's 'logs' refer to their individual performance during group PvE encounters, normally, raid boss fights. The player's damage and/or healing done, as well as boss damage and environmental damage they receive are tracked by a separate in-game application and made available through a web-based interface. Because of their accuracy and detail, encounter logs provide a sophisticated overview of how the captured encounter went on and how every participant performed. Among other things, logs allow the players to assess each other's competence and efficiency. The player's 'parses' for particular encounters are derived from software-enabled comparison of their performance against performance shown by tens of thousands of other players of the same class and specialisation. This striking concept is represented as a percentage value: a parse of 20% means that 80% of the players performed better than the player in question. A parse of 80% indicates that only 20% of the players were better than the one examined. A parse above 95% places the player within the 5% best performing *World of Warcraft* players in the world.

An incentive like this seems to grate against Bartle's Killer/Achiever heuristic that presupposes that 'an achiever doesn't care how other players are doing, except insofar

as it validates their own status' (Bartle 2016a: 477). The problem is that other players validate an Achiever's status, explicitly, *by doing worse than them*. Since parses are assembled automatically, an Achiever cannot help but 'care' about other players' performance somewhat; there are tens of thousands contesting the same percentage bracket, if they are doing well, an Achiever is less likely to succeed and vice versa.

More importantly, the incentive in question is mechanically and pragmatically divorced from the formal metrics of group PvE accomplishments. The group as a whole may succeed, yet the Achiever's individual parses may be very low. Does this qualify as achievement, then, in a type-related sense? Conversely, the Achiever may personally parse very high, yet the raid as a whole may be a failed enterprise. Is this an achievement that would fit within the type's goal-setting environment?

The motivation of the type, then, is compromised by conflicting goals:

- **Case 1:** The players work collaboratively, clear the challenge the game presents them with, but derive no personal benefit for their metrics/parses.
- **Case 2:** The players play in a selfish, competitive manner, jeopardise the success of the group, yet securing significant personal benefit in terms of their parses and metrics.
- **Question:** In either case, what is the type motivating the players' behaviour?

It may be tempting to infer the presence of Killer undertones in the second case. Having parsed better than the rest of the group is a demonstration of superiority. Sacrificing collective benefit for personal gain is acting on people and, arguably, imposing on them. This is, however, a temptation that should be resisted – self-serving play can be pursued by either type. Achiever and Killer players can act in a manner that is likely to undermine the group, yet the reason they do so remains different. Achievers would follow their primary motivation of acting on the world even when acting on the world involves acting on people. In some sense, other players become an aspect of the world, a part of environment that has to be mastered for the world to be acted upon.

One way to further elucidate the difference in how the two types engage in intra-group competition is to suggest that an Achiever would be focused on their own success, regardless of whether or not the group suffers. A Killer, on the other hand, would prioritise group loss, regardless of whether or not they themselves benefit from it. The former would work for their own victory, the latter would work for someone else's defeat. In other words, Achievers tend to remain Achievers even if their achievement requires acting against other players, their teammates included. However, the very fact that they have to do that destabilises the type by introducing goals they would not otherwise pursue and methods they would not otherwise resort to.

Another issue that seems to compromise the consistency of Achiever type is the widespread phenomenon of players increasing their metrics illicitly, i.e. without having the requisite skill or expanding the necessary effort. A significant number of players seem to derive pleasure from *having the achievement* and not from *having achieved*. Three kinds of this malpractice may be distinguished:

- 'Boosting' — an interaction in which a relatively strong player or group of players assists a player in passing gameplay challenges that he or she would not otherwise be able to complete.
- 'Carrying' — normally refers to a paid interaction in which an extremely competent group of players enables a player in passing advanced difficulty gameplay challenges, notably, without having to do anything at all. 'Just turn up, pay the gold and die in a corner, we will do the rest' (Bloomie, *World of Warcraft* community forums 2014), as one of the booster teams advertised their service.
- 'Piloting' — more common in PvP, a transaction in which a player's character is controlled by another player, not uncommonly one well within the top 10% parses. A direct violation of Blizzard Terms of Service and a bannable offence, piloting is a lot more expensive than carrying as well as incomparably less frequent.

The opportunity to pay a large amount of game currency for joining a group of expert players who then perform the necessary activities — kill a boss at a high difficulty level, complete a timed challenge and so forth — with the carried player increasing their metrics simply by virtue of being present is consequential on two levels. It creates a significant proportion of players whose type is conflicted and blurred — are carried players Achievers, substantive Explorers, or, perhaps, Socializers? It also devalues achievement points by making them more accessible and derogates the reliability of some markers of status by relative ease of their falsification.[175]

With all of the above, in *World of Warcraft* endgame Achiever type seems to be both disproportionately present and internally conflicted. This state of affairs — with Achiever type 'eating itself' would have had much more dramatic consequences unless some transformation took place.

4.8.5 Killer motivation

When Killer type is brought up in contemporary MMO research there seems to be a tendency to take the motivation literally and view it exclusively in conjunction with the concrete act of player character killing. In some sense, the type is often seen as equivalent to one specific mode of gameplay: if PvP is addressed, Killer type is mentioned and any reference to Killer type is immediately supplied with a reference to PvP. Such associative rigidity seems to inform Douglas Brown's argument as he observes, that 'most [*World of Warcraft*] patches seem aimed squarely at Achievers through the regular addition of raids and Killers through the constant expansion of PvP combat options' (Brown 2011: 82).[186] Achievers are pigeonholed into raiding and

---

[175] Which puts even stronger emphasis on logs and parses that are technically impossible to fabricate.

[186] A possible sign of an approach being inefficient is that the argument it produces is fallacious: there is no 'constant expansion' of PvP content in *World of Warcraft*. In terms of

Killers are pigeonholed into PvP, and no connection or interaction between the two is deemed worthy of examination.

The most obvious reason why such uncompromising distinction may not be universally appropriate is its exclusion of MMOs that lack an explicit player versus player component. For instance, there is virtually no PvP in *Dungeons and Dragons Online*, but it does not follow that no aspects of the game may mechanically or aesthetically appeal to Killer type players. More importantly, structured PvP does not seem to fit Killer playstyle all that well because Killers are not interested in sportsmanship which structured PvP tends to enforce. According to Bartle, the kind of PvP a Killer would truly indulge in is non-consensual and one-sided: 'life of a killer is so much sweeter when people can't meaningfully fight back' (Bartle 2016a: 468; see also Bartle 2016a: 477).

A good example of a PvP modality which seems naturally suitable for the Killer mindset is the largely forgotten practice of battleground twinking. In online gamer parlance, a twink means a low-level character whose combat characteristics were maximised by most powerful gear available within this level bracket (see also Bainbridge 2010: 148—149; Bartle 2016a: 110). The lowest level structured PvP in *World of Warcraft* was represented by battlegrounds assembled from players whose character level was between 10 and 19. Consequently, a twink character purposed for Killer-centric PvP sessions, had to be level 19, i.e. the maximum level allowed. Beside that, the player had to procure a number of extremely rare items, which would require a significant investment of playtime, in-game currency or both. In addition to making all this effort, a twinking player had to ensure that their character does not accidentally level up to 20: were it to happen, the character would no longer be able to participate in the lowest level battlegrounds and therefore become useless.

---

both scale and frequency of updates, the game's PvP mode is not even remotely comparable to its PvE mode.

In other words, keeping a battleground twink was a time-consuming and resource-intensive project that was likely to detract from the more meaningful venues of gameplay productivity. Moreover, the project served a single very limited purpose, which was to enable the player to participate in one isolated PvP scenario of a lowest level available.

Why would the player want to do that? The answer is simple: a fully twinked level 19 character had tremendous advantage over regular characters of level 19 and lower. Within a battleground the player logged into, their twink was incomparably more powerful than any non-twinked opponent. The possible player motivation behind these arrangements is aptly summarised by an authoritative twinking player: 'There's nothing like the superiority you feel over the opponent when after engaging in combat and killing them, you still have 80% of your health left and your cooldowns[176] are still ready and waiting' (Demonrage, GameFAQs community guides 2008).

In terms of player types, battleground twinking was, in most cases, an unambiguous actualisation of the Killer motivation. Whereas a structured PvP session was formally consensual, the non-Killer participants did not consent to being hopelessly disadvantaged (a twink player could single-handedly destroy the opposing team if they so desired). Twink gameplay was one-sided since opponents did not have a chance to win and were dealt with in a way that was often more cynical than necessary.

However, this PvP modality is no longer possible because every structured PvP session in *World of Warcraft* sets character statistics as normalised within a bracket. In other words, the players within a battleground is numerically equal regardless of their equipment and their regular level. Unfair advantage is therefore unobtainable, and the resulting skill-based competition would incentivise an Achiever a lot more than it would a Killer (cf. Bartle 2016a: 477).

---

[176] Here: most powerful damaging abilities.

Consequently, with structured PvP opportunities being of little interest, the problem that Killer type players seem to face in *World of Warcraft* endgame is not enough room to roam. Unstructured, 'open-world' PvP is currently consensual in the sense the potential victim would have to tick the box indicating they agree to be attacked. Group PvE scenarios do offer an opportunity to act on the other players, but an extremely limited one, since a Killer player within a group would be found, removed and blacklisted. In other words, an average Killer player would have remarkably little to entertain themselves with, which echoes the situation which Socialisers or Explorers may have to deal with and, just like the two types above, shows the Killer type in stark contrast with inordinately busy Achievers.

4.9 Implicit competition and type-swapping

To summarise the above, even though players of different types are free to follow the core motivation behind their playstyle, the process by which this motivation is pursued is regulated by the endgame situation which is significantly skewed towards Achievers, in particular, the most competitive aspects of the type. The possible consequences such state of affairs may bring about is disproportionate prevalence of Achiever incentives within motivationally diverse collaborations.

To reiterate, battleground twinking owed its limited popularity to the increased opportunity of dominance that the practice afforded. A somewhat similar incentive in the context of group endgame PvE is exemplified by mythic difficulty raiders' participation in randomly assembled LFR groups. A mythic raider would normally have a much higher item level than most players in a lowest difficulty raid group, besides, they are likely to be of superior competence. As a result, their performance would be a lot higher than that of the other players, which leads to an attitude very aptly

summarised by one of my co-players: ‘You don’t join the LFR for a handful of runes,[177] you join the LFR to piss on the plebs from the top of the meters.’

4.9.1 Individual performance metering and its importance

The ‘meters’ the player refers to is the colloquial term for real-time individual performance metering applications. Enabled by third party software, these player interface extensions capture the numerical values of player performance (damage done per second, healing done per second, damage taken and so forth) and show how the player’s ongoing performance compares to that of their teammates. In general, this means that real-time performance metrics are always shown on the screen, so the player who has them enabled is persistently aware if they are the highest performer or not. If other player performs better than them, the meters visualise the margin of their advantage by way of a comparative bar graph. The same information is simultaneously available to everyone in the group who has the meters installed and running. In other words, every meter-user involved in collaborative gameplay activity is always aware if someone scores higher than them or if they score the highest in the group. Consequently, a rather unexpected dependency emerges: a player’s individual position on the meters is relative and therefore affected by the others’ performance. The more efficiently the rest of the team plays, the more difficult it becomes to secure the highest position.

Conversely, a mythic difficulty player joining a random LFR group enjoys the reverse dependency — the other players in the group are, in most cases, incomparably weaker so the mythic player is more or less guaranteed to dominate the meters. In terms of ‘non-violent’ competition, this correlates to disproportionate advantage a twink character would have in a low-level battleground. The crucial difference between the two cases is that a twink character is only usable within a very limited domain of

[177] Here: consumable items that grant short-term improvement to character parameters.

somewhat niche gameplay and meters can be used persistently, in each and every gameplay scenario, including guild-based raiding on normal, heroic or mythic difficulty. In some cases, the players' preoccupation with each other's meter scores is very well known to negatively affect the group's ability to function in an efficient, coordinated manner. One player's commentary from the perspective of a tank summarises the issue extremely well:

> Damage Meters can actually cause chaos in team work. [. . .] When you have damage meters out players would abuse any way to rise up the damage meters even if it means throwing water on teamwork and actually getting through the pulls. They would ignore attacking the kill order and focus on a target that is at full health so they don't have to share that mob's health with other DPSers insuring they can top the damage meters faster that way because when people are all focus firing on one target that target will die so quick many DPSers won't get any hits in. [. . .] Furthermore a rogue wouldn't use Feint/Vanish[178] as it wastes him from potentially throwing more damage and have more energy to use more attacks or say other classes reducing their threat with spells and talents, they wouldn't pick those talents or use those spells as they waste mana and time. Part of a DPSer's role is CC[179] AND avoiding threat while dealing as much damage as they can. But it's because of DPS meters DPSers completely forgo the CC and avoiding threat part and just try to deal as much damage as possible ignoring how hard it's making it for the tank to hold threat. (Redsteel222, Classic WoW Reddit 2017).

It bears repeating that the player's commentary above is a remarkably accurate overview of the mechanical issues caused by individual performance metering. This is the state of affairs I have numerously observed with raid healers, who sometimes attempt to increase their healing per second output by using most powerful abilities earlier than would be optimal in order to prevent the other healers from using those abilities first.[180] For players of either role, competing with their peers may become a

---

178 Threat reduction abilities.

179 Crowd-control abilities which slow, impede or disable computer-controlled units instead of damaging them.

180 A common raid healer mistake referred to as 'cooldown stacking'.

more urgent and compelling task that playing against the game; a controversial situation that some *World of Warcraft* players describe as ‘meter whoring’.

