

EXPERIENCING AZEROTH: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY INTO PLAYING THE
MASSIVE MULTIPLAYER ONLINE ROLE-PLAYING GAME (MMORPG) *WORLD*
OF WARCRAFT

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Professional Doctorate in Psychotherapy and Counselling

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2020



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Thesis Declaration

1. I declare that this thesis has been composed solely by myself and that it has not been submitted, in whole or in part, in any previous application for a degree. Except where states otherwise by reference or acknowledgment, the work presented is entirely my own.

2. I confirm that this thesis presented for the degree of Professional Doctorate in Psychotherapy and Counselling, has:

- i) been composed entirely by myself
- ii) been solely the result of my own work
- iii) not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification

3. I declare that this thesis was composed by myself, that the work contained herein is my own except where explicitly stated otherwise in the text, and that this work has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification except as specified.

Signed: Elise De Fusco

Date: 07/03/2020

Abstract

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Degree sought:	Professional Doctorate in Psychotherapy and Counselling	No. of words in the main text of thesis:	45,397
Title of thesis:	EXPERIENCING AZEROTH: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY INTO PLAYING THE MASSIVE MULTIPLAYER ONLINE ROLE-PLAYING GAME (MMORPG) WORLD OF WARCRAFT		

In this thesis I explore the following question: what are players experiencing in World of Warcraft? I examine this question through narrative inquiry. I begin by looking at the history of the Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG) and factors that have influenced their widespread success. I then move into my research rationale and gaming literature review. Next, I look at literature surrounding ideas on reality and virtual reality as I discuss my ontology (social constructionism) and epistemology (interpretivism). I also look at literature on ludology, narrative and fantasy narratives and how they are relevant in understanding and interpreting human experience as I move into my methodology (narrative inquiry) and methods (computer mediated semi-structured interview).

I relay my participants' narrative accounts through reconstructed tales, each of which highlights a specific trope that captures the sense of the narrative as I have interpreted it. I touch upon why fantasy narratives can be particularly conducive for personal exploration and understanding experience, whether through literature or gaming. I link my participants narratives to existing literature on experiences of gameplay to shed light on the complex and unique relationships people experience with (and within) MMORPGs.

The goal of this thesis is to broaden understanding on the experience of online gaming and the role it can play in people's lives, which is highly relevant to the field of psychotherapy. Through my participants' stories I strive to understand and convey the complexities of their experiences, including the sense of joy, friendship, love, loss, and accomplishment that was discovered in this strange and wonderful digital landscape. It is my hope to contribute my work to the therapeutic body of knowledge.

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Lay Summary



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Acknowledgments

Dedicated to my parents Ed & Laura, my brother and sister-in-law Ben & Kim, my Auntie Lisi, and all the friends and loved ones that have supported me for the past five years – I could not have done it without you.

I would also like to thank my supervisor Jonathan for his guidance, time, and unwavering encouragement through the writing of this thesis.

Finally, to my Grammy. I miss and love you always.

A Gaming Primer

I realised while writing this thesis that it's possible those reading it may have never picked up a video game controller. As with any new task, it may seem foreign, confusing, and intimidating. Because of this, I decided to include a brief primer on massive multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), to help readers better understand my material. In this primer I will discuss the very basics of gameplay with the hope that it will shed light on how MMORPG's work generally, to deepen understanding of my material and participants accounts.

While actual gameplay will vary, there are many commonalities to be found between all games. They will all require some sort of game system to play, whether this is a console or a computer. To move/fight/complete actions in the game will require using certain buttons on your console controller, or keys on a keyboard. Different combinations of buttons/keys will have different actionable outcomes.

All games will have lore (in-game history and localised knowledge) to varying degrees. The more elaborate role-playing games like *Warcraft*, *Everquest*, or *Final Fantasy* will typically have much more lore than first-person shooter games like *FarCry* or *Grand Theft Auto*. This lore is a structure for the game and its players, and the character's backstory derived from the lore will determine what the player needs to achieve in order to complete the game. For a game like *World of Warcraft*, this is what guides you through the realm and helps you search out the quests and raids you need to complete. It is an immersive experience, like a choose-your-own-adventure-book.

Large scale games that take place online will always have multiple servers (computers that provide data to other computers), often divided by region, and players will either choose or be assigned to a specific one. In *World of Warcraft*, servers are divided by region and type of gameplay: player versus player (PvP), player versus environment (PvE), or both PvP/PvE. In PvP, players are fighting other players, so two real people will be dueling. In PvE, players are fighting enemies that are computer code – controlled only by the game. Some servers are further delineated by whether they are role play servers. In role

play servers, players are always expected to remain in character . This means the way they speak, the content of their conversations, and the way they behave must remain in keeping with the game. Failure to do so will at least anger other players, and at the most result in banishment from the server.

In most modern role-playing games, the first thing one does is create an avatar. This avatar will be the digital representation of the player in-game, and for most players, designing an avatar is an important and occasionally lengthy process. Depending on the game, one will be able to customize varying micro and macro elements of the avatar's appearance. One would first choose the race that they would like to play with. For the purposes of this primer, I will provide the options you would find in *World of Warcraft*. Races in Azeroth (the 'world' of *World of Warcraft*) are: Human, Dwarf, Night Elf, Gnome, Draenei, Worgen, Pandaren, Orc, Undead, Tauren, Troll, Blood Elf, or Goblin. The race one chooses will affect which class(es) they can play as. Class is like a profession in that it will determine the skills, abilities, and battle role for that individual avatar. The classes in *World of Warcraft* are: Warrior, Paladin, Hunter, Rogue, Priest, Death Knight, Shaman, Mage, Warlock, Monk, Druid, or Demon Hunter.

As you can see there are a multitude of combinations that can be chosen, and players usually spend time researching the races and classes they want to play as. The variety of options also means that once someone has fully "levelled up" (reached the level cap for) one character, they can begin anew with something completely different to diversify gameplay. I will expand further on the mechanics of levelling up shortly.

After these steps are chosen, the player will then get to customize the physical appearance of their avatar. In *Warcraft*, this means choosing a set of facial features, skin colour, eye and hair colour, height, weight, and tattoos or piercings. The final step is naming the avatar. This is the name that other players will see. For some, it may be important to choose a name that aligns with the coinciding culture of their chosen race. Others may like it to be something silly, or a username they have used for years on other internet platforms. Some people can't decide on their own and instead use random name

generators. Whatever the choice, your avatar's name says something about you as a player, and in my experience, it can be challenging to find the "perfect fit".

Once you have customized your avatar, you enter the world. The game will begin with a cinematic segment, like a clip from a movie. It will explain some of the ongoing plot and will then insert you into the story. In *Warcraft*, easy quests are presented to you to help you acclimatise to gameplay and to what your role in battle will be. Battle roles are determined by the class a player has picked, and for the most part fall into one of four categories: tank, ranged damage per second (DPS), melee DPS, or healer. Tanks are responsible for drawing the attention of the boss (higher level/end level attacking creature) and sustaining most of the damage. The tank is a difficult role and usually best played by confident players. Melee damage per second is responsible for remaining up-close to the boss and attacking. A ranged damage per second is responsible for fighting from afar, usually with spells or ranged weapons like bows or guns. This role is well suited to new or less confident players, as they remain away from the main site of battle. Finally, the healer is responsible for healing themselves and other members of their team. This role is a crucial role during battle and is often better left to experienced players, as an ineffective healer will likely mean a loss for the team.

MMORPGs will also have some type of guild system, where players self-organise into groups that they quest and raid with. Raids are PvE instances¹ that can be completed with anywhere from 10-25 players. They are usually complicated and difficult to complete, but success means high level rewards. Practiced raid groups are likely to be the most consistently successful, and guilds are the easiest way to construct them. Guilds are structured and authorized by a guild leader, who determines when new players may join, and which new players are allowed in. They will also strategize and organise battle roles for the raids that need completing, and other guild members must defer to them or risk expulsion from the guild. Being a guild leader is a time-consuming and frequently stressful task. It requires a vast knowledge of the game, raids, and quests, as well as a good set of

¹ An instance is a special area that generates a new copy of the location for each group, or for a certain number of players, that enters the area.

leadership skills. Having a poor guild leader will likely result in failures and disbandment of the guild.

While it is not necessary to be in a guild, most players find that they make the game much easier to play, as at some point you *must* work together with other players. MMORPG's like *World of Warcraft* cannot be completed as an individual, so joining a guild means you can develop friendships with other players and work together with them to complete quests and raids. A well-developed partnership between friends is more likely to be successful than a group of strangers coming together for the first time. Guilds also mean you can find a group of players who have similar levels of devotion to the game, whether that is casual raiding once a week, or hardcore raiding four times a week. Guilds provide social outlets and enable players to get to know one another over weeks and months, which not only improves in-game successes, but increases the chances of real friendships developing.

Communication in-game and within guilds takes place in one of two ways. There is an in-game text-based chat system which a player can use both to speak to other players in the surrounding environment, or privately to specific players/groups. This is known as general chat. Typing specific commands into general chat can also control certain actions of your avatar; for example, typing '/dance' into the general chat window will cause your avatar to do a little dance. Players can also communicate through add-ons like Discord, whereby players speak into headset microphones and can hear the other players they are connected with. Discord is the preferred method of communication for most serious players, as it is a much faster and easier way to converse, particularly during raids where every second counts.

One of the features of online role-playing games that have made them so widespread is the accessibility of gameplay to all levels of players. Instructions on how to play the game are woven seamlessly into the plot (the interaction of ludology/narratology, something I will expand upon in Chapter 5), which is structured step-by-step until a player reaches a certain level of proficiency. Individuals who have never played a video game before would be able to join *World of Warcraft* and learn how to play. Low level quests

and activities teach you about the class you have chosen and how to best play it. There is no time limit on completing activities, so new players can take as much time as they need to adjust and learn. Failed raids and quests can be repeated an infinite number of times, so less experienced players are never discouraged from playing the game. In the same way that there is no real way to “win” an MMORPG, there is no way to lose either. By designing the game to have a series of incremental, achievable goals, players of all levels can enjoy the game. There is no instruction manual, instead you learn to play by doing. This has contributed to the widespread success of these types of videogames, as all ages and proficiencies can enjoy them.

Key commands can also be customized by each player, so a player can change the factory settings to ones that are more comfortable for them. There are also add-ons for accessibility, so even players with disabilities can enjoy playing. *World of Warcraft* has truly been designed to appeal to the largest possible player base.

To progress in the game, you receive experience points (XP) by completing quests, learning skills, and performing raids. As you aggregate XP, you begin to ‘level up’. As you reach higher and higher levels, it takes exponentially more XP to hit the next level, so levelling up can sometimes take days. This is another example where socializing with other players can provide a massive advantage. High level players can assist lower level players in their quests, enabling them to progress at a much faster rate. As a character levels up, they gain better armour and weaponry, more advanced spells, and unlock higher level raids. Players will also earn mounts (beasts that players can ride) when they reach certain levels, which means they can move between zones much faster. All these advantages contribute to a higher chance of success, so individuals are motivated to keep playing.

Though this primer gives only a brief overview of how games like *World of Warcraft* are played, even at a basic level it is easy to see why they have become so popular. They are designed in a way that anyone can play them, and structured so that learning is a part of the play. They foster social interaction and provide obtainable rewards at each step of the game. Further, the games themselves are very pleasant to play, with

bright colours, exotic sounds, and pleasing music. The sensory output is engaging and creates a vibrant atmosphere for playing. All these elements have arguably contributed to making games like *World of Warcraft* an international sensation.

Now that we have covered a primary explanation of how an MMORPG is played, I will move on to the substantive argument of this thesis. Using narrative inquiry, this thesis will explore the experiences of gameplay, and discuss some of the social, emotional, and psychological impacts on players lives.

Part I

Prelude²

I ran through the barren landscape, my feet crunching on dead grass. A red sky glared down at me, the sun a fiery haze in the distance. A blood red sea stood before me. The only sound was that of wind and my own footsteps on the ground. I felt an infinite sense of loneliness descend upon me as I stood at the shore. I panned to my left and right – no one was near. I couldn't shake a sense of unease that was beginning to bloom in my belly. What was wrong? The sea before me felt so vast as I looked out at the tiny rock that I was meant to swim too. I pressed 'z' and summoned my Oliphant. It trumpeted its hello to me, and there was a small sense of relief, a feeling that I was no longer alone in this wretched, dying place. I hopped on and we began the swim across the sea. Suddenly, a notification popped up on my screen:

"Due to scheduled maintenance, *World of Warcraft* will not be available between the hours of 9.00am and 11.am"

I looked at my clock – 8.58am. I had forgotten about the weekly maintenance, and suddenly realised what had felt so wrong. I actually *was* alone. For the first time in my gaming, I had not seen any other players. Any consistent gamer would have remembered the scheduled shutdown and would not have bothered logging on so close to the time. As a new player, I had forgotten. Alone in my flat in Leeds and alone in the world of Azeroth, I had been able to feel the digital emptiness of this landscape and had been plagued with a sense of loneliness and unease. How interesting, I thought to myself. The idea that I could feel alone in a virtual landscape, where I had been physically alone the whole time at my computer.

² Different font has been used to indicate reflexive accounts.