The internal contradictions of this mechanic make it a perfect example of conflictual — and conflicted — imitation in MMOs. On the one hand, the players are expected to show certain levels of performance confirmed by their meter numbers by which their mastery of the game is assessed (cf. Nardi 2010: 58). On the other hand, excessive usage of damage metering software is often frowned upon,[181] which is to say socially stigmatised in many casual contexts and explicitly forbidden in many hardcore scenarios (cf. Taylor 2008: 190–191). The most striking circumstance, however, is how pervasive this controversial mechanic has become: the overwhelming majority of my 332 respondents (EN=91%; RU=96%) reported using metering software.

The ubiquitous usage of individual performance metering is problematic in the light of player types theory, particularly, in terms of difference between Killer type and Achiever type which is not always obvious or clearly demarcated. To tell the two types apart, Bartle suggests the following heuristic: ‘Killers measure themselves against other people. Achievers measure themselves against absolute standards’ (Bartle 2016a: 477). The reason I am reluctant to implement this mode of differentiation within the context of *World of Warcrfat* group endgame PvE is the fact that the overwhelming majority of the players who raid measure themselves — explicitly — against other people. There is no absolute standard attached to individual performance metrics; the player’s position is always relative to that of another player. Encounter logs are not based on absolute standards either — the numerical representation of the player’s efficiency is derived from comparing their performance to how other players perform in the same scenario.

Further to that, at higher levels of player expertise and game challenge the salience of any standards apart from purely relative ones tends seems to be a lot lower. A level cap is an absolute standard, but that is something endgame players are guaranteed to have accomplished. Raid progression may be thought of as absolute standard, but its

[181] For instance, transmitting meter scores in public is considered a breach of etiquette.

acquisition is either spread over a significant period of in-game time, or immediately obtainable by means of a boosted run (see 4.8.4 of this thesis). Item level, finally, may be thought of as absolute value, insofar as there is, formally, a maximum possible figure a player can achieve. At higher difficulties of group endgame PvE, however, a player's item level is appreciably high to start with and acquiring further increase is a slow and unpredictable process. Even more importantly, item level does not affect player ranking in a linear way: one does not need to maximise their item level in order to parse above 90%.[182] Moreover, where player ranking is concerned, the meters serve as a reliable prognosis for improving one's parses or failing to improve it.

As a consequence, damage meter scores become extremely prominent in both casual and hardcore raiding contexts. To casual players they provide the means of gratification or distinction that are always readily available albeit difficult to obtain. For hardcore players, their damage scores represent an approximation of their competence and predict their relative position on the 'global' scale of the game. The endgame situation in which a majority of the players are intensely focused on the damage someone else is doing as well as the damage they themselves are capable of brings out one of the most striking parallels between *World of Warcraft* game mechanics and the mimetic theory; the tyranny of the damage meters is immediately resemblant of Girard's interpretation and reconceptualisation of Homer's term 'kudos':

> It is the fascination of superior violence. Violence strikes men as at once seductive and terrifying; never as a simple means to an end, but as an epiphany. Violence tends to generate unanimity, either in its favor or against it. [. . .] At the least success violence begins to snowball, becoming finally an irresistible avalanche. Those who possess kudos see their strength multiplied a hundredfold; those deprived of it discover that they are hopelessly handicapped. Kudos passes to the man who strikes the hardest — the victor of the moment. It belongs to the man who manages to convince others, and who believes himself, that his violence is completely irresistible. [. . .] When the rivalry becomes so intense that it destroys or disperses all its objects, it turns upon itself; kudos alone becomes the ultimate object. (Girard 1989: 152)

[182] Even though it does contribute to the player's possibility to perform better than their teammates.

It is indeed fascinating how well the concept applies in the context of *World of Warcraft* endgame. The lack of differentiation affects proximity between the players, close proximity aggravates mimetic rivalry, objects, which is to say valuable items the players used to be interested in are universally more accessible and therefore no longer as desirable as they used to be. Moreover, as we have earlier discussed, the types themselves are dissolved within each other: Explorers are compromised by the necessity to achieve, Socialisers are compromised by the need to be a little bit of everything else and so forth. Consequently, the focus of mimetic desires shifts onto 'kudos' — the topmost position on the damage meters, or the highest parse possible. This is intimidating, in a sense, because acquisition of these coveted metrics invariably requires the player to dominate the others: there simply cannot be two first places on a single performance metering scale. However, the effect of kudos seems to be most impactful and supremely dramatic on a smaller scale of closed communities, which takes place when similar competitive incentives take hold within permanent raiding groups.

4.9.2 Implicit competition in collaborative contexts

Recall the conflicted loot council situation referred to earlier (see 4.6.2 of this thesis), particularly the two members who were, consistently, in opposition to each other. The utilitarian councillor insisted that powerful gear should be distributed, exclusively, among five highest performing players. The humanitarian councillor wanted to prioritise team members whose item level was the lowest. The first was a Killer type player, the second was an Achiever and possible explanation of their distribution preferences through player types was presented above. What we did not address, however, were the practical implications these two approaches had for the two councillors personally. In order to assess those implications, we will have to examine the same situation from a slightly more cynical angle, a perspective that corresponds less to Bartle and more to Girard.

The utilitarian councillor was a healer, whose 'healing per second' metrics depended on the two factors. Firstly, the faster the encounter proceeds, the more powerful abilities the healer would be able to use without risking depleting their resources. Secondly, the more damage the players in the group take, the higher healing per second the healer would be able to achieve. Overgearing the best performing damage dealers created a possibility of the boss being 'burst down'[183] and therefore increased the utilitarian's healing per second potential. Further to that, denying item upgrades to the lowest performing team members ensured that they will take more damage than they would if their item level was higher.

The humanitarian councillor was one of the top five damage dealers in the group, whose metrics of 'damage per second' were a bit more straightforward and simply required him to do more damage than the others. Being a warlock, this particular player lacked powerful burst abilities, most of his damage was spread over time and accumulated gradually. As a consequence, the humanitarian was interested in slower encounters that would allow his numbers to ramp up. Moreover, whenever the other four highest performers had the opportunity to burst the enemy down, his own over-time numbers did not look as impressive in comparison. By channeling powerful loot towards lowest performing players, the humanitarian increased the potential length of the encounter and at the same time prevented his immediate competition from performing higher by keeping their item level in check.

To reiterate: the utilitarian was a self-reported Killer who openly declared being interested in outperforming his teammates. The humanitarian identified as an Achiever and professed that he cared about steady raid progression and very little else. Situationally, however, the two players of different types did not seem to be that much different from each other: both were able (and perhaps willing) to pursue goals of self-serving nature rather than prioritise the collective benefit of the group.

[183] Here: overpowered by using most efficient character abilities simultaneously and early into the fight.

To elucidate this further, I will offer an example that may seem to be rather extreme yet is, in fact, mechanically coherent and pragmatically relevant. The players who undertake the role of the healer are responsible for mitigating or preventing the damage their teammates may receive as well as healing them to compensate for damage already taken. A healer's individual healing per second output is affected by the number of healers in the group: the more healers there are, the more their efforts will overlap and therefore the lower each healer's individual output is likely to be.

Where the benefit of the group is concerned, it is, in most cases, safer to keep all team members alive at all times. From the perspective of an individual healer, however, it may be more beneficial for their personal output if one or more other healer characters died. Let us imagine a peak damage situation during a highest difficulty encounter. Will an Achiever healer save their healer colleague or pretend not to notice?

The question may seem controversial, at least in the light of some perspectives focused on teamwork and shared intentionality. As an example of such perspective, Mark Chen's argument on the theoretical basis of social dilemmas suggests that in video games self-serving player intentions may seamlessly translate into mutual cooperation because the collective benefit of the group has the personal benefit of the individual player as its possible consequence (Chen 2009: 49, 62). I would like to counter Chen's argument with a different hypothesis, the competitive arousal/desire to win model which Deepak Malhotra summarises as follows:

> According to the competitive arousal model, the desire to win emerges in a two-step process. First, characteristics of the competitive situation (e.g., rivalry and time pressure) stimulate physiological arousal. Second, arousal pushes motivation away from goal attainment (i.e., the rational pursuit of a scarce and contested asset) toward beating the competition at potentially high cost. (Malhotra 2010: 140)

To illustrate this theoretical construct, Malhotra refers to counterproductive auction strategies, in which a bidder is prepared to overvalue the contested item as long as this

means outbidding a rival (Malhotra 2010: 139)[184] and conducts three large-scale quantitative studies involving actual auction participants or simulated auction situations. The findings support the veracity of the competitive arousal model (Malhotra 2010: 144–145). In other words, and contra what Chen proposes, interpersonal competition is not necessarily or always rational or intended to accomplish personal benefit. In Girard's own words: 'the moment the mediator's influence is felt, the sense of reality is lost and judgment paralyzed' (Girard 1976: 4).

Besides, even when personal versus collective benefit is considered, the two are not necessarily equivalent. In my own quantitative findings, the perceived value of individual accomplishment was significantly lower than the perceived value of collective success for the English-speaking respondents (25% EN, 33% EN respectively) yet noticeably higher for the Russian-speaking gamers (40% RU, 32% RU respectively).[185] In hardcore raiding situations where personal and collective benefit is, as was earlier observed, mechanically and pragmatically separate, the urgency of mutual cooperation seems even less plausible.

There is no gainsaying that for a significant number of *World of Warcraft* endgame participants group cooperation may function in a mutually beneficial way as Chen seems to suggest. Nevertheless, I am arguing that for a number of players that is, perhaps, no less significant, group cooperation and individualistic play represent two parallel projects neither of which is regularly prioritised. In the latter case, it may be especially challenging to differentiate between Achievers and Killer incentives: absolute standards are not present and dominating the meters is, unambiguously, a demonstration of superiority.

---

[184] This phenomenology is entirely similar to that of Girard's mimetic rivalry: the contested object is of secondary relevance at best, it is the person of the model that the rival is focused on.

[185] These approximate figures refer to the number of players who reported that individual or collective success was tremendously rewarding for them. The extreme variance across the two samples suggests that some respondents may have misrepresented their attitudes. It is difficult to establish the reason, yet it has to be said, that responses that prioritise group success are more desirable socially.

It could have been productive, perhaps, to substitute the heuristic of absolute/relative standards with that based on dominance and prestige, the terms that Joseph Henrich and Francisco Gil-White define as ‘force or force threat’ in the former case and ‘freely conferred deference’ in the latter (Henrich & Gil-White 2001: 165). To elaborate, Henrich and Gil-White argue that the social asymmetry of dominance is established by agonistic (aggressive-competitive) means and prestige represents status and influence acquired from non-agonistic sources (Henrich & Gil-White 2001: 166–168). A possible problem with this approach, however, is the modest — if not minuscule — space for non-agonistic acquisition of status in *World of Warcraft* endgame. If raiding is a core activity that most endgame players are involved in, requirements and expectations concerning player ranking and metrics will almost inevitably become an important factor at some point. Since these kinds of metrics can only be obtained in competition with other players, the relevance of any non-competitive status is instrumentally questionable.

4.9.3 Mimetic type acquisition

I hope that the analysis of *World of Warcraft* endgame situation presented earlier in the thesis goes some way to foreground the means of establishing superior status and the instrumental salience of this status in most meaningful aspects of gameplay. At this point I would like to restate one of the problems I began with, the two limitations of player types that Bartle formulates as follows:

> ‘It [player types theory] doesn’t account for players who appear to play one style while actually playing another. [. . .] It assumes that players are independent.’ (Bartle 2004: 140)

I also would like to propose a solution grounded in the mimetic theory. From the mimetic standpoint we do not have to assume that players are independent for the simple reason that we have to assume the opposite. We have to assume that the players acquire their ongoing playstyle by means of reflexive imitation or that it was in some

other way suggested to them. To describe the mechanism of this imitation, we should revisit player-character identity (see 4.1.2 of this thesis) which I referred to as 'a portable collection of cues, signs and objective properties that may, together or separately, constitute an object of desire'. We should also take into account the link between identity and player motivation: since identity is achievable through immersion (Bartle 2004: 157, 202) and immersion is actualised by progression through player types (Bartle 2016a: 582) we are justified to say that in different moments of playtime the player's type constitutes a part of their identity, in other words, represents their state of being at that particular moment. Finally, we should recall the central principle of mimetic desire: it is not the object itself that the subject is focused on, but the state of being which this object is believed to bestow, and which is seen as desirable because it is projected by the model.

The conflation of the type's objective attributes with the state of being the type represents is a possible reason why the questionnaire based on Bartle's theory types (Andreasen & Downey 1999) is not a reliable way of telling the difference between Achievers and Killers (Bartle 2004: 146). This indiscrimination is exemplified by one of the questions intended, precisely, to register the respondent as a possible Achiever or Killer:

> 'Would you rather: a) Have a sword twice as powerful as any other in the game [or] b) Be the most feared person in the game' (Andreasen & Downey 1999: para 34).