Introduction

It has been argued that we live in a world where we are simultaneously more connected and further isolated than ever before (Turkle, 2011). We spend so much of our lives in front of screens that it can be easy to forget to look up at the world around us. One of the most curious dichotomies in our society is the fact that the life on our screen brings us closer to people around the globe yet can disconnect us from our immediate surroundings. This juxtaposition has painted much digital media with a broad brush of “bad” and “unhealthy,” particularly regarding video games. But what are the experiences like for the players? In this thesis I will be exploring the online world of Azeroth and four people who visit it to try and understand the experience of gaming from first-hand accounts. It is my hope to contribute my work to the therapeutic body of knowledge, where gaming has historically been misunderstood and investigated through quantitative inquiry.

I explore the following question: what are players experiencing in *World of Warcraft*? I will examine this question through use of narrative inquiry. My participants have all shared narratives with me, and I in turn have interpreted and rewritten their stories in this thesis. I begin by looking at the history of the Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG) and factors that have influenced their widespread success. I then move into my research rationale and gaming literature review. I will touch on the existing gaming literature and outline current debates, highlighting the current gaps in research. Next, I will look at literature surrounding ideas on reality, virtual reality, and how the mind may shift between them as I discuss my ontology (social constructionism) and epistemology (interpretivism). I will also look at literature on ludology, narrative, and fantasy narratives and how they are relevant in understanding and interpreting human experience as I move into my methodology (narrative inquiry) and methods (computer mediated semi-structured interview). This provides justification for the relevance and salience of my research.

I relay my participants’ narrative accounts through reconstructed tales, each of which highlights a specific trope that captures the sense of the narrative as I have

interpreted it. This has been done to link video games with fantasy literature and showcase the ways they can be similarly experienced, as well as to highlight the lineage of fantasy narratives from paper to digital (as both heavily utilize character tropes). I will touch upon why fantasy narratives can be particularly conducive for personal exploration and understanding of experience, whether through literature or gaming. This will serve to underscore the importance of narrative culturally, societally, individually, and subsequently therapeutically. By linking fantasy, reality, literature, and video games through the lens of narrative inquiry, I try to shed light on the complex and unique relationships people experience with (and within) games, MMORPGs specifically.

I have also included personal accounts of my experiences in and around *World of Warcraft (WoW)* to provide first-person reflexive data. Reflexivity has played a vital role in the construction of this thesis, giving transparency to my process while also providing new and varied data in and about video games. The variety of roles I held in mind while writing this thesis also account in part for its ‘untraditional’ style, as I have been a researcher, a friend, a gamer, a girlfriend, a narrator, and a therapist throughout. My reflexive accounts will start off with my experiences of gameplay and will shift to my experiences *about* gameplay as the thesis moves into its discussion and analysis. This has been done so that each section of the thesis has a relevant gameplay narrative, beginning with my own and working into my participants’. As the latter half of the thesis is centered on my participants’ data and stories, I wanted to let their narratives shine, and thus my reflexive voice shifts into a more academic tone in later Interludes. I will also discuss the process of my reflexivity in more detail in my discussion.

My goal is to broaden understanding on the experience of online gaming and the role it can play in people’s lives, which is highly relevant to the field of psychotherapy (being a discipline centered exclusively on human experience). Through my participants’ stories I strive to understand and convey the complexities of their experiences, including the sense of joy, friendship, love, loss, and accomplishment that has been found in this strange and wonderful digital landscape. It is my hope that in reading this thesis you will

find yourself shifting between the real and the imagined, experiencing ordinary and fantastic, lost in our world and their world, Earth and Azeroth...

Interlude I

I am about to begin my first dungeon³. Because I primarily play as a loner (sans friends), I have had *WoW* search out a group of other players who are interested in completing the same dungeon using the “looking for raid” (LFR) feature. I am a Draenai Hunter, fighting for the Alliance. There are five roles needed for this dungeon – tank, healer, and three DPS (damage per second). I am ranged DPS (dealing damage away from the melee). My heart is pounding. I am aware that I will be playing with strangers. I am plagued with anxiety. Will I be good enough? Will they harass me? What if they are very experienced, will I embarrass myself? I have heard and read horror stories about ‘grief play’, gamers who enjoy putting down and heckling other players. I am hyper-aware of my own insecurities regarding video games. I never had console games as a child, and sometimes even the most basic video games are difficult for me to get a handle on. Studies have shown that children who play video games as they develop have better hand-eye coordination and fine motor skills (Gozli, Bavelier and Pratt, 2014) – two traits I conspicuously lack. I often get confused, unsure as to what buttons to hit or what order to cast my spells in. Sometimes in the heat of battle I lose track of which character is mine, as I find the flashing lights and sounds to be overwhelming. Other times my ineptitude is as basic as my motor skills, not realizing that perhaps my fingers are in the wrong spot, hitting the wrong keys. I find that I cannot easily look back and forth between my screen and the keyboard, and my muscle memory isn’t developed enough to enable me to look away. Further, I already have so many spells built up on my spell bar (the block of numerical keys that are used to cast spells) that I forget what half of them are, or how to use them properly. All of this is spinning through my mind as the game collects a few other people who are interested in this dungeon.

³ A dungeon is one of the features of an MMORPG that separates them from other types of video games. Dungeons are examples of “instances”. An instance is a battle that occurs separate from the main server. These instances are infinitely repeatable and can be played simultaneously by any number of players, though the players will not see each other. So, as an example, there is a dungeon by the name of Wailing Caverns. As you travel through Azeroth you will see all the other players who are in the same zone. However, as soon as you enter Wailing Caverns, every other player (apart from your chosen team), will disappear. You will battle the boss in Wailing Caverns and collect whatever loot drops. If you fail, you can try again as many times as you want. You can also replay the dungeon even if you have already defeated the boss, as it will “respawn” each time you enter. High level players will sometimes redo low level dungeons with their lower level friends so that they can help them defeat the bosses more quickly, or to increase their player statistics.

Finally, we are set to begin. The tank is the leader, a job that you can either opt for or the game will randomly assign. Tanks are frequently leaders since they are responsible for taking much of the damage and must be familiar with the bosses they are up against. We begin the dungeon – so far so good. To be honest, no one even really seems to take notice of me. I follow along behind everyone else as we traverse the halls, seeking out the lesser bosses and their minions. I look to the bottom left of my screen at the text rolling there. I can only follow some of the conversation taking place; again, my coordination skills are subpar by comparison, and I am only able to catch glimpses of the text scrolling by. Suddenly I notice the tank expressing displeasure with another member of the group. ‘Not me, thank God’, I think to myself. A notification pops up - “vote to remove [xxx] from the group”, it says. The caption beneath reads “stupid idiot”. I am stunned. I didn’t even know this was an option! We can be cast out from the group!? The thought stresses me out. I turn down the vote, thinking about what it would be like if I was the individual they were voting on, and the other member stays in. Again, my preexisting social anxieties are preyed upon. If I am not good enough, I could get kicked out. How shameful and embarrassing! Even in this space where no one knows my name or can see my face, the thought of being a failure is still very real.

Chapter 1 – History of the MMORPG

“The world needs heroes. Will you answer the call?”

-Dungeons and Dragons Manual

Before looking deeply into the history of *World of Warcraft*, we must understand the delineations of the genre and define what I mean when I say ‘fantasy’ and ‘trope;’ for as I will show, the literary genre laid the groundwork for the games that would follow. To define my concept of fantasy we must first turn to Tzvetan Todorov and his structural analysis of the ‘fantastic’ literary genre. Todorov begins by outlining the difficulties in defining a literary genre; not only is literature always changing, so too are the boundaries and overlaps between genres. He states, “it is doubtful that contemporary literature is entirely exempt from generic distinctions; it is only that these distinctions no longer correspond to the notions bequeathed by the literary theories of the past” (Todorov, 1975: 8). Though contemporary literature may no longer fit past theories, Todorov goes on to say that “we may safely assume that there exists some universal semantics of literature, comprehending the themes which are to be met with always and everywhere and which are limited in number; their transformations and combinations produce the apparent multitude of literary themes” (Todorov, 1975: 20).

Todorov then goes on to define what he calls the ‘fantastic’. The ‘fantastic’ is a state of transition or hesitation, whereby an event occurs in a text and both the character and reader must “decide whether or not what they perceive derives from “reality” as it exists in the common opinion” (Todorov, 1975: 41). Though his definition of the fantastic would become the basis for what we now call ‘fantasy,’ Todorov did not see it as a set genre. Instead, once the basis of this perception has been decided, we move from the ‘fantastic’ to either the ‘uncanny’ or the ‘marvellous’. While I will touch on the uncanny later in this paper, my definition of fantasy primarily falls into that of the marvellous, where “new laws of nature must be entertained to account for the phenomena” (Todorov,

1975: 41). This means that we are experiencing worlds where unknown creatures, magics, and physics not only exist, but are a given in that world. The marvellous is the genre of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, Lucas' *Star Wars*, and LeGuin's *Earthsea*. To further refine this categorization, many of the works I refer to and the tropes I pull from them are what would commonly be known as 'high fantasy.'

"The literary or compound term 'high fantasy' is enormously evocative and, like most evocative terms, it is pluralistic in meaning and therefore difficult to pin down with a neat or precise definition. 'High' can refer to style, subject matter, theme or tone. It can also refer to the characters themselves – their elite or elevated social status or the moral or ethical philosophies which they espouse or exemplify" (Sullivan III, 2004: 436).

High fantasy may feature Kings/Queens, Elves, Dragons, or Wizards, while the content often focusses around themes of destiny and moral dilemma. Gary K. Wolfe defines high fantasy as "set in a secondary world...as opposed to Low Fantasy which contains supernatural intrusions into the "real" world [what Todorov would class as the uncanny]" (Wolfe, 1986: 52). The creation of a believable and cohesive secondary world is crucial for it to be a successful piece of fantasy literature. This is what made Tolkien so successful as a high fantasy author. High fantasy stories tend to have traces of folktales and hero epics of the past, which is another way they remain tied to the reader's primary world. High fantasy can be traced back to some of the earliest Western literary traditions: the myth, epic, romance or folk tale (Sullivan III, 2004: 438).

Todorov also speaks to tropes, a type of linguistic symbol, which he categorizes under "verbal allegory". In my Discussion I will come back to the fact that tropes can be people, objects, plot, or narrative devices, and thus are not simply defined. I believe that tropes can be both metaphoric and/or allegorical linguistic symbols – they can be used to signify, describe, quantify, or exaggerate. Grigsby (1978) references the medieval linguist Geoffrey of Vinsauf, who defines metaphor as "an implied comparison, in which a word or phrase literally denoting one kind of object or idea is used in place of another in order to suggest a likeness" (32). This "likeness" is how a trope functions as a linguistic symbol.

Therefore, for the purposes of my research, I define tropes (character tropes specifically) as linguistic symbols whose characterizations bear a likeness to other characters that are frequently found in fantasy stories. This is relevant to gaming, for just as fantasy literature builds on the stories and tropes of the past, so too do fantasy video games.

So, where did Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) come from, and how did they become so popular? MMORPGs were primarily inspired by *Dungeons & Dragons*, a table-top role-playing game invented by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson in 1974 that involved characters and settings widely considered to be inspired by the work of *The Lord of the Rings* author J.R.R. Tolkien (Lawrence, 2018). Still popular today, *Dungeons & Dragons* arguably influenced almost all role-playing games that would follow. Under the direction of a “Dungeon Master,” players create characters from a range of races and classes, and the success or defeat of their actions is determined by rolling dice. “Experience points,” weapons, and skills are gained throughout the game, and charted on character cards. These objectives are mimicked by most modern-day MMORPGs, including *World of Warcraft*. Many people who played table-top role-playing games (RPGs) may have also been involved in other live-action role playing games (LARP). This type of role-play gaming can often appeal to those at the fringes of society; the awkward, quiet, outcast, bookish, etc., which has contributed to a long-standing stigma that persists even though the demographic of players has changed drastically (Ferguson, 2018: 41). This stigma influenced my curiosity on the experience of gaming, as I became aware that my anecdotal knowledge of gamers did not align with public or therapeutic perception.

As Kirriemuir (2006) discusses, “the pinpointing of the ‘first’ computer game is a contested issue,” with a digital version of Tic-Tac-Toe or *Tennis for Two* sometimes cited as the earliest examples (22). In 1962, *Spacewar!* is written for a mainframe computer at MIT and would become the inspiration for the 1971 arcade game *Computer Space* (Wolf, 2008). A 1967 game by the name of *ADVENT* was one of the first text-based adventure games (Kirriemuir, 2006), and was soon followed by other online role-playing games. These early games were called “Multi-User Dungeons” (MUDs), after their table-top ancestors, and like *ADVENT* they were text-based or comprised of simple graphics. Unlike

games of today, players of early MUDs would use text to complete a variety of pre-defined actions – for example “open” to go through a door, or “attack” to fight. These early games would have been challenging to complete, often without a clear goal or objective. This is very unlike the MMORPGs of today, which frequently have clearly outlined quests and non-player characters (NPCs) to help guide a player through the game. Among the first and best-known of the Multi-User Dungeons was a game written by Roy Trubshaw at Essex University in autumn of 1978; was simply named “MUD” (Bartle, 1999). As we can see, from the beginning MMORPG’s relied on narratology to function -- story structure, plot, and written language -- facets that influenced my choice of methodology as discussed in Chapter 6.