From the mimetic standpoint this opposition is deeply erroneous as it assumes mutual exclusivity of the two clearly sequential choices. If someone wants to be the most feared person in the game, having a sword twice as powerful as any other would *certainly* go a long way towards reaching this particular goal state. Conversely, *why* would anyone want to have the most powerful weapon *in a multiplayer game*? Castronova seems to have little doubts on the matter:

> Online games exhibit economic inequality so vast and so obvious that it dwarfs real-world inequality. When warriors acquire their priceless, epic, two-handed

> sword — usually a massive, glowing, singing pillar of shiny red steel that they carry around everywhere they go — they flaunt it. (Castronova 2007: 143).

In other words, the weapon constitutes an object of desire — a highly visible marker of superiority to which the rest of the players are exposed.[187] Having a sword like that indicates the owner as a model for anyone in close proximity. High visibility of the attribute increases its value in representing the identity which an imitator in proximity is likely to want to appropriate.

Mimetic acquisition of player types, therefore may proceeds from the *cues, signs and objective properties* — character equipment, character titles, PvE progression, item level, performance meter numbers and so forth — that some other player displays, and the imitator can discern and attribute to a particular goal state correspondent to a particular motivation. To simplify: the player sees another player achieve the highest score on the damage meters, infers the motivation correspondent to the Achiever type, links the desirability of the meter scores to the state of being an Achiever and sets off to appropriate both the scores and the state of being they inferred from it. The process, as was earlier observed, is modulated by proximity and exposure: the type the player is more likely to acquire is the one the player observes the most and at a closest range. Consequently, if either of the four types is disproportionately supported or incentivised by the game, this is the type that a greater number of players are likely to pursue.

Further to the above as well as to address the second limitation of player types theory, I propose that the player is not necessarily and always conscious of what style they are playing currently, let alone the style they may be playing tomorrow. Their player type may be quite volatile in cases when it is regulated by spontaneous imitation and situational rivalry. To further elucidate the matter, I will finalise the loot council story referred to earlier (4.6.2 and 4.9.2 of this thesis) by revealing the ultimate plot twist.

---

[187] Virtual environments to which the Bartle Test refers have little to no visual fidelity, yet various markers of quality or status exist and are observable by the players. Consequently, the issue I take with the conflation of status and its attribute is justified.

Both the utilitarian Killer and the humanitarian Achiever consistently parsed well above 95%. The Killer scored slightly higher and was very vocal about parses and their importance. Regardless of playing a different role, the Achiever was constantly exposed to the Killer's highly visible parses (which were not uncommonly brought up by the teammates). Those high percentage parses became a contested object which defined the relationship between the two endgame players, with the perceived value of the object growing along with their rivalry:

> The value of an object grows in proportion to the resistance met with in acquiring it. And the value of the model grows as the object's value grows. Even if the model has no particular prestige at the outset, even of all that 'prestige' implies — *praestigia*, spells and phantasmagoria — is quite unknown to the subject, the very rivalry will be quite enough to bring prestige into being. The mechanical character of primary imitation makes it likely that the subject will misinterpret the automatic aspect of his rivalry with the model. When the subject interrogates himself about this relationship of opposition, he will tend to endow it with meanings it does not possess. (Girard 1987: 295)

The two loot councillors, who may seem to have represented different approaches to collective good, were, in all probability, using those distinctions as a pretext for undermining each other. As members of a permanent roster raiding team, the two were always in close proximity, and though their different roles did not allow them to compete by way of meter racing they battled on the field of loot distribution. In some sense, the Achiever player may have become a Killer by meeting one and desiring the object the Killer had in his possession. Simultaneously, the Killer player may have temporarily transformed into an Achiever, which could have proceeded along the same lines; — the object of value exposed, the model in close proximity, the aggressive action instrumentally available:

> If desire is allowed to follow its own bent, its mimetic nature will almost always lead it into a double bind. The unchanneled mimetic impulse hurls itself blindly against the obstacle of a conflicting desire. It invites its own rebuffs, and these rebuffs will in turn strengthen the mimetic inclination. We have, then, a self-perpetuating process, constantly increasing in simplicity and fervor. Whenever the disciple borrows from his model what he believes to be the 'true' object, he tries to possess that truth by desiring precisely what this model desires.

> Whenever he sees himself closest to the supreme goal, he comes into violent conflict with a rival. (Girard 1989: 148)

One of the limitations of player types theory is formulated as follows: 'It doesn't address how players change style over time. The classic path is killer to explorer to achiever to socializer, but others are possible' (Bartle 2004: 140). I propose one such possible path and suggest that the mechanism of player type change may be mimetic. In other words, I contend that when differences between the players are subdued, subject-model proximity is close and goal objects are highly visible and frequently exhibited, some players are likely to change their initial dominant player approach to that most incentivised by the game or most salient within the player's immediate social environment, where the former may, to some extent, be predictive of the latter. For instance, since *World of Warcraft* endgame tends to prioritise Achiever incentives the most, granting Achiever motivation increased mimetic potential, the possibility of Achiever type players being disproportionately represented in most in-game communities may be relatively higher.

5 Conclusion

The research question this study sought to answer was whether or not René Girard's mimetic theory is relevant in massively multiplayer online game analysis. I will give a brief overview of the route that I took and the contributions to knowledge that I made while pursuing the answer.

In chapter 1 I situated the mimetic theory within contemporary neuroscientific tendencies. Those tendencies could not be a prominent feature of this research since there is no reliable data on mirror neuron phenomena in digitally mediated playable environments. However, the discovery of mirror neurons, as well as the elaboration of the stimuli that cause mirror neurons to discharge add some empirical substance to Girard's previously hypothetical constructions.

In chapter 2 I provided a succinct, yet comprehensive explication of the mimetic theory and its central concepts. In some respects, this overview modernises Girard's argument to be more suitable for the needs of practical game development: my implementation of the theory is based, significantly, on the concepts of proximity and intersecting possibilities yet Girard uses this metaphor only once, preferring more literary or esoteric explanations. I used this theoretical elaboration to contextualise the link between the mimetic theory and Bartle's player types: in the context of multiplayer video games, mimetic desire may be thought of as equivalent to imitative motivation. By looking at the two theories in combination, this study poses a question of whether or not player motivation can be imitated or suggested and what the mechanics of such imitation may be.

In chapter 3 I presented the methodology in a manner sufficiently detailed to make my choice of approach entirely transparent. I argued that interdisciplinary approaches have their place in MMO analysis and advocated a hands-on approach to MMO research. In the same section I introduced my reasoning for running a quantitative study within two

different gamer demographics and recommend the assessment of variance across isolated samples as an efficient measure of data validation.

In chapter 4 I proceeded to spell out the findings related to the phenomenology of mimetic desire in *World of Warcraft* and by extension other MMOs. First and foremost, I proposed an approach to formalising the player character identity of the *other* — which was essential for the purpose of this study and may be helpful in future MMO-related research. In the following sections, I applied this formalisation to player character identity to examine the traditional components of identity construction in *World of Warcraft* and other MMOs. In doing so, I addressed some long-time challenges of MMO research — virtual cross-gendering and virtual 'xenophobia' in particular — from the perspective of the mimetic theory. Having foregrounded the low instrumental viability of *World of Warcraft* identity differentiations, I turned to an examination of *World of Warcraft* endgame phenomenon and its characteristics as mimetic crisis. In particular, I addressed the objects of mimetic desire in *World of Warcraft* and model-obstacle relationships linked to the acquisition of these objects. I used the notion of *World of Warcraft* endgame as mimetic crisis to address Bartle type player motivations again and observed that they are mechanically and pragmatically diffuse, just like the other modes of differentiation which were referred to earlier. In the concluding section of the chapter, I presented my argument regarding implicit competition and its mechanical urgency and relevance. I also argued, that in some cases, a motivation incentivised by the game or especially salient within the player's social environment is likely to be the actual drive behind what may be self-reported or even perceived as some entirely different motivation to play. In other words, I argued that conflictual imitation may be a decisive factor of some socially situated gaming experiences.

To summarise: analysis and fieldwork disclose a variety of mimetic dependencies and processes embedded in the representational dimension of the game and its gameplay mechanics. Themes and patterns consistent with concepts and notions of the mimetic theory are a significant presence in MMO game mechanics and representational

material as well as the players' behaviours and gameplay strategies, emergencies and conventions. Further, these imitative phenomena become a crucial aspect of motivation to play insofar as mimetic goal activation is present and strongly influenced by goal proximity. The study concludes that imitative goal-setting and implicit intra-group competition are encouraged and reproduced through fictions, mechanics and social interactions within *World of Warcraft*.

From the findings above, I conclude that concepts and schemas derived from René Girard's mimetic theory can be used productively as a tool of critical analysis in theoretical or academic contexts as well as practical heuristics and practical game design solutions.

To give an example of the former: applying the concept of mimetic rivalry to collective PVE gameplay scenarios can lead to unexpected findings in the area of intra-group competition, conflicted goals or hidden motivations which can be partially verified by examination of encounter logs and individual parses (healer cooldowns used simultaneously may be an indication of mimetic rivalry, an encounter terminated after a single character death may point to a model seeking to protect its status and so forth).

To give an example of the latter: different combinations of proximity, visibility and exposure can allow the designer to compose practical heuristics that would have some limited predictive potential. One of the major complications of game design has to do with the fact that the designer cannot know what the player will do. However, if the designer assumes that some players will seek to imitate a model, they can create the model for the player to imitate and in so doing make their player experience more manageable.

The most significant limitation of this study should be emphasised: it only addressed collective gameplay and not solitary play that some MMO participants may pursue. In other words, while the study offers an extensive perspective on group PvE gameplay and allows implications to be made towards PvP gameplay, it does not cover the players who neither PvP or PvE. Mimetic desire is necessarily a social phenomenon, it requires

at least two participants, which is the situation extremely common in most MMOs, but no default configuration may exist without exceptions and the presence of this exceptions must be duly acknowledged.

By way of an afterword, studying imitation in multiplayer video games is an opportunity to advance the fields of game studies and imitation research alike. This thesis uncovers the tip of the iceberg and does it from a particular viewpoint which is by no means the only feasible perspective. With all the limitations of this approach, however, it is far from depleted, and worthy of a follow-up study. In particular, a very important issue which was not addressed and may be the subject of further research is mimetic phenomena in permanent death communities. By my estimation, the findings of such investigation would have been extremely different from those of the current study. The primacy of absolute and not relative metrics — the character is dead or alive, everything else is negligible — is likely to reconfigure (if not entirely dispose of) mimetic desire. The increased risks and higher degree of gameplay challenge faced by permanent death player characters would perhaps make the scapegoat mechanism relevant by virtue of 'actual' existential threat being present. Finally, the fact that permanent death players operate within regular MMO communities is promising in terms of Girard's less developed notions of conspicuous non-consumption (Girard 1996: 10–12) and hero's askesis (Girard 1976: 153–175). I would expect this discussion to be illuminating and the reason I did not undertake it at this point was the complete absence of permanent death tradition in *World of Warcraft*. In addition to that, since I advocate a hands-on approach to MMO research, the subject would have required me to play permanent death myself, which would have significantly limited the scope of my study as well as decreased its tempo. The initial mimetic project now concluded, I will draw on the wealth of theoretical and empirical data I have accumulated in the process and use it to address the issue above and many other possible issues, in forms a lot less expansive, but hopefully, no less informative.

Appendix A: Combined survey results

		n	**EN**	*n*	**RU**
Q1 On an average week, how much time do you spend raiding?	Less than 6 hours	64	**37.65%**	45	**27.44%**
	Between 6 and 12 hours	88	**51.76%**	84	**51.22%**
	More than 12 hours	18	**10.59%**	35	**21.34%**
Q2 How much time, if any, did you raid within the last 7 days?	Less than 6 hours	93	**54.71%**	64	**39.02%**
	Between 6 and 12 hours	67	**39.41%**	67	**40.85%**
	More than 12 hours	10	**5.88%**	33	**20.12%**
Q3 On average, how many kills per boss did you score during the previous/current raid tier? Please provide an estimated number of boss kills in a raid, any difficulty apart from the LFR.	Less than 10 kills per boss	55	**32.54%**	34	**20.73%**
	Between 10 and 15 kills per boss	43	**25.44%**	63	**38.41%**
	Between 15 and 25 kills per boss	44	**26.04%**	41	**25.00%**
	More than 25 kills per boss	27	**15.98%**	26	**15.85%**

Q4 In general, what raid difficulty do you currently prefer?	Normal Mode (or lower)	37	**21.76%**	25	**15.25%**
	Heroic Mode	82	**48.24%**	69	**42.07%**
	Mythic Mode	51	**30.00%**	70	**42.68%**
Q5 How likely are you to raid at the Mythic difficulty within the next 12 months?	Very unlikely	55	**32.35%**	40	**24.39%**
	Rather unlikely	39	**22.94%**	25	**15.24%**
	Rather likely	26	**15.29%**	28	**17.07%**
	Very likely	50	**29.41%**	71	**43.29%**
Q6 In general, do you feel the players who don't raid (PvPers, roleplayers and the like) have positive attitude towards or negative attitude towards raiders, or rather than that there is no connection between raiding or non-raiding and the relationship between different kinds of players?	I think they have positive attitude towards raiders	8	**4.71%**	12	**7.32%**
	I think they have negative attitude towards raiders	63	**37.06%**	25	**15.24%**
	I don't think non-raiders have any particular attitude towards raiders	99	**58.24%**	127	**77.44%**
Q7 In general, which role in a raid group do you play the most — a Tank, a Healer or a DPS?	I play Tank most of the time	22	**12.94%**	18	**10.98%**

	I play Healer most of the time	48	**28.24%**	34	**20.73%**
	I play DPS most of the time	100	**58.82%**	112	**68.29%**
Q8 In general, what faction do you play when you raid — Horde, Alliance or both?	I play Horde most of the time	80	**47.06%**	62	**37.80%**
	I play Alliance most of the time	77	**45.29%**	94	**57.32%**
	I play Horde and Alliance in more or less equal proportion	13	**7.65%**	8	**4.88%**
Q9 Within your preferred raid difficulty, how would you rate your overall raiding ability: your knowledge of your class, your awareness of boss mechanics and your performance in your role?	Poor	1	**0.59%**	1	**0.61%**
	Fair	15	**8.82%**	8	**4.88%**
	Good	45	**26.47%**	50	**30.49%**
	Very good	81	**47.65%**	83	**50.61%**
	Excellent	28	**16.47%**	22	**13.41%**
Q10 Would you describe yourself as a core member of the group, as an average yet steady performer, or rather as an undeperforming member of the group mostly taken as a fill-in?	I'm not performing very well yet, but it is important for the group to have the required numbers, so I contribute that	10	**5.88%**	17	**10.37%**
	I'm not a star player but my performance is stable, my	88	**51.76%**	122	**74.39%**

	attendance is good, and I am well aware of boss mechanics				
	I'm a core member of the raid group, my performance is absolutely essential to the raid's success	72	**42.35%**	25	**15.24%**
Q11 Would you say there is someone in your group who plays your role — Tank, Healer, Ranged DPS or Melee DPS significantly better than you do?	Yes, there is a person (people) who performs much better than me in my role	85	**50.00%**	78	**47.56%**
	No, I think I am the best player in the group where my role is concerned	42	**24.71%**	44	**26.83%**
	I don't know, I avoid drawing these kinds of comparisons	43	**25.29%**	42	**25.61%**
Q12 Raiding often requires much time, effort and dedication. Many raiders find additional motivation in the success of their co-players. How inspiring for you are the raid groups that were the first in the world to clear the Mythic difficulty, World Top 100 guilds?	Not inspiring at all	92	**54.12%**	79	**48.17%**
	Slightly inspiring	58	**34.12%**	60	**36.59%**
	Very inspiring	15	**8.82%**	18	**10.98%**
	Extremely inspiring	5	**2.94%**	7	**4.27%**
Q13 How inspiring for you are the raid groups that were the first to clear the Mythic	Not inspiring at all	112	**65.88%**	82	**50.00%**

difficulty on the server you play on?					
	Slightly inspiring	36	**21.18%**	63	**38.41%**
	Very inspiring	21	**12.35%**	13	**7.93%**
	Extremely inspiring	1	**0.59%**	6	**3.66%**
Q14 How inspiring for you are the highest ranked players in the world, World Top 100 players?	Not inspiring at all	95	**56.21%**	73	**44.51%**
	Slightly inspiring	43	**25.44%**	54	**32.93%**
	Very inspiring	22	**13.02%**	27	**16.46%**
	Extremely inspiring	9	**5.33%**	10	**6.10%**
Q15 How inspiring for you are the highest ranked players on the server you play on?	Not inspiring at all	101	**59.76%**	80	**48.78%**
	Slightly inspiring	46	**27.22%**	60	**36.59%**
	Very inspiring	20	**11.83%**	18	**10.98%**
	Extremely inspiring	2	**1.18%**	6	**3.66%**
Q16 How inspiring for you are the best performing players in the raid group you raid with?	Not inspiring at all	33	**19.41%**	32	**19.51%**
	Slightly inspiring	50	**29.41%**	81	**49.39%**
	Very inspiring	71	**41.76%**	43	**26.22%**

	Extremely inspiring	16	**9.41%**	8	**4.88%**
Q17 Raiding is a complex, demanding activity that often requires preparation and research. How often do you consult with boss strategy guides produced by world's best raid groups?	Never	13	**7.65%**	10	**6.10%**
	Sometimes	56	**32.94%**	34	**20.73%**
	Often	62	**36.47%**	61	**37.20%**
	All the time	39	**22.94%**	59	**35.98%**
Q18 How often do you consult with class guides put together by world's best players?	Never	14	**8.24%**	9	**5.49%**
	Sometimes	44	**25.88%**	40	**24.39%**
	Often	63	**37.06%**	51	**31.10%**
	All the time	49	**28.82%**	64	**39.02%**
Q19 How often do you refer to combat logs of highest ranked raiders in the world?	Never	76	**44.71%**	52	**31.71%**
	Sometimes	46	**27.06%**	58	**35.37%**
	Often	30	**17.65%**	26	**15.85%**
	All the time	18	**10.59%**	28	**17.07%**

Q20 How often do you check out armory profiles of highest ranked players in the world?	Never	72	**42.35%**	41	**25.00%**
	Sometimes	72	**42.35%**	67	**40.85%**
	Often	15	**8.82%**	30	**18.29%**
	All the time	11	**6.47%**	26	**15.85%**
Q21 How often do you refer to combat logs of highest ranked players on your server?	Never	113	**66.47%**	83	**50.61%**
	Sometimes	34	**20.00%**	56	**34.15%**
	Often	17	**10.00%**	17	**10.37%**
	All the time	6	**3.53%**	8	**4.88%**
Q22 How often do you check out armory profiles of highest ranked players on your server?	Never	105	**61.76%**	78	**47.56%**
	Sometimes	46	**27.06%**	65	**39.63%**
	Often	16	**9.41%**	14	**8.54%**
	All the time	3	**1.76%**	7	**4.27%**
Q23 How often do you refer to combat logs of best performing players in your raid group?	Never	52	**30.59%**	47	**28.66%**
	Sometimes	45	**26.47%**	61	**37.20%**

	Often	42	**24.71%**	34	**20.73%**
	All the time	31	**18.24%**	22	**13.41%**
Q24 How often do you check out Armory profiles of best performing players in your raid group?	Never	55	**32.35%**	50	**30.49%**
	Sometimes	69	**40.59%**	64	**39.02%**
	Often	35	**20.59%**	32	**19.51%**
	All the time	11	**6.47%**	18	**10.98%**
Q25 How often do you refer to your own combat logs?	Never	18	**10.59%**	21	**12.80%**
	Sometimes	45	**26.47%**	29	**17.68%**
	Often	37	**21.76%**	48	**29.27%**
	All the time	70	**41.18%**	66	**40.24%**
Q26 How often do you access your own armory profile?	Never	18	**10.59%**	15	**9.15%**
	Sometimes	81	**47.65%**	63	**38.41%**
	Often	43	**25.29%**	48	**29.27%**
	All the time	28	**16.47%**	38	**23.17%**

Q27 If there is a Raid Leader in your current raid group, what role does he or she play?	The raid leader is a Tank	61	**35.88%**	55	**33.54%**
	The raid leader is a Healer	27	**15.88%**	28	**17.07%**
	The raid leader is a DPS	59	**34.71%**	59	**35.98%**
	We don't have a raid leader	1	**0.59%**	2	**1.22%**
	I don't consistently raid with the same raid group	22	**12.94%**	20	**12.20%**
Q28 In general, how aware are you of the backstory of a raid encounter you are doing, i.e. whom you are fighting and for what reason?	Not aware at all	19	**11.18%**	5	**3.05%**
	Somewhat aware	68	**40.00%**	44	**26.83%**
	Very aware	49	**28.82%**	66	**40.24%**
	Extremely aware	34	**20.00%**	49	**29.88%**
Q29 In general, how aware are you of the mechanics of a boss encounter and the tactics the group needs to adhere to?	Not aware at all	1	**0.59%**	2	**1.22%**
	Somewhat aware	25	**14.71%**	15	**9.15%**
	Very aware	90	**52.94%**	111	**67.68%**
	Extremely aware	54	**31.76%**	36	**21.95%**

Q30 How important, in your opinion, is to understand, acknowledge and follow the tactics of a raid encounter?	Not important at all	1	**0.59%**	1	**0.61%**
	Somewhat important	10	**5.88%**	11	**6.71%**
	Very important	55	**32.35%**	66	**40.24%**
	Extremely important	104	**61.18%**	86	**52.44%**
Q31 How important, in your opinion, is to restrict voice communication during the pull to commands issued by the Raid Leader?	Not important at all	17	**10.00%**	10	**6.10%**
	Somewhat important	48	**28.24%**	54	**32.93%**
	Very important	78	**45.88%**	67	**40.85%**
	Extremely important	27	**15.88%**	33	**20.12%**
Q32 Would you say the first hit on the boss should be done by a Tank, or a Healer, or a DPS, or that it doesn't matter?	A Tank Should hit the boss first	134	**78.82%**	122	**74.39%**
	A Healer should hit the boss first	0	**0.00%**	0	**0.00%**
	A DPS should hit the boss first	2	**1.18%**	4	**2.44%**
	It doesn't matter who hits the boss first	34	**20.00%**	38	**23.17%**
Q33 In general, what role is the most important for the raid to succeed? Would you	The Tanks are most important for the raid's success	21	**12.35%**	12	**7.32%**

say it is Tanks, or Healers, or DPS, or all three equally?					
	The Healers are most important for the raid's success	15	**8.82%**	3	**1.83%**
	The DPS are most important for the raid's success	19	**11.18%**	18	**10.98%**
	All three roles are equally important	115	**67.65%**	131	**79.88%**
Q34 Would you say that individual performance is most important for the raid to succeed, or that coordinated effort of the group is more important, or rather that the two are equally important?	Individual performance is more important	9	**5.29%**	4	**2.44%**
	Acting coordinately as a group is more important	73	**42.94%**	62	**37.80%**
	Both factors are equally important	88	**51.76%**	98	**59.76%**
Q35 How often do you use BigWigs or Deadly Boss Mods?	Never	9	**5.29%**	8	**4.88%**
	Sometimes	6	**3.53%**	6	**3.66%**
	Often	12	**7.06%**	7	**4.27%**
	Always	143	**84.12%**	143	**87.20%**
Q36 How often do you use Weak Auras?	Never	66	**38.82%**	63	**38.41%**

	Sometimes	13	**7.65%**	20	**12.20%**
	Often	16	**9.41%**	11	**6.71%**
	Always	75	**44.12%**	70	**42.68%**
Q37 How often do you use Skada or Recount?	Never	16	**9.41%**	7	**4.27%**
	Sometimes	14	**8.24%**	8	**4.88%**
	Often	17	**10.00%**	10	**6.10%**
	Always	123	**72.35%**	139	**84.76%**
Q38 Please name the approximate number of pulls you had on a boss that you would describe as the most challenging boss you ever fought.	30 to 50 pulls	53	**31.18%**	54	**32.93%**
	50 to 100 pulls	50	**29.41%**	34	**20.73%**
	100 to 200 pulls	35	**20.59%**	32	**19.51%**
	200 to 300 pulls	15	**8.82%**	20	**12.20%**
	More than 300 pulls	16	**9.41%**	24	**14.63%**
Q39 Would you say a failed pull is more likely to be a result of individual mistake or underperformance; or mistake or underperformance	A pull is more likely to fail because of individual mistakes/underperformance	42	**24.71%**	43	**26.22%**

of the group; or both in equal measure?					
	Mistakes/underperformance on behalf of the group is the more likely cause of failure	222	**12.94%**	14	**8.54%**
	Both factors equally may be a cause of failure	106	**62.35%**	107	**65.24%**
Q40 Would you say a wipe is more likely to be caused by Tanks, or by Healers, or by DPS, or rather that players of any role are equally likely to cause a wipe?	I think a wipe is more likely to be caused by tanking	18	**10.59%**	25	**15.24%**
	I think a wipe is more likely to be caused by healing	11	**6.47%**	10	**6.10%**
	I think a wipe is more likely to be caused by damage dealing	31	**18.24%**	41	**25.00%**
	I think a wipe is equally likely to be caused by players of either role	110	**64.71%**	88	**53.66%**
Q41 The more difficult the boss encounter, the bigger pleasure it is to succeed. How rewarding for you is the success of the group?	Not rewarding at all	4	**2.35%**	7	**4.27%**
	Somewhat rewarding	27	**15.88%**	36	**21.95%**
	Very rewarding	82	**48.24%**	69	**42.07%**
	Tremendously rewarding	57	**33.53%**	52	**31.71%**
Q42 How rewarding for you is your sense of personal accomplishment?	Not rewarding at all	6	**3.53%**	7	**4.27%**

	Somewhat rewarding	40	**23.53%**	33	**20.12%**
	Very rewarding	81	**47.65%**	59	**35.98%**
	Tremendously rewarding	43	**25.29%**	65	**39.63%**
Q43 How rewarding for you are documented achievements (Ahead of the Curve and the like)?	Not rewarding at all	31	**18.24%**	21	**12.80%**
	Somewhat rewarding	67	**39.41%**	60	**36.59%**
	Very rewarding	48	**28.24%**	48	**29.27%**
	Tremendously rewarding	24	**14.12%**	35	**21.34%**
Q44 How rewarding for you are vanity drops (rare mounts, transmog skins and the like)?	Not rewarding at all	20	**11.76%**	25	**15.24%**
	Somewhat rewarding	63	**37.06%**	53	**32.32%**
	Very rewarding	47	**27.65%**	45	**27.44%**
	Tremendously rewarding	40	**23.53%**	41	**25.00%**
Q45 How rewarding for you are gear upgrades?	Not rewarding at all	4	**2.35%**	2	**1.22%**
	Somewhat rewarding	52	**30.59%**	32	**19.51%**
	Very rewarding	72	**42.35%**	75	**45.73%**