“The three years of 1978 to 1980 became, for historians of entertainment, a golden period of gaming development. During this time enduring popular games such as *Space Invaders*, *Zork*, *Pacman*, *Asteroids* and *Battlezone* were released” (Kirriemuir, 2006: 24). The success of arcade games led to the development of home consoles, such as Atari, SEGA, and NES (ibid). During the 1980s designers began to improve graphics, and games started to reach expanded audiences (Cunningham, 2018: 6). “The first graphical world released on the Internet [was] 2D Habitat in 1985” (Veerapen, 2013: 107). “*Habitat* was a massive step forward in the world of online gaming and a clear predecessor to today’s MMORPG open world⁴ environments.” (Machin, 2015). *Habitat* was one of the first user defined games, where players had near complete control over gameplay. They were free to do whatever they wished in this world, from working and playing to robbing and killing. “It stepped beyond the mere ‘hack and slash’⁵ world of MUDs and combined them with the more social role-playing aspects that have set MMORPGs apart from other games” (Machin, 2015). Following this, *TinyMUD* is released in 1989, a game which allowed “its users to interact with one another in a textual world emulating their physical world. The emphasis [was] on socializing instead of achieving” (Veerapen, 2013: 107).

⁴ Open world video games are a type of video game where players can roam freely through a virtual world and are given considerable freedom in choosing how or when to approach objectives.

⁵ Games that emphasize combat as the main objective.

It is easy to see how especially in these early stages, MMORPGs were a collaborative experience. Players were actively involved in shaping the online world they were a part of. Games like *Habitat* capitalized on this, giving rise to co-constructed virtual content that in many ways emulated the construction of non-virtual society (a point I will expand on in Chapter 4). However, the ability to understand and utilize these tools highlights the small minority of people who were able to access and master the earliest MMORPGs.

In the late 80s, *Dungeons & Dragons* licenses to Strategic Simulations Inc, and together they release *Pool of Radiance* for Commodore 64, Apple II, IBM, and Nintendo. (Roberts, 2010). *Pool of Radiance* was “built to follow the format of table-top roleplaying” (Roberts, 2010: 215), so players would create a character, explore the map, and fight enemies on a turn-by-turn basis. Much like *Dungeons & Dragons*, games could take a massive amount of time and the turn-based gameplay was sometimes clunky (Roberts, 2010). However, soon after the company released *Neverwinter Nights* in 1991 (Bartle, 2010: 7). “It was a true merger of graphical role playing and Dungeons and Dragons based rules of combat. [...] It featured a very well balanced, well thought out combat system and hosted tournaments for player versus player combat. The game also benefited greatly from the introduction of guilds and guild wars, adding a more social and team-based element to the game” (Machin, 2015). The game would ultimately be steamrolled by AOL’s release of *GemStone III*, *Dragon’s Gate* and *Federation II*, all of which could host far more players than *Neverwinter Night’s* 500 user cap (Bartle, 2010: 7), but the game introduced some of the pillars of modern MMORPGs. The invention of the World Wide Web in 1994 cracked open the online game market, as users began rapidly signing up to access the internet (ibid). It was at this point that developers began to realise these games could be extremely lucrative, and the modern MMORPG structures and innovations began to emerge more rapidly.

A game called *Legends of Future Past* (1992) contributed greatly to modern MMORPGs by inventing a crafting system, as well as employing paid staff as administrators. Crafting allowed players to develop skills in various fields (leatherworking,

sewing, blacksmithing, etc.) and create new items with materials they harvested. This system provided the player a potentially endless series of small attainable goals. This meant that gamers were now driven to spend more time in-game even when they were not fighting or questing. “*Legends of Future Past* also made brilliant use of paid “Game Masters” who could not only arbitrate the world in general but provide new and varied quests and events for players, adding a whole new level of replay value” (Machin, 2015).

Meridian 59 was released in 1996 by 3DO, but due to poor content, low quality graphics, and poor marketing, it never gained a foothold (Bartle, 2010). Next up in 1997 was *Ultima Online (UO)*, a hugely popular game that hit 100,000 players within a year of its release and according to Bartle (2010) was the first MMORPG. *UO*’s lead designer sought to create a world, not just a game. The game was so successful that it encountered severe technical difficulties due to the large number of players, which ultimately contributed to its downfall (Bartle, 2010). As *UO*’s technical issues began to emerge, Sony released *EverQuest* in 1999, and “within 6 months it had overtaken *UO* as the #1 virtual world in the West. In its 2001-2004 heyday, its 425,000+ player base was regarded with envy by every other developer, and over a hundred new worlds were announced that aimed to take its crown” (Bartle, 2010: 9).

The next truly successful game to follow *EverQuest* was *Dark Age of Camelot* released by Mythic Entertainment in 2001, which had 200,000 subscribers within a year of its release (Bartle, 2010). “The first two franchised virtual worlds to gain a head of publicity were *The Sims Online* and *Star Wars Galaxies*” (Bartle, 2010: 10) with *Star Wars Galaxies* projected to reach a million subscribers but ultimately falling short due to production delays. Console manufacturers attempted to access the market as well, typified by Sony’s *Final Fantasy XI* 2002 release, though this was one of the only successful console MMORPGs (Bartle, 2010). 2003/4 saw the release of the two largest virtual worlds to date – *Second Life* and *World of Warcraft*. *Second Life*’s “player empowerment innovations [were] ground-breaking, and it [led] the way in establishing virtual worlds’ relationship to society at large” (Bartle, 2010: 11).

World of Warcraft was chosen as the focus of this study because it is the most successful MMORPG to date, both in player subscriptions and money earned. *Warcraft* has released seven software expansions with more than 8.5 million active subscribers (Achterbosch, Pierce and Simmons, 2008: 15) at its peak, paying between £10 and £12 per month for access. By comparison, *Everquest*, the most popular MMORPG between 2000 and 2004, had around 400,000 subscribers at its peak (Morton, 2019). *World of Warcraft* was able to incorporate many of the scattered features of other MMORPGs into a cohesive game platform, which meant it quickly dominated the market.

“There are several factors that contributed to *WoW*’s success [...] but what it really comes down to is *craftsmanship* and *design* [...] [Blizzard Entertainment] learned from [earlier mistakes], put all the necessary infrastructure in place, and polished the software until it shone [...] there were many reasons to play and few reasons not to, and while *WoW*’s design elements are not all particularly original, the way they are fitted together is done *very cleverly*” (Bartle, 2010: 12) (emphasis in original).

Additionally, unlike most other MMORPGs at the time, which were only available on Windows, *WoW* released editions for Mac OS X and Microsoft Windows to start. All of this was combined with an easy-to-learn play format, which meant virtually anyone could access and enjoy Azeroth.