	Tremendously rewarding	42	**24.71%**	55	**33.54%**
Q46 How often do you feel disappointed when your teammate gets a piece of gear you want?	Never	61	**35.88%**	30	**18.29%**
	Sometimes	87	**51.18%**	94	**57.32%**
	Often	16	**9.41%**	20	**12.20%**
	Always	6	**3.53%**	20	**12.20%**
Q47 How old are you?	Between 18 and 25 years old	35	**20.59%**	80	**48.78%**
	Between 25 and 40 years old	91	**53.53%**	77	**46.95%**
	More than 40 years old	44	**25.88%**	7	**4.27%**
Q48 Are you male or female?	Male	144	**84.71%**	134	**81.71%**
	Female	25	**14.71%**	27	**16.46%**
	Rather not say	1	**0.59%**	3	**1.83%**

References

Aarna. (2017). How long would it take to get to level 100? *World of Warcraft community forums*. Retrieved from https://eu.battle.net/forums/en/wow/topic/17615191477

Aarseth, E. (2003). *Playing Research: Methodological approaches to game analysis*. Paper presented at DAC 2003. Melbourne, Australia. Retrieved from httpu://heim.ifi.uio.no/~gisle/ifi/aarseth.pdf

Aarseth, E. (2008). A Hollow World: World of Warcraft as Spatial Practice. In Corneliussen H. G., & Rettberg J. W., (Eds.), *Digital Culture, Play and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Aarseth, E. (1997). *Cybertext: perspectives on ergodic literature*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Aarseth, E., (2004). Genre Trouble: Narrativism and the Art of Simulation. In Wardrip-Fruin, N., & Harrigan, P. (Eds.), *First person: new media as story, performance, and game.* Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Activision Blizzard. (2015). *Activision Blizzard Announces Better-than-expected Second Quarter 2015 Financial Results*. Retrieved from http://files.shareholder.com/downloads/ACTI/517500560x0x843531/E54D33AE-B471-4321-B2C3-594512F1A778/Q2_2015_ATVI_Earnings_Press_Release.pdf

Akalai. (2016). Russians destroy BGs... *World of Warcraft community forums.* Retrieved from https://eu.battle.net/forums/en/wow/topic/17613462055?page=2

Akong'a, J. (1987). Rainmaking Rituals: A Comparative Studyof Two Kenyan Societies. *African Study Monographs,* 8 (2), 71–85.

Amtharius. (2018). Welfare Epics and Catch-up Mechanics. *World of Warcraft community forums*. Retrieved from https://eu.battle.net/forums/en/wow/topic/17623982485#post-1

and intention to play online games. *Computers in Human Behavior, 25*, 466–474.

Andreasen, E., & Downey B. (1999). *The Bartle Test*. Original English question data set retrieved from http://www.andreasen.org/bartle/questions-en.dat

Anthony, J. (2015). Current Key Perspectives in Video Gaming and Religion: Theses by Jason Anthony. *Gamevironments, 3*, 7-15.

Arenamustard. (2017). Russian 'Premades'. *World of Warcraft community forums.* Retrieved from https://eu.battle.net/forums/en/wow/topic/17614771377

ArenaNet. (2012). *Guild Wars 2* (PC). Published by NCSOFT.

Attillian. (2011). Tanks deserve better Loot. *World of Warcraft community forums*. Retrieved from https://us.battle.net/forums/en/wow/topic/2353017485?page=1

Azizhashing. (2014). How long did it take to level in WoW Vanilla? *MMO-champion community forums.* Retrieved from https://www.mmo-champion.com/threads/1591365-How-long-did-it-take-to-level-in-WoW-Vanilla

Bainbridge, W. S. (2010). *The Warcraft Civilization: Social Science in a Virtual World.* Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Ballard, M., Gray, M., Reilly, J., Noggle, M. (2009). Correlates of video game screen time among males: body mass, physical activity, and other media use. *Eating Behaviors, 10* (3), 161-167.

Bartle, R. (1996). Hearts, clubs, diamonds, spades: Players who suit MUDs. *Journal of MUD Research, 1*(1).

Bartle, R. (2004). *Designing Virtual Worlds*. Berkeley: New Riders.

Bartle, R. (2009). Understand the Limits of Theory. In Bateman, C. (Ed.), Beyond Game Design: Nine Steps Toward Creating Better Videogames. Boston: Charles River Media.

Bartle, R. (2014). Design Principles: Use and Misuse. In Quandt, T. & Kröger, S. (Eds.), *Multiplayer: The social aspects of digital gaming*. London: Routledge.

Bartle, R. (2016a). *MMOs from the Inside Out: The History, Design, Fun and Art of Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing Games*. New York: Apress Media.

Bartle, R. (2016b). *MMOs from the Outside In: The Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing Games of Psychology, Law, Government and Real Life*. New York: Apress Media.

Beer_Dude. (2011). Let the Drunken raid nights begin. Again. *Dungeons and Dragons community forums.* Retrieved from https://www.ddo.com/forums/archive/index.php/t-344249.html?s=237aa9ee30472dacb39f8ce501578a82

Bengtsson, M. (2016). How to plan and perform a qualitative study using content analysis. *Nursing Plus Open, 2*, 8–14.

Bergstrom, K. (2016). An Unwelcome Intrusion? Player Responses to Survey Research Recruitment on the World of Warcraft Forums. *Loading… The Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association,* 10 (16), 15-31.

Bertozzi, E. (2008). „You play like a girl!": Cross-gender competition and the uneven playing field. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 14, 473-487.

Billieux J., Van der Linden, M., Achab, S., Khazaal, Y., Paraskevopoulos, L., Zullino, D., & Thorens, G. (2013). Why do you play World of Warcraft? An in-depth exploration of self-reported motivations to play online and in-game behaviours in the virtual world of Azeroth. *Computers in Human Behavior, 29* (1), 103-109.

Blinka, L. (2008). The Relationship of Players to Their Avatars in MMORPGs: Differences between Adolescents, Emerging Adults and Adults. *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace, 2* (1), article 5.

Blizzard Entertainment. (2004). *World of Warcraft* (PC). Published by Blizzard Entertainment.

Blizzard Entertainment. (2008). *World of Warcraft: Wrath of the Lich King* (PC). Published by Blizzard Entertainment.

Blizzard Entertainment. (2010). *World of Warcraft: Cataclysm* (PC). Published by Blizzard Entertainment.

Blizzard Entertainment. (2012). *Diablo 3* (PC). Published by Blizzard Entertainment.

Blizzard Entertainment. (2012). *World of Warcraft: Mists of Pandaria* (PC). Published by Blizzard Entertainment.

Blizzard Entertainment. (2013). *World of Warcraft: Siege of Orgrimmar* (PC). Published by Blizzard Entertainment.

Blizzard Entertainment. (2015). *World of Warcraft: Warlords of Draenor* (PC). Published by Blizzard Entertainment.

Blizzard Entertainment. (2018). *World of Warcraft: Battle for Azeroth* (PC). Published by Blizzard Entertainment.

Bloomie. (2014). Buying Garrosh Kill. *World of Warcraft community forums*. Retrieved from http://eu.battle.net/wow/en/forum/topic/11120001979#2

Bogost, I. (2006). *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Bogost, I. (2007). *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Bogost, I. (2015). Current Key Perspectives in Video Gaming and Religion: Theses by Ian Bogost. *Gamevironments*, 3, 16–17.

Bogost, I. (2017). Video Games are Better Without Stories. *The Atalntic*, April 25. Retrieved from https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2017/04/video-games-stories/524148/

Booth, A., & Nolen, P. (2012). Choosing to compete: How different are girls and boys? *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization, 81*, 542– 555.

Bradburn, N. M., Sudman, S., & Wansink, B. (2004). *Asking Questions: The Definitive Guide to Questionnaire Design—For Market Research, Political Polls, and Social and Health Questionnaires, Revised Edition*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Braithwaite, A. (2018). WoWing Alone: The Evolution of "Multiplayer" in World of Warcraft. *Games and Culture, 13* (2), 119–135.

Brown, D., & Krzywinska, T. (2009) Movie-games and Game-movies: Towards an aesthetics of transmediality. In Buckland, W. (Ed.), *Film Theory and Contemporary Hollywood Movies*. New York: Routledge.

Brown, D. (2011). The only (end)game in town: designing for retention in World of Warcraft. In Crawford, G., Gosling V. K., & Light, B. (Eds.), *Online Gaming in Context: The social and cultural significance of online games*. London, Routledge.

Brown, D., & Krzywinska, T. (2011). Following in the Footsteps of Fellowship: A Tale of There and Back Again — Text / Translation / Tolkienisation. In Krzywinska, T., MacCallum-Stewart, E., & Parsler, J. (Eds.), *Ring Bearers: The Lord of the Rings Online as Intertextual Narrative*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Bruckman, A.S. (1993). Gender Swapping on the Internet. *Proceedings of INET '93, The Internet Society.*

Brunet, J., Sabiston, C. M., Dorsch, K. D., McCreary D. R. (2010). Exploring a model linking social physique anxiety, drive for muscularity, drive for thinness and self-esteem among adolescent boys and girls. *Body Image, 7* (2), 137-42.

Bryce, J., Rutter, J., & Sullivan, C. (2006). Digital games and gender. In Rutter J., & Bryce, J. *Understanding digital games*. London: Sage.

Bungie. (2014). *Destiny* (PC). Published by Activision.

Burke, T. (2004). What constitutes 'ethical participant observation' in MMOG ethnography? A commentary on the article. Retrieved from http://terranova.blogs.com/terra_nova/2004/10/what_constitute.html

Bushman, B. J. (2018). Teaching Students About Violent Media Effects. *Teaching of Psychology, 45* (2), 200–206.

Calleja, G. (2007). Digital Game Involvement: A Conceptual Model. *Games and Culture, 2* (3), 236–260.

Calleja, G. (2011a). *In-Game: From Immersion to Incorporation*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Calleja, G. (2011b). Narrative generation in The Lord of The Rings Online. In Krzywinska, T., MacCallum-Stewart, E., & Parsler, J. (Eds.), *Ring Bearers: The Lord of the Rings Online as Intertextual Narrative*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Caplan, J. B., & Caplan, P. J. (2005). The Perseverative Search for Sex Differences in Mathematics Ability. In A. M. Gallagher & J. C. Kaufman (Eds.), *Gender differences in mathematics: An integrative psychological approach*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Carbine Studios. (2014). *Wildstar* (PC). Published by NCSOFT.

Cassell, J., & Jenkins, H. (1998). Chess For Girls?: Feminism and Computer Games. In Cassell J., & Jenkins, H. (Eds.), *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Castronova E. (2005a) *Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online Games*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Castronova, E. (2005b). *The Horde is Evil*. Retrieved from https://terranova.blogs.com/terra_nova/2005/12/the_horde_is_ev.html

Castronova, E. (2007). *Exodus to the Virtual World: How Online Fun is Changing Reality*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

CCP Games. (2003). *EVE Online* (PC). Published by CCP Games.

Cempa. (2016). Russians in PvP EU. *MMO-champion community forums.* Retrieved from https://www.mmo-champion.com/threads/2003098-Russians-in-PvP-EU

Chaud. (2015). WoW Down to 5.5 Million Subscribers, Warcraft Movie Trailer at Blizzcon. MMO-champion. Retrieved from https://www.mmo-champion.com/threads/1890882-WoW-Down-to-5-5-Million-Subscribers-Warcraft-Movie-Trailer-at-Blizzcon

Chen, M. (2009). Communication, Coordination, and Camaraderie in World of Warcraft. *Games and Culture, 4* (1), 47–73.

Chrisafis, A. (2005). Katrina 'sent by God to punish New Orleans gays'. The Guardian, November 19. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2005/nov/19/northernireland.hurricanes2005

Cihys. (2014). New Race Models: African Americans Possible? *World of Warcraft community forums*. Retrieved from https://us.battle.net/forums/en/wow/topic/13508590968#post-15

Clarke, J., Hall, S., Jefferson, T., & Roberts, B. (1991) Subcultures, Cultures and Class. In Hall, S. & Jefferson, T. (Eds.), *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth subcultures in post-war Britain*. London: Routledge.

Cohen, J. (2000). Problems in the Field: Participant Observation and the Assumption of Neutrality. *Field Methods, 12* (4), 316-333.

Cook, D. (2006). "What are game mechanics?". lostgarden.com, available online at http://lostgarden.com/2006/10/what-are-game-mechanics.html

Corneliussen, H. (2008). World of Warcraft as a Playground for Feminism. In Corneliussen H. G., & Rettberg J. W., (Eds.), *Digital Culture, Play and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Crawford, G., & Gosling, V. (2005). Toys for Boys? Women's Marginalization and Participation as Digital Gamers. *Sociological Research Online 10* (1). Retrieved from http://www.socresonline.org.uk/10/1/crawford.html

Crawford, G., Gosling V. K., & Light, B. (2011). It's not just a game: Contemporary challenges for games research and the internet. In Crawford, G., Gosling V. K., & Light, B. (Eds.), *Online Gaming in Context: The social and cultural significance of online games*. London, Routledge.

Cryptic Studios. (2004). *City of Heroes* (PC). Published by NCSOFT.

Cunningham, S., Engelstätter, B., & Ward, M. R. (2011). Understanding the effects of violent video games on violent crime. *ZEW-Centre for European Economic Research Discussion Paper*, No. 11-042.

d'Arc, B.F, Vinkier, F., Lebreton, M., Soulières, I., Mottron, L., & Pessiglione, M. (2016). *Mimetic desire in autism spectrum disorder. Molecular Autism, 7*:45.

Davis, F. D., Bagozzi, R. P., & Warshaw, P. R. (1992). Extrinsic and Intrinsic Motivation to Use Computers in the Workplace. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 22*, 1111-1132.

Decety, J. & Chaminade, T. (2005). The Neurophysiology of Imitation and Intersubjectivity. In Hurley S. & Chater N. (Eds.), *Perspectives on Imitation: From Neuroscience to Social Science*. Vol 1, *Mechanisms of Imitation and Imitation in Animals*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Demonrage. (2008). World of Warcraft 19 Twinking Guide. GameFAQs community guides. Retrieved from https://gamefaqs.gamespot.com/pc/534914-world-of-warcraft/faqs/51817.

di Pellegrino, G., Fadiga, L., Fogassi, L., Gallese, V., & Rizzolatti, G. (1992). Understanding motor events: A neurophysiological study. *Experimental Brain Research,* 91, 176–180.

Dietz, T. L. (1998). An Examination of Violence and Gender Role Portrayals in Video Games: Implications for Gender Socialization and Aggressive Behavior. *Sex Roles, 38*, 425–442.

Dill, K. E., & Thill, K. P. (2007). Video Game Characters and the Socialization of Gender Roles: Young People's Perceptions Mirror Sexist Media Depictions. *Sex Roles, 57*, 851–864.

Doran, R. (2008). 'Editor's Introduction: Literature as Theory.' In Girard, R., *Mimesis and Theory: Essays on Literature and Criticism, 1953–2005*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Downs, E., & Smith, S. L. (2010). Keeping Abreast of Hypersexuality: A Video Game Character Content Analysis. *Sex Roles, 62* (11), 721-733.

Drachen, A. (2011). Analyzing player communication in multi-player games. In Crawford, G., Gosling V. K., & Light, B. (Eds.), *Online Gaming in Context: The social and cultural significance of online games*. London, Routledge.

Drachen, A., & Smith, J. H. (2008). Player talk: The functions of communication in multplayer role-playing games. *Computers in Entertainment, 6* (4): 1–36.

Ducheneaut, N., N. Yee, E. Nickell and R. J. Moore (2006a) Alone together? Exploring the Social Dynamics of Massively Multiplayer Online Games. *ACM Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI 2006)*; Montreal; Canada. New York: ACM, 407-416.

Ducheneaut, N., N. Yee, E. Nickell and R. J. Moore (2006a) Building an MMO With Mass Appeal: A Look at Gameplay in World of Warcraft. *Games and Culture, 1* (4), 281-317.

Ducheneaut, N., Yee, N., & Bellotti, V. (2010) The Best of Both (Virtual) Worlds: Using Ethnography and Computational Tools to Study Online Behavior. *EPIC 2010 Proceedings*, 136–148.

Dunn, R. A., & Guadagno, R. E. (2012). My avatar and me—Gender and personality predictors of avatar-self discrepancy. *Computers in Human Behavior, 28* (1), 97–106.

Dupuis, E. C., & Ramsey, M. A. (2011). The Relation of Social Support to Depression in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 41* (10), 2479–2491.

Dupuy, J.-P. (2011) Naturalizing Mimetic Theory. In Garrels S.R. (Ed.), *Mimesis and Science: Empirical Research on Imitation and the Mimetic Theory of Culture and Religion*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press.

Eccoton. (2013). Could WOW be the best MMO ever? *MMORPG.com forums*. Retrieved from https://forums.mmorpg.com/discussion/397176/could-wow-be-the-best-mmo-ever

Eklund, L. (2011). Doing gender in cyberspace: The performance of gender by female World of Warcraft players. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies,* 17(3), 323–342.

Engerman, J. (2016). *Call of Duty for Adolescent Boys: An Ethnographic Phenomenology of the Experiences within a Gaming Culture*. PhD dissertation, Department of Learning and Performance Systems, The Pennsylvania State University.

Ensslin, A. (2011). Recallin' Fagin: linguistic accents, intertextuality and othering in narrative offline and online video games. In Crawford, G., Gosling V. K., & Light, B. (Eds.), *Online Gaming in Context: The social and cultural significance of online games*. London, Routledge.

Eskelinen, M. (2001). The Gaming Situation. *Game Studies*, *1* (1). Retrieved from http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/eskelinen/

Eskelinen, M. (2004). Towards computer game studies. In Wardrip-Fruin, N., & Harrigan, P. (Eds.), *First person: new media as story, performance, and game.* Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Ezakuugorg. (2012). 50% of LFRs Dont Deserve Loot. *World of Warcraft community forums*. Retrieved from https://us.battle.net/forums/en/wow/topic/7200060241#post-1

Ferguson C. J. (2007). The Good, The Bad and the Ugly: A Meta-analytic Review of Positive and Negative Effects of Violent Video Games. *Psychiatric Quarterly*, 78 (4), 309–316.

Ferguson, C. J. (2015a). Do Angry Birds Make for Angry Children? A Meta-Analysis of Video Game Influences on Children's and Adolescents' Aggression, Mental Health, Prosocial Behavior, and Academic Performance. *Perspectives on Psychological Science, 10* (5), 646–666.

Ferguson, C. J. (2015b). Does Movie or Video Game Violence Predict Societal Violence? It Depends on What You Look at and When. *Journal of Communications, 65*, 193-212.

Ferguson, C. J. (2018). The Overhyped Data on Video Games and Aggression. *Psychology Today*, October 08.

Ferguson, C. J., Rueda, S. M., Cruz, A. M., Ferguson, D. E., Fritz, S., & Smith, S. M. (2008). Violent Video Games and Aggression: Causal Relationship or Byproduct of Family Violence and Intrinsic Violence Motivation? *Criminal Justice and Behavior, 35* (3), 311–332.

Fishbach, A., Shah, J.Y., & Kruglanski A.W. (2004). Emotional transfer in goal systems. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 40,* 723–738.

Flufflepuff. (2015). Quickest way to level from 1 to 60? *World of Warcraft community forums.* Retrieved from https://us.battle.net/forums/en/wow/topic/20754517426

Fowler, F. J. (1995). *Improving Survey Questions: Design and Evaluation*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Frasca, G. (2003). Simulation versus narrative. In Wolf M., & Perron, B. (Eds.), *The video game theory reader*. London: Routledge.

Freud, S. (1949). *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. London: The Hogarth Press.

Funcom. (2012). *The Secret World* (PC). Published by Funcom.

Funk, J. B., & Buchman D. D. (1996). Children's perceptions of gender differences in social approval for playing electronic games. *Sex Roles, 35*, 219–231.

Funk, J. B., Buchman D. D., & Germann J. N. (2000). Preference for violent electronic games, self-concept, and gender differences in young children. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 70* (2), 233–41.

Funpolice. (2018). Outlaw is trash tier now PVE. *World of Warcraft community forums*. Retrieved from https://us.battle.net/forums/en/wow/topic/20767746663?page=2

Furst, L. (2003). *Idioms of Distress: Psychosomatic Disorders in Medical and Imaginative Literature.* Albany: State University of New York Press.

Gallese, V. (2005a). ‘‘Being Like Me’’: Self–Other Identity, Mirror Neurons, and Empathy. In Hurley S. & Chater N. (Eds.), *Perspectives on Imitation: From Neuroscience to Social Science*. Vol 1, *Mechanisms of Imitation and Imitation in Animals*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Gallese, V. (2005b). Embodied simulation: From neurons to phenomenal experience. *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences, 4,* 23–48.

Gallese, V. (2007). Before and below ‘theory of mind’: embodied simulation and the neural correlates of social cognition. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B, 362,* 659–669.

Gallese, V. (2009). The Two Sides of Mimesis: Girard’s Mimetic Theory, Embodied Simulation and Social Identification. *Journal of Consciousness Studies, 16* (4), 21–44.

Gallese, V., Fadiga, L., Fogassi, L., & Rizzolatti, G. (1996). Action recognition in the premotor cortex. *Brain,* 119, 593–609.

Geraci, R. (2014). *Virtually Sacred: Myth and Meaning in World of Warcraft and Second Life*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Girard, R. (1976). *Deceit, Desire and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure.* Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Girard, R. (1986). *The Scapegoat*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Girard, R. (1987). *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*. London: Athlone Press.

Girard, R. (1989). *Violence and the Sacred*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Girard, R. (1996). Mimesis and violence: Perspectives in cultural criticism. In Williams J.G. (Ed.), *The Girard Reader*. New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company.

Girard, R. (2000). *Theatre of Envy: William Shakespeare*. Leominster: Gracewing.

Girard, R. (2001a). *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*. Leominster: Gracewing.

Girard, R. (2001b). "What Is Occurring Today Is a Mimetic Rivalry on a Planetary Scale." *LE MONDE,* November 6, 2001. Retrieved from https://www.uibk.ac.at/theol/cover/girard/le_monde_interview.html

Girard, R. (2008a). *Evolution and Conversion: Dialogues on the Origins of Culture*. London: Continuum.

Girard, R. (2008b). *Mimesis and Theory: Essays on Literature and Criticism, 1953–2005*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Girard, R. (2011). Mimesis and Science: An Interview with René Girard. In Garrels S.R. (Ed.), *Mimesis and Science: Empirical Research on Imitation and the Mimetic Theory of Culture and Religion*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press.

Girard, R. (2013). *Anorexia and Mimetic Desire*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press.

Goggin, J. (2011). Playbour, Farming and Leisure. *Ephemera, 11*(4) 357–358.

Gold, R. (1958). Roles in Sociological Field Observations. *Social Forces, 36* (3), 217-223.

Golub, A. (2010) Being in the World (of Warcraft): Raiding, Commitment and Knowledge Production in a Massively Multiplayer Online Game. *Anthropological Quarterly, 83* (1), 17-46.

Gottlieb, O. (2105). Current Key Perspectives in Video Gaming and Religion: Theses by Owen Gottlieb. *Gamevironments, 3,* 18-25.

Green, E. (2001). Technology, leisure and everyday practices. In Green, E., & Adam, A. (Eds.), *Virtual Gender: Technology, consumption and identity*. London: Routledge.

Greitemeyer, T. (2018). The spreading impact of playing violent video games on aggression. C*omputers in Human Behavior*, 80, 216-219.

Griffits, M. D., Davies, M. N., & Chappell, D. (2003). Breaking the stereotype: The case of Online Gaming. *Cyberpsychology and Behaviour, 6* (1), 81–91.

Grossbard, J. R., Neighbors, C., & Larimer, M. E. (2011). Perceived norms for thinness and muscularity among college students: what do men and women really want? *Eating behaviors, 12* (3), 192-199.

Guadagno, R. E., Muscanell, N., Okdie, B. M., & Ward, T. B. (2011). Even in virtual environments women shop and men build: A social role perspective on Second Life. *Computers in Human Behavior, 27*, 304-308.

Guild Wars 2 Official Wiki. (2013). *Dredge*. Retrieved from https://wiki.guildwars2.com/wiki/Dredge

Gwynnethe. (2018). Do you see your character(s) as yourself? *World of Warcraft community forums*. Retrieved from https://us.battle.net/forums/en/wow/topic/20762077331?page=1

Halpern, D. F., Benbow, C. P., Geary, D. C., Gur, R. C., Hyde, J. S., & Gernsbacher, M. A. (2007). The Science of Sex Differences in Science and Mathematics. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest, 8*(1), 1–51.

Hartmann, T., & Klimmt, C. (2006). Gender and Computer Games: Exploring Females' Dislikes. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 11* (4), 910–931. 910–931.

Hashtronaut. (2017). [EU] The Russians in BGs. *MMO-champion community forums.* Retrieved from

Haug, W.F. (1986). *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics: Appearance, Sexuality and Advertising in Capitalist Society*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Hebdige, D. (2005). *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. London: Routledge.

Hellmans. (2013). Race For Epics - The Undeserved Loot Isle. *World of Warcraft community forums*. Retrieved from https://eu.battle.net/forums/en/wow/topic/8016881679#post-8

Henrich, J., & Gil-White, F.J., The evolution of prestige: freely conferred deference as a mechanism for enhancing the benefits of cultural transmission. *Evolution and Human Behavior, 22* (3), 165-196.

Higgin, T. (2009). Blackless Fantasy: The Disappearance of Race in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games. *Games and Culture, 4* (1), 3–26.

Hilgard, J., Engelhardt, C. R., & Rouder, J. N. (2017). Overstated evidence for short-term effects of violent games on affect and behavior: A reanalysis of Anderson et al. (2010). *Psychological Bulletin, 143* (7), 757-774.

Hoggart, R. (2009). *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working-Class Life*. London: Penguin Classics.

Holbart. (2016). Russians Cheat In BG. *World of Warcraft community forums*. Retrieved from https://eu.battle.net/forums/en/wow/topic/17612982332

Hsieh, H.-F., & Shannon, S. F. (2005). Three Approaches to Qualitative Content Analysis. *Qualitative Health Research*, 15 (9), 1277–1288.