Following these releases was *Everquest II* (2004), *Guild Wars* (2005), *Dungeons & Dragons Online* (2006), *Vanguard* (2007), *Guild Wars 2* (2012), and *The Elder Scrolls Online* (2014). As you can see by the release of a new game at least once a year from 2001-2007, MMORPG’s exploded in popularity during the early 2000s. The incredibly widespread player base and engrossing nature of these games earned attention not only from the gaming promoters and media but from mainstream media as well. This in turn served to increase the genre’s exposure to potential players not previously involved in gaming, recruiting even more members. MMORPGs quickly became a part of what would grow to be one of the biggest and most influential industries on the planet (Messner, 2017)

It is relevant to remember when looking at the growth of MMORPGs that games/game developers are and always have been motivated by the industry. It behoves them to have people heavily engaged, however this does not mean that all players (or even a majority) are ‘addicted,’ as many researchers would have us believe. One need only type “video game addiction” into Google Scholar to be flooded with thousands of articles on the topic (e.g., Billieux, Schimmenti, Khazaal, Maurage, & Heeren, 2015; Chappell, Eatough, Davies & Griffiths, 2006; Cover, 2006; Wittek et al., 2015; Lemenager et al., 2013; Maraz, Király, & Demetrovics, 2015; Smahel, Blinka, & Ledabyl, 2008; Zhong & Yao, 2013, to name a few). MMORPGs have been designed to be pleasing to the eye and ear, as well as being fun for friends and groups to play together. They are meant to give players a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction, with a stable system of gratification and reward. This keeps players coming back, and more money flowing into the industry. All these factors contributed to the rapidly developing world of online gaming, and as I will show in the next chapter, research literature has not always kept pace with their evolution.

Chapter 2 – Rationale

Research Gap and Gaming Literature

“The self is only a threshold, a door, a becoming between two multiplicities”

- Gilles Deleuze, 1987; “A Thousand Plateaus”

Academic and therapeutic literature on video games is frequently one-dimensional, as evidenced from the studies outlined in this chapter. The virtual gaming world has not always been given credence in its relation to psychological wellbeing. I would argue that everything we do online is a part of our real life, and thus the experiences taking place online are relevant and important, worthy of our attention and study. As you will see, my participants make very little distinction between their real lives and their gaming. Their gaming is a vivid and dynamic part of their life, an activity that is steeped in importance. Through these games people tackle issues of power (Webb, 2001), attachment (Wolfendale, 2006), gender (Hussain & Griffiths, 2008), relationships (Bargh, McKenna & Fitzsimons, 2002), socialization (Billieux et.al, 2013), and loneliness (Zhong & Yao, 2013). Limited studies exist that explore the experience of online gaming, fewer that use narrative inquiry, and to the best of this researcher’s knowledge none that use narrative inquiry to study *World of Warcraft*. It is here that I am hoping my study will address a gap in existing psychotherapy research literature. I will now outline some of the relevant literature and debates surrounding MMORPGs/video games, before transitioning into my ontology and epistemology.

To understand the many reasons people game, Bartle (1996) created a taxonomy for the types of motivation to play online games (coined “Player Types”) using a series of qualitative interviews, one of the first studies of this kind. He then split the groups into four types:

“Achievers (players who give themselves game-related goals and persevere until they achieve them), Explorers (players who try to find out as much as they can about the game’s virtual world), Socializers (players who use the game’s communication facilities to interact with other players), and Killers (players who use the tools provided by the game to cause distress or to beat other players)” (Billieux et al., 2013: 2).

Bartle theorized that players would fall into one of these four categories, and that they are independent of one another (ibid).

Yee (2006) created a 40-question survey based on Bartle’s “Player Types”, which he then distributed to 3,000 MMORPG players to empirically test the underlying assumptions of Bartle’s model. Yee found that achievement, socialization and immersion scored highly as motivators to play, but that “play motivations in MMORPGs do not suppress each other as Bartle suggested” (Yee, 2006: 774). Instead, the motivators to play are often correlated, and suggest that “different people choose to play games for very different reasons [...] and thus the same video game may have very different meanings or consequences for different players” (Yee, 2006: 774). Billieux et al. (2013) expanded on Yee and Bartle’s taxonomy, studying self-reported motivations to play *World of Warcraft*, concluding that teamwork and guild membership were the strongest predictors of gameplay. Using ethnography to study *Ultima Online*, Kolo and Baur (2004) reached similar conclusions to other research; namely that socialization was a large motivator to play, and that the social connections in *Ultima Online* were often a combination of online and offline relationships.

In an attempt to broaden frameworks on what makes gamers game, researchers Begy and Consalvo (2011) studied the MMO *Faunasphere*, a non-combat caretaking game. Through mixed qualitative and quantitative methods they concluded that “the fictional world of a game directly impacts the nature of achievement in that game,” and while player motivation roughly fit into pre-existing ludology frameworks, “new, hybrid spaces like *Faunasphere* are likely to continue emerging, and [as researchers] we must continue to adapt our theoretical toolsets as necessary, paying attention to the complex

interplay of design structures, game fictions, and player actions as they work in tandem with one another” (Begy, Consalvo: 2011). This statement touches on how modern games can fall into a variety of genres, complicating research frameworks and making it all the more imperative that researchers are open and flexible to new ideas.

Twitch, a program that serves as a platform for a variety of games, funded a study of 1,000 internet gamers after realizing the perception of gamers as lonely outcasts was outdated and largely inaccurate. While the criteria was broad (anyone who has played an online game on any device in the past 2 months), the results show that gamers tended to be “more likely to be living with other people such as family, friends or significant others, and are more likely to agree with the statement, “my friends are the most important thing in my life” (Tsukayama, 2014). This finding loosely suggests that gamers are in fact more social than non-gamers.

Survey and interview research by Williams et. al (2006) aimed to understand player behaviours, attitudes/opinions, meaning making, and the gain/loss of social capital and social networks. The results of their research support the theory that virtual spaces act as ‘third’ places, *WoW* in particular providing a “vibrant third place, populated with a range of social experiences ranging from ephemeral impersonal groups to sustained and deep relationships that extend offline” (Williams et. al, 2006: 340). As you will see, my own research will corroborate this claim, with my participants building and maintaining important social connections both in and out of the game. By studying guild members through survey and interview, Williams et. al (2006) concluded that “playing *WoW* is as social as a team sport, which has its own rules, literal boundaries, and social norms [...] [and] there is no doubt that social capital was created” (357). This is further justification for understanding the implications of MMO gaming, particularly as technology allows for more and more immersive gameplay.

Zhang and Kaufman (2016) in their online survey study of older *World of Warcraft* players found that “as for their younger counterparts, older adults’ social interactions in MMORPGs are motivated by social, achievement, and immersion factors; can take place on several different levels; and can be casual or intimate” (150). These results are

important not just to MMORPG studies, but to ludology overall, as games are sometimes seen and criticised as activities for children. Zhang and Kaufman (2016) instead support the claim that “MMORPGS serve best as a new form of third place for informal sociability, much like pubs, coffee shops, and other hangouts” (165). MMORPGs can help enhance an individual’s social life, regardless of age, by offering a space to form meaningful relationships.

Barnett and Coulson (2010) reviewed five MMORPG studies to better understand the social aspects of gameplay and their relation to the real world. They found that social skills were necessary to progress in the game, and that there is a need to further explore why people choose to play MMORPGs over other types of games or choose to spend time interacting online over interacting face-to-face (ibid). In a similar vein, by observing players’ activities Ducheneaut and Moore (2005) highlighted how “the design of MMORPGs fosters the development of social skills by encouraging players to interact with each other” (98), showing that social skills can be practiced and learned in online games. Through use of biographical interview, Simon, Boudreau, and Silverman (2009) explored the memories and experiences of playing *Everquest*, highlighting how the game can be played in multitudinous ways. The designed sociality of the game may transform over time due to “a confluence of game mechanics, online player interaction, and the offline context of play,” (Simon, Boudreau & Silverman, 2009) which will influence a player’s experience. A different study focusing on role playing in MMORPGs and using a combination of surveys and ethnographic data collection concluded that virtual spaces can be used as creative outlets and places for socialization (Williams, Kennedy & Moore: 2011). The researchers also noted that more psychologically burdened role-players may use online worlds as coping mechanisms, as they can provide acceptance, connection, and support that may be unavailable outside of the game (ibid).

Li, Liao and Khoo (2011) delved further into the use of MMORPGs as coping mechanisms by examining the relationship between actual-ideal self discrepancies (AISD), depression, escapism and pathological gaming. Using survey methods on 161 secondary school students, they determined that gamers with higher AISD and depression were more

likely to use MMORPGs as an escape, which had a direct effect on pathological gaming (ibid). A different study of AISD in Wii games found that players who created an avatar based on an ideal self were more likely to experience the game as interactive than those who created an avatar based on the actual self (Jin, 2009). These results align with the conclusions of another study conducted through use of surveys, which showed that “players who tend to be addicted view their characters as being superior and more often wish to be like their characters in their real lives” (Smahel, Blinka & Ledabyl, 2008: 715). Another survey study conducted by Bessiere, Seay and Kiesler (2007) on *WoW* players found complementary results; that those with low self-esteem and higher levels of depression were more likely to rate their avatars as superior to themselves, which has significant implications for psychological well-being. These studies suggest that individuals who view themselves negatively are more likely to immerse themselves deeply into MMORPGs, which can influence pathological gaming or “addiction”. Both the ability to create creative outlets for socialization or stray into pathology are two reasons why understanding gameplay can be important for therapists. Exploring habits of gamer clients and their experiences of gameplay may offer important clues into how the client views themselves.

Due to the social nature of MMORPGs, research into avatars and their relation to the self make up a significant portion of the research literature. For example, researchers looking to better understand how the virtual self influences a player’s behaviour in-game distributed personality rating scales to *World of Warcraft* players in addition to recording their in-game behaviour. The results of this study implied that the virtual self:

“does not appear to be an equivalent persona, but rather a projection of psychological characteristics (e.g. personality traits) that are necessary to work in conjunction with the content, purpose, constraints, and affordances of the environment in which the avatar exists” (McCreery, Krach, Schrader & Boone, 2012: 980).

A mixed methods study on avatar customization and identification in *The Lord of the Rings Online* conducted using surveys, Likert scales, and interviews showed that “a

majority of the participants formed some form of a relationship with their characters [...] for some participants, the characters were a representation of themselves; for others, the characters were nothing but mere toys or vehicles. In all cases, this relation and identification with characters was dynamic and changed over time” (Turkey & Kinzer, 2014: 17). This suggests that identification with avatars is a dynamic element of online self-presentation, whereby players identify with and use their avatars in different ways depending on other game elements.

A quantitative study of 299 *World of Warcraft* players on the perception of online appearance showed that avatar “features were not diagnostic of the players self-reported personalities” but that “observers may be making use of consensual but invalid stereotypes regarding players and their self-presentation” (Harari, Graham & Gosling, 2015: 65). The study’s findings suggest that stereotypes relating to socialization may be the strongest, i.e. players who appear ‘good’ over ‘evil’, or ‘healthy’ over ‘sickly’ were more likely to be judged as extroverted and agreeable (ibid). This could be a factor in player’s choices for self-presentation; though they may not consider themselves to be socially outgoing, by creating an avatar that appears to be, they are likely to be treated as such and thus may have an opportunity to develop new socialization skills.

A much earlier study by Turkle (1996) reached similar conclusions through a combination of ethnographic and clinical research, whereby she found that in the “virtual realities that exist today, people are exploring, constructing, and reconstructing their identities [...] they are creating communities that have become privileged contexts for thinking about social, cultural, and ethical dilemmas” (166). Drawing from this research, my working definition of identity is contrary to the Latin root of the word, ‘idem’ or ‘same’ (Turtle, 2002: 6), and differs from many traditional theories that see identity as singular or possessing of a “true” self. My concept of identity theory aligns to that of Turkle, who sees identity as multiple, particularly since the advent of the internet. Similar to Henri Tajfel’s social identity theory, which posits that individuals will behave or act differently depending on the social groups they identify with (Abrams & Hogg, 1990), Turkle (2002) outlines how “the relative anonymity of life on the screen [...] gives people

the chance to express often unexplored aspects of the self. Additionally, multiple aspects of the self can be explored in parallel” (6).

Furthermore, “on the internet [...] one can be many and usually is. If traditionally identity implied oneness, life on today’s computer screen implies multiplicity, heterogeneity, and fragmentation” (Turkle, 2002: 7). Turkle goes on to discuss the process of “cycling through” identities that people do online (for example from Facebook, to gaming, to LinkedIn we are likely to present different identities), and how individuals may be engaging with multiple identities at the same time. For a reflexive example, the person I present on my Instagram is vastly different from who I am on my professional networks, and both differ from who I am in real life. My Facebook is mostly for family but also a place where I express political views, which I don’t on Instagram. My Reddit, being completely anonymous, is where I am the most daring and outspoken, and post photos that I would not on other platforms. And lastly, my gaming self is much more confident and aggressive than any of these other personas. In sum, I see identity like a 20-sided die that is always in motion, displaying different faces and affects depending on the time and place while sometimes teetering on an edge, showing more than one face simultaneously.

Given the ability of MMORPGs to create and sustain environments for socializing, play, and identity formation, it is no surprise that many in the field of education see the potential benefits of these games. Susaeta et. al (2010) believe that “games potential for education stems from the fact that players are immersed in a virtual world where they have the opportunity to manipulate and explore, thus motivating the construction of knowledge” (257). They additionally posit that the structure of MMORPGs, namely the narrative, quest-driven gameplay, provides information at a rate that makes it easy to learn (as opposed to a deluge of information that won’t all be immediately utilized) (Susaeta et. al, 2011). They concluded that “the structure of a quest facilitates the development of a series of curriculum objectives through a ludic language” (Susaeta et. al, 2011: 268). While only a preliminary study, these results strengthen the argument that video games have practical and educational benefits, beyond those of leisure.