Hsu, C.-L., & Lu, H.-P. (2004). Why do people play on-line games? An extended TAM with social influences and flow experience. *Information & Management, 41*, 853–868.

https://www.mmo-champion.com/threads/2161914-EU-The-Russians-in-BGs/

Huesmann L.R. (2005). Imitation and the Effects of Observing Media Violence on Behavior. In Hurley S. & Chater N. (Eds.), *Perspectives on Imitation: From Neuroscience to Social Science*. Vol 2, *Imitation, Human Development, and Culture*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Huh. S., & Williams D. (2010). Dude Looks like a Lady: Gender Swapping in an Online Game. In Bainbridge W.S. (Ed.), *Online Worlds: Convergence of the Real and the Virtual*. London: Springer-Verlag.

Hunicke, R., Leblanc, M., & Zubek, R. (2004). MDA: A Formal Approach to Game Design and Game Research. In *Proceedings of the Challenges in Games AI Workshop, Nineteenth National Conference of Artificial Intelligence*. San Jos: AAAI Press.

Hurlbut, W. (2011). Desire, Mimesis, and the Phylogeny of Freedom. In Garrels S.R. (Ed.), *Mimesis and Science: Empirical Research on Imitation and the Mimetic Theory of Culture and Religion*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press.

Iacoboni, M. (2005). Understanding Others: Imitation, Language, and Empathy. In Hurley S. & Chater N. (Eds.) *Perspectives on Imitation: From Neuroscience to Social Science*. Vol 1, *Mechanisms of Imitation and Imitation in Animals*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Imlikeabird. (2015). Russians in pvp should be removed. *World of Warcraft community forums.* Retrieved from https://eu.battle.net/forums/en/wow/topic/15161331440#1

Ivory, D. (2009). Still a Man's Game: Gender Representation in Online Reviews of Video Games. *Mass communication and Society,* 9 (1), 103-114.

Jacobus, Mary. (1982). Is There a Woman in This Text? *New Literary History, 14* (1), 117–141.

Jay, N. (1992). *Throughout Your Generations Forever: Sacrifice, Religion and Paternity.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Jayanth, M. (2014). 52% of gamers are women – but the industry doesn't know it. *The Guardian,* September 18. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/sep/18/52-percent-people-playing-games-women-industry-doesnt-know

Jefferson, T. (1991). Cultural Responses of the Teds: The defence of space and status. In Hall, S. & Jefferson, T. (Eds.), *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth subcultures in post-war Britain.* London: Routledge.

Jenkins, H. (2004). Game Design as Narrative Architecture. In Wardrip-Fruin, N., & Harrigan, P. (Eds.), *First person: new media as story, performance, and game.* Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Jenkins, H. (2007). *The Wow Climax: Tracing the Emotional Impact of Popular Culture*. New York: New York University Press.

Johnsen, W. A. (2003). *Violence and Modernism: Ibsen, Joyce, and Woolf.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida.

Juul, J. (2001). Games telling stories? - A brief note on games and narratives. *Game Studies, 1* (1). Retrieved from http://www.gamestudies.org/0101/juul-gts/

Kamaaki. (2008). Does your WoW character reflect your personality? *Wowhead community forums.* Retrieved from https://www.wowhead.com/forums&topic=29136

Karlsen, F. (2011). Entrapment and Near Miss: A Comparative Analysis of Psycho-Structural Elements in Gambling Games and Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games. *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction 9,* 193-207.

Kazooie. (2018). How long does it take to get from 0-110 now? *World of Warcraft community forums*. Retrieved from https://us.battle.net/forums/en/wow/topic/20761767056

Kennedy, H. W. (2007). Female Quake players and the politics of identity. In Atkins, B., & Krzywinska, T. (Eds.), *Videogame, Player, Text*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Keyboard Champion. (2014). Why are russians good at PvP? *MMO-champion community forums.* Retrieved from https://www.mmo-champion.com/threads/1612656-Why-are-russians-good-at-PvP

Kim, J.L., Sorsoli, C.L., Collins, K., Zylbergold, B.A., Schooler, D., & Tolman D. L. (2007). From sex to sexuality: exposing the heterosexual script on primetime network television. *Journal of Sex Research, 44* (2), 145-157.

King, G., & Krzywinska, T. (2006). Tomb Raiders and Space Invaders: Videogame Forms and Contexts. London: I.B. Tauris.

Kirkpatrick, G. (2011). *Aesthetic Theory and the Videogame*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Kirwan, M. (2000). Introduction to the Second Edition. In Girard, R., *Theatre of Envy: William Shakespeare*. Leominster: Gracewing.

Kirwan, M. (2009). Girard and Theology. London: T&T Clark.

Klastrup, L., & Tosca, S. (2011). When fans become players: The Lord of the Rings Online in a transmedial world perspective. In Krzywinska, T., MacCallum-Stewart, E., & Parsler, J. (Eds.), *Ring Bearers: The Lord of the Rings Online as Intertextual Narrative*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Klimmt, C. Hefner, D., & Vorderer, P. (2009). The Video Game Experience as "True" Identification: A Theory of Enjoyable Alterations of Players' Self-Perception. Communication Theory, 19, 351-373.

Kofman, S. (1980). The Narcissistic Woman: Freud and Girard. *Diacritics*, 10 (3), 36–45.

Kohlbacher, F. (2006). The Use of Qualitative Content Analysis in Case Study Research. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research, 7* (1).

Koo, D.-M. (2009). The moderating role of locus of control on the links between experiential motives

Krippendorff, K. (1989). Content analysis. In Barnouw, E., Gerbner, G., Schramm, W., Worth, T. L., & Gross, L. (Eds.), *International encyclopedia of communication* Vol. 1, 403–407. New York, NY: Oxford University Press. Retrieved from http://repository.upenn.edu/asc_papers/226

Krippendorff, K. (2004). *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Krzywinska, T. (2006). The Pleasures and Dangers of the Game: Up Close and Personal. *Games and Culture, 1* (1), 119–122.

Krzywinska, T. (2007). Being a determined agent in (the) World of Warcraft: text/play/identity. In Atkins, B., & Krzywinska, T. (Eds.), *Videogame, Player, Text*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Krzywinska, T. (2008). World creation and lore: World of Warcraft as rich text. In Corneliussen H. G., & Rettberg J. W., (Eds.), *Digital Culture, Play and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Landy, J. (2012). Deceit, Desire and the Literature Professor: Why Girardians Exist. *Republics of Letters: A Journal for the Study of Knowledge, Politics and the Arts, 3* (1), 1–21. Retrieved from https://arcade.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/article_pdfs/ROFL_v03i01_Landy_091512_0_0.pdf

Langer, J. (2008). The Familiar and the Foreign: Playing (Post)Colonialism in World of Warcraft. In Corneliussen H. G., & Rettberg J. W., (Eds.), *Digital Culture, Play and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Lankoski, P., & and Björk, S. (2015). Formal analysis of gameplay. In Lankoski, P., & B Björk, S. (Eds.), Game research methods: An overview. ETC Press.

Leafowitz. (2015). Why Scarcity Matters. *World of Warcraft community forums*. Retrieved from https://us.battle.net/forums/en/wow/topic/18704215823

Lebreton, M., Kawa, S., d'Arc, B.F., Daunizeau, J., & Pessiglione, M. (2012). Your Goal Is Mine: Unraveling Mimetic Desires in the Human Brain. *Journal of Neuroscience, 32* (21) 7146-7157.

Lee, M.-C., & Tsai, T.-R. (2010). What Drives People to Continue to Play Online Games? An Extension of Technology Model and Theory of Planned Behavior. *International Journal of Human–Computer Interaction, 26* (6), 601-620.

Levy-Warren, M. (2008). Computer Games. In Turkle, S. (Ed.), *The Inner History of Devices*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Lin, H., & Sun C. T. (2011). Thrift players in a twisted game world? A study of private online game servers. It's not just a game: Contemporary challenges for games research and the internet. In Crawford, G., Gosling V. K., & Light, B. (Eds.), *Online Gaming in Context: The social and cultural significance of online games.* London, Routledge.

Lull. (2011). Need a bikini? I've got you un-covered! *World of Warcraft community forums*. Retrieved from https://us.battle.net/forums/en/wow/topic/3053956119

MacCallum-Stewart, E. (2008). "Never Such Innocence Again": War and Histories in World of Warcraft. In Corneliussen H. G., & Rettberg J. W., (Eds.), *Digital Culture, Play and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

MacCallum-Stewart, E. (2008). Real Boys Carry Girly Epics: Normalising Gender Bending in Online Games. *Eludamos. Journal for Computer Game Culture*. 2008, 2 (1), 27-40.

MacCallum-Stewart, E. (2011). The place of role-playing in massively multiplayer online role-playing games. In Krzywinska, T., MacCallum-Stewart, E., & Parsler, J. (Eds.), *Ring Bearers: The Lord of the Rings Online as Intertextual Narrative*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

MacCallum-Stewart, E., & Parsler, J. (2008). Role-play vs. Gameplay. The Difficulties of Playing a Role in World of Warcraft. In Corneliussen H. G., & Rettberg J. W., (Eds.), *Digital Culture, Play and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

MadSeasonShow. (2018). *WoW Memories: First Steps - Episode 1*. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0anqyc7greQ

Maggs-Rapport, F. (2000). Combining methodological approaches in research: Ethnography and interpretive phenomenology. *Journal of Advanced Nursing, 31*, 219–225.

Mäkelä, H. (2014). Narrated Selves and Others. PhD Dissertation, Faculty of Arts, University of Helsinki.

Malaby, T. M. (2007). Beyond Play: A New Approach to Games. *Games and Culture, 2* (2), 95–113.

Malhotra, D. (2010). The desire to win: The effects of competitive arousal on motivation and behavior. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes, 111* (2), 139-146.

Malone, K. L. (2009). Dragon Kill Points: The Economics of Power Gamers. *Games and Culture, 4* (3), 296-316.

Manning, F. E. (1983). The Scholar as Clown: An Approach to Play. In Manning, F. E. (Ed.), *The World of Play: Proceedings of the 7th Annual Meeting of the Association of the Anthropological Study of Play.*

Marileen. (2016). Race change, is it worth it? *World of Warcraft community forums*. Retrieved from https://eu.battle.net/forums/en/wow/topic/17613442352

Markey, P. M., & Ferguson, C. J. (2017). Teaching Us to Fear: The Violent Video Game Moral Panic and the Politics of Game Research. American Journal of Play, 10 (1), 99-115.

Markey, P. M., Markey, C. N., & French, J. E. (2015). Violent Video Games and Real-World Violence: Rhetoric Versus Data. *Psychology of Popular Media Culture,* 4, (4), 277–295.

Massie, K. (2011). Representations of race and gender within the gamespace of the MMO EverQuest. In Crawford, G., Gosling V. K., & Light, B. (Eds.), *Online Gaming in Context: The social and cultural significance of online games*. London, Routledge.

Matarese, V., & Shashok, K. (2018). Post-publication peer review in biomedical journals: overcoming obstacles and disincentives to knowledge sharing. https://doi.org/10.31229/osf.io/8kxyz

McCreary, D. R., Saucier, D. M., & Courtenay, W. H. (2005). The Drive for Muscularity and Masculinity: Testing the Associations Among Gender-Role Traits, Behaviors, Attitudes, and Conflict. *Psychology of Men & Masculinity, 6* (2), 83-94.

McEwan, I. (2013). *Sweet Tooth.* London: Vintage.

McKee H. A., Porter J. E. (2009). The ethics of internet research: a rhetorical, case-based process. Playing a Good Game: Ethical Issues in Researching MMOGs and Virtual Worlds. *International Journal of Internet Research Ethics, 2* (1), 5-37.

Meleagar. (2009). How Powergamers Made, and then Broke, the MMOG Genre. MMORPG.com. Retrieved from http://www.mmorpg.com/blogs/Meleagar/122009/5483How-Powergamers-Made-and-then-Broke-the-MMOG-Genre

Messner, M. A., Dunbar, M., & Hunt, D. (2000). The Televised Sports Manhood Formula. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues, 24* (4), 380–394.

Michaelson, G., & Pohl, M. (2001). Gender in email-based co-operative problem-solving. In Green, E., & Adam, A. (Eds.), *Virtual Gender: Technology, consumption and identity*. London: Routledge.

Miller, M. K., & Summers, A. (2007). Gender differences in video game characters' roles, appearances, and attire as portrayed in video game magazines. *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research, 57* (9-10), 733-742.

Moi, Toril. (1982). The Missing Mother: The Oedipal Rivalries of René Girard. *Diacritics, 12* (2), 21–31.

Monson, M. J. (2012). Race-Based Fantasy Realm: Essentialism in the World of Warcraft. *Games and Culture, 7* (1), 48–71.

Mortensen, T. E. (2008). Humans Playing World of Warcraft: or Deviant Strategies? In Corneliussen H. G., & Rettberg J. W., (Eds.), *Digital Culture, Play and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Murnen, S.K., Poinsatte, K., Huntsman, K., Goldfarb, J., & Glaser, D. (2015). Body ideals for heterosexual romantic partners: gender and sociocultural influences. *Body Image, 12*, :22-31.

Murray, J. (1997). *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Myers, D. (2008). Play and Punishment: The Sad and Curious Case of Twixt. Unpublished manuscript, retrieved from http://static1.1.sqspcdn.com/static/f/280482/3533905/1247015307030/Myers_PlayPunishment_031508.pdf

Nakamura, Lisa. (2001). *Race In/For Cyberspace: Identity Tourism and Racial Passing on the Internet.* Retrieved from http://mysite.du.edu/~lavita/edpx_3770_13s/_docs/nakamura_race_in_cyberspace.pdf

Nardi, B. (2010). *My Life as a Night Elf Priest: An Anthropological Account of World of Warcraft*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.

Newell, W. L. (2012). *Desire in René Girard and Jesus*. Lanham: Lexington Books.

Nisaliyah. (2017). Russian 'Premades'. *World of Warcraft community forums*. Retrieved from https://eu.battle.net/forums/en/wow/topic/17614771377#post-6

Pacherie, E. & Dokic, J. (2006). *From mirror neurons to joint actions.* Journal of Cognitive Systems Research, 7, 101–112.

Palaver, W. (2013). *René Girard's Mimetic Theory*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press.

Pale. (2013). Do you identify with your toon or compensate. *World of Warcraft community forums*. Retrieved from https://us.battle.net/forums/en/wow/topic/8796351677

Paul, C. A. (2012). *Wordplay and the Discourse of Video Games: Analyzing Words, Design and Play*. New York: Routledge.

Paul, C. A., & Philpott, J. (2011). The rise and fall of "Cardboard Tube Samurai": Kenneth Burke identifying with the World of Warcraft. In Crawford, G., Gosling V. K., & Light, B. (Eds.), *Online Gaming in Context: The social and cultural significance of online games.* London, Routledge.

Pearce, C. (2009). *Communities of play: Emergent cultures in multiplayer games and virtual worlds.* Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Prebble, L. (2014). Video games must change. Right now they are too white and too male. *The Guardian*, March 11. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/mar/11/video-games-too-white-too-male-women-ethnic-diversity

Quandt, T., Chen, V., Mäyrä, F., Van Looy, J. (2014). (Multiplayer) Gaming Around the Globe? A Comparison of Gamer Surveys in Four Countries. In Quandt, T. & Kröger, S. (Eds.), *Multiplayer: The social aspects of digital gaming.* London: Routledge.

Radde-Antweiler, K. (2015). Current Key Perspectives in Video Gaming and Religion: Theses by Kerstin Radde-Antweiler. *Gamevironments*, *3,* 30–36.

Ragnaroker. (2017). So when are Russians being removed from PvP? *World of Warcraft community forums.* Retrieved from https://eu.battle.net/forums/en/wow/topic/17615092281

Realmpop. (2018). *Realm Pop shows you population statistics on the players' characters in World of Warcraft.* Retrieved from https://realmpop.com/

Rechizit. (2013). 06/11/13 Riggnaros vs. Purplerbbz. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZzitoTT14xg

Redsteel222. (2017). How damage meters ruined certain class/specs for Vanilla WoW. *Classic WoW Reddit.* Retrieved from https://www.reddit.com/r/classicwow/comments/7jtqg9/how_damage_meters_ruined_certain_classspecs_for/

Rehak, B. (2007). Of eye candy and id: the terrors and pleasures of Doom 3. In Atkins, B., & Krzywinska, T. (Eds.), *Videogame, Player, Text*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

RelaZ. (2017). [EU] The Russians in BGs. *MMO-champion community forums.* Retrieved from https://www.mmo-champion.com/threads/2161914-EU-The-Russians-in-BGs/page2

Rettberg, J. W. (2008). Quests in World of Warcraft: Deferral and Repetition. In Corneliussen H. G., & Rettberg J. W., (Eds.), *Digital Culture, Play and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Rettberg, S. (2008). Corporate Ideology in World of Warcraft. In Corneliussen H. G., & Rettberg J. W., (Eds.), *Digital Culture, Play and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Rike, J. L. (1996). The Cycle of Violence and Feminist Constructions of Selfhood. *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture, 3,* 21–42.

Rizzolatti, G. (2005). The Mirror Neuron System and Imitation. In Hurley S. & Chater N. (Eds.), *Perspectives on Imitation: From Neuroscience to Social Science*. Vol 1, *Mechanisms of Imitation and Imitation in Animals*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Rizzolatti, G., Fadiga, L., Fogassi, L., & Gallese, V. (1996a). Premotor cortex and the recognition of motor actions. *Cognitive Brain Research,* 3, 131–141.

Royse, P., Lee, J., Undrahbuyan, B., Hopson, M., & Consalvo, M. (2007). Women and games: technologies of the gendered self. *New Media & Society, 9* (4), 555–576.

Ryan, M.-L. (2007). Beyond Ludus: narrative, videogames and the split condition of digital textuality. In Atkins, B., & Krzywinska, T. (Eds.), *Videogame, Player, Text*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Schott, G. R., & Horrell, K. R. (2000). Girl Gamers and their Relationship with the Gaming Culture. *Convergence, 6* (4), 36–53.

Schut, K. (2006). Desktop Warriors: Negotiating American Manhood in the Digital Fantasy Role-Playing Game. In Williams, J. P., Hendricks, S. Q., & Winkler, W. K. (Eds.), *Gaming as Culture: Essays on Reality, Identity and Experience in Fantasy Games*. Jefferson: McFarland.

Schwartz, L. (2006). Fantasy, realism, and the other in recent video games. *Space and Culture, 9*, 313-325.

Shaw, A. (2014). Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Short, E. (2008). Unit Operations. *Electronic Book Review*. http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/firstperson/ops

Sicart, M. (2008). Defining Game Mechanics. *Game Studies, 8* (2). Retrieved from http://gamestudies.org/0802/articles/sicart

Silverman, M., & Simon, B. (2009) Discipline and Dragon Kill Points in the Online Power Game. *Games and Culture, 4* (4), 353-378.

Sony Online Entertainment. (1999). *Everquest* (PC). Published by Sony Online Entertainment.

Stallabrass, J. (1996). *Gargantua: Manufactured Mass Culture*. London: Verso.

Steinkuehler, C. A., & Williams, D. (2006). Where Everybody Knows Your (Screen) Name: Online Games as "Third Places". *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 11*, 885-909.

Strawson, G. (2004). Against Narrativity. *Ratio (new series), XVII*, 428–452.

Suler, J. (2004). The Online Disinhibition Effect. *CyberPsychology & Behaviour, 7* (3), 321-326.

Tantleff-dunn, S., & Thompson, J. K. (2007). Breast and Chest Size Satisfaction: Relation to Overall Body Image and Self-Esteem. *Eating Disorders, 8* (3), 241-246.

Taylor, T. L. (2003). Multiple Pleasures: Women and Online Gaming. *Convergence, 9* (1), 21–46.

Taylor, T. L. (2003). Multiple Pleasures: Women and Online Gaming. *Convergence, 9* (1), 21–46.

Taylor, T. L. (2006). *Play Between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Taylor, T. L. (2008). Does World of Warcraft Change Everything? How a PvP Server, Multinational Playerbase and Surveillance Mod Scene Caused Me Pause. In Corneliussen H. G., & Rettberg J. W., (Eds.), *Digital Culture, Play and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Thawonmas, R., Yoshida, K., Lou, J.-K., & Chen, K.-T. (2009). Analysis of Area Revisitation Patterns in World of Warcraft. *ICEC '09 Proceedings of the 8th International Conference on Entertainment Computing*, 13-23.

Thorburn, D. (1987). Television as an Aesthetic Medium. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication, 4*, 161–173.

Thorndike, E. (1898). Animal Intelligence: An Experimental Study of the Associative Processes in Animals. *Psychological Monographs, 2* (4, Whole No. 8). Retrieved from https://archive.org/stream/animalintelligen00thoruoft/animalintelligen00thoruoft_djvu.txt

Tolman, D.L., Kim, J.L., Schooler, D., Sorsoli, C. L. (2007). Rethinking the associations between television viewing and adolescent sexuality development: bringing gender into focus. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 40* (1), 84.e9-16.

Trassk. (2012). Goblins are.. stereotypical Jewish? *MMO-champion community forums.* Retrieved from https://www.mmo-champion.com/threads/1163823-Goblins-are-stereotypical-Jewish

Turbine. (2006). *Dungeons and Dragons Online* (PC). Published by Standing Stone Games.

Turbine. (2007). *The Lord of the Rings Online* (PC). Published by Standing Stone Games.

Tÿchus. (2011). Tanks deserve better Loot. *World of Warcraft community forums*. Retrieved from https://us.battle.net/forums/en/wow/topic/2353017485?page=3

Umiltà, M., Kohler, E., Gallese, V., Fogassi, L., Fadiga, L., Keysers, C., & Rizzolatti, G. (2001). I know what you are doing: A neurophysiological study. *Neuron, 31*, 155–165.

Valtin, G., Pietschmann, D., Liebold, B. & Ohler, P. (2014). Methodology of measuring social immersion in online role-playing games: Exemplary experimental research on social interactions in virtual worlds. In Quandt, T. & Kröger, S. (Eds.), *Multiplayer: The social aspects of digital gaming*. London: Routledge.

Van Looy, J., Courtois, C., & De Vocht M. (2014). Self-Discrepancy and MMORPGs: Testing the Moderating Effects of Avatar Identification and Pathological Gaming in World of Warcraft. In Quandt, T. & Kröger, S. (Eds.), *Multiplayer: The social aspects of digital gaming*. London: Routledge.

Van Looy, J., Courtois, C., De Vocht M., & De Marez, L. (2012). Player Identification in Online Games: Validation of a Scale for Measuring Identification in MMOGs. *Media Psychology, 15* (2), 197-221.

Vandenbosch, L., Vervloessem, D., & Eggermont, S. (2013). "I Might Get Your Heart Racing in My Skin-Tight Jeans": Sexualization on Music Entertainment Television. *Communication Studies, 64* (2), 178-194.

Volenar. (2016). Russians!? *World of Warcraft community forums*. Retrieved from https://eu.battle.net/forums/en/wow/topic/17289172209

Whitaker, J. L., & Bushman, B. J. (2014). RETRACTED: "Boom, Headshot!": Effect of Video Game Play and Controller Type on Firing Aim and Accuracy. *Communication Research, 41* (7), 879–891.

White, H. (1978). Ethnological 'Lie' and Mythical 'Truth'. *Diacritics*, 8 (1), 2–9.

Williams, D., Ducheneaut, N., Xiong, L., Zhang, Y., Yee, N., & Nickell, E. (2006). From Tree House to Barracks: The Social Life of Guilds in World of Warcraft. *Games and Culture, 1* (4), 338–361.

Williams, D., Yee, N., & Caplan, S. (2008). Who plays, how much, and why? Debunking the stereotypical gamer profile. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 13*, 993–1018.

Williams, J.G. (2001). Foreword. In Girard, R., *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*. Leominster: Gracewing.

Williams, J.G. (Ed.) (1996). *The Girard Reader*. New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company.

Wollheim, R. (1986). *The Thread of Life. Cambridge*: Cambridge University Press.

World of Warcraft community Reddit. (2016). *Who was infamous on your server and why?* Retrieved from https://i.reddit.com/r/wow/comments/4gnn1c/who_was_infamous_on_your_server_and_why/d2jjdrw/.compact

Wright, K. (1999). WomenGamers.com: Gender Bending in Games. Retrieved from https://dondeq2.com/2018/01/09/womengamers-com-gender-bending-in-games-by-dr-kathryn-wright/

Wu, J.-H., Wang, S.-C., & Tsai, H.-H. (2010). Falling in love with online games: The uses and gratifications perspective. *Computers in Human Behavior, 26* (6), 1862-1871.

Xindralol. (2016). Russians in PvP EU. *MMO-champion community forums.* Retrieved from https://www.mmo-champion.com/threads/2003098-Russians-in-PvP-EU

Yee, N. (2005). *Motivations of play in MMORPGs: Results from a factor analytic approach.* Retrieved from http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/motivations.pdf

Yee, N. (2006). Motivations for Play in Online Games. *Cyber Psychology & Behavior, 9*, 772–775.

Yee, N. (2014). *The Proteus Paradox: How Online Games and Virtual Worlds Change Us – And How They Don't*. Orwigsburg: Yale University Press.

Yee, N. (2017). Beyond 50/50: Breaking Down the Percentage of Female Gamers by Genre. Retrieved from https://quanticfoundry.com/2017/01/19/female-gamers-by-genre/

Yee, N., & Bailenson, J. (2007). The Proteus Effect: The Effect of Transformed Self-Representation on Behavior. *Human Communication Research, 33*, 271–290.

Yee, N., Bailenson, J. N., & Ducheneaut, N. (2009). The Proteus Effect: Implications of Transformed Digital Self-Representation on Online and Offline Behavior. *Communication Research, 36* (2), 285–312.

Yee, N., Ducheneaut, N., Yao, M., & Nelson, L. (2011). Do men heal more when in drag?: conflicting identity cues between user and avatar. *CHI '11 Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, 773-776.

Yliajo. (2014). *Mythic Highmaul Down: A World First Interview with Paragon.* Retrieved from http://manaflask.com/en/articles/mythic-highmaul-down-a-world-first-interview-with-paragon#comment-1756216770

Zackariasson, P., Wåhlin, N., & Wilson T. L. (2010). Virtual Identities and Market Segmentation in Marketing in and Through Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs). *Services Marketing Quarterly, 31*, 275–295.

ZeniMax Online Studios. (2014). *The Elder Scrolls Online* (PC). Published by Bethesda Softworks.