To examine more deeply the possibility for social exploration and learning, researchers Lee and Hoadley (2007) conducted case studies of U.S. high school students and their interactions in MMORPGs. Students were instructed to play with a variety of avatar identities, and the researchers found that the adoption of different identities in-game provided an opportunity for the students to solve problems from new points of view, which opened them to new perspectives and challenged them to think creatively. Studies have also been conducted on the educational impact for college students. Alawami and Ku (2016) found through semi-structured interviews of three college students who play *World of Warcraft* that they experienced the game as “fun and relaxing, and motivating and addictive” (1433). Regarding the educational impact of *WoW*, participants reported:

“playing the game improved their academic skills such as writing, typing, reading, searching, analysing, reasoning, problem solving, and understanding. Playing also encouraged participants to develop time management skills that help them balance their responsibilities between real life and virtual world” (Alawami & Ku, 2016: 1436).

This shows that the potential benefits (both educational and otherwise) of MMO gameplay are not limited to young children.

Using qualitative and quantitative methods, researchers Cantamesse, Galimberti, and Giacoma (2011) sought to examine the effect of *WoW* on adolescent’s social interaction and competence. Their results support the argument that playing *World of Warcraft* “involves recognizing the processes of co-construction of meaning and interactional strategies made available in such games, which can be defined as “inhabited cyberplaces” in which the dialectic of Self, plural identity, subjectivity and inter-subjectivity unfolds in analogy to what happens in face-to-face social spaces” (Cantamesse, Galimberti & Giacoma, 2011: 239). MMORPGs can provide vital spaces for adolescent socialization and identity formation/presentation, and the experience of these spaces can parallel those in the offline world. This has therapeutic implications, as noted by Ceranoglu (2010) in his literature review on video games in psychotherapy. He found that while there is limited research on the subject, video games “may facilitate therapeutic

relationships [...] and elaborate and clarify conflicts during the therapy process” (141).

These studies insinuate that social learning and self-exploration in MMORPGs and video games is particularly relevant when concerning adolescents and children.

The narratives we tell ourselves and about ourselves are integral in psychotherapy; the narratives in MMORPGs allow us to become our own characters in a story and see new aspects of ourselves in so doing. This can be particularly effective and useful for those who are still psychologically pliable, a fact that has frequently gone unnoticed by parents and psychotherapists alike. “A still growing mind can be exceedingly volatile, can experience wide mood swings, can delight in introspection, can enjoy the pleasures of irony, detachment, satire” (Coles, 2014: 63). Where Coles is referring to funnelling this youthful energy into novels, I argue this can also be experienced in MMORPGs. What safer way to act out volatile mood swings than on NPC’s that are just bits of computer code? Teenagers can experience the full range of emotion with little to no fear of fallout in an MMORPG. When consequences do occur, it is contained and physically distant, providing an opportunity to learn in a safe environment (Lee & Hoadley, 2007).

In fact, much of the current psychological literature about therapy and video games is centred around work with children. A 2007 study showed that 94% of American seventh and eighth graders (UK year 6/7) played video games in the last 6 months, while 97% of American teens between ages 12-17 reported playing video games at some point. This means that therapeutic video games could potentially have a huge outreach capability. Video games provide a unique tool in the mental health field, especially for work with children and adolescents. They have been found to be useful in group therapy for youths in distress and have been correlated with changes in the moral developmental stage of adolescents involved in video game therapy (ibid). A newer therapeutic game (still in the testing phase at the time of the article) was designed for adolescents which featured issues and challenges that serve as a context for discussion between counsellor and client, allowing the counsellor to observe gameplay and prompting deeper client engagement with the therapy process (Ceranoglu, 2010).

There are also existing games that help enhance social skills for children with developmental disorders, which utilize avatars much in the same way that MMORPGs do (Ceranoglu, 2010). Being represented by an avatar can help the child emotionally connect what is happening in the game as something that is happening to themselves, and it can be useful in developing social skills (ibid). Traditional board games have often been used by therapists in work with children, but video games can sometimes provide deeper insight and help the relationship develop faster (ibid). Observing a child's play style and choice of content may offer clues to intrapsychic conflicts. Authors of one study observed how the video game represented the child's internal world in the way the game was played, and how they related to the therapist during gameplay (ibid). They further observed that the content and play stimulated the development of the child's imagination and aspiration. Additionally, video games can simultaneously be used to evaluate cognitive skills such as visuospatial skills or executive functions with more ease than traditional board games (ibid). Video games may also bring out different aspects of transference when compared to traditional toys and games. In a board game, a child often has a preconceived notion that the therapist (or adult) will be superior in skill, which means losing may be easier to cope with since it has been anticipated (ibid). This preconception typically does not exist with video games however, since the older the adult, the less likely they are to be proficient at video games. This provides a unique opportunity to see how a child or adolescent deals with an unexpected loss, or with gaining power upon a win (ibid).

Finke, Hickerson, and Kremkow (2018) looked at the motivations of young adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) to play videogames using semi-structured interviews with 10 ASD individuals. Results suggested that “the participants perceived playing videogames for leisure as a good use of time and to have positive impacts on their lives in several ways” (Finke, Hickerson & Kremkow, 2018: 683). The motivations primarily included socialization (making/retaining friends) and emotion management (coping/stress relief), and they aligned with self-reported motivations of non-ASD players. Players in this study also reported an increased interest in technology, animation, or engineering careers as a result of playing video games (Finke, Hickerson & Kremkow, 2018: 684).

The repeatability of video games (as compared to other types of media) is also useful in delivering manual-based interventions, such as Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy. This can be useful in therapy with adults as well as children. Several past and present efforts are underway to develop more video games that have a therapeutic element. One notable example of these is the “Self-Esteem Games Project” taking place at McGill University, where researchers are creating games that help players feel more secure and confident in themselves (Ceranoglu, 2010).

Keeping in-line with therapeutic effects for adults, research is emerging that shows how playing MMORPGs can help improve basic social skills, and preliminary evidence suggests it may be particularly useful for those with Asperger’s (Ceranoglu, 2010). MMORPGs create complex social spaces where players must learn about and participate in the shared practices of a game community (ibid). On a more micro level, being a part of a guild requires knowledge of the social practices appropriate to that game and guild. Players must know their place and role in the group and be able to adapt to the command of the guild leader, risking expulsion if they are unwilling to submit or learn. Adaptability and response to authority are two areas where those on the autism spectrum may struggle, thus offering another opportunity for MMORPGs in therapy to be useful.

Video games more generally also have therapeutic potential for other psychological disorders, such as anxiety or personality disorders. Wilkinson, Ang and Goh (2008) conducted a widespread literature review on the uses of both online and offline games for different vulnerable groups. One study used graded virtual reality exposure for anxieties about flying and heights, concluding it was superior to the control but inferior to live graded exposure (Wilkinson, Ang & Goh, 2008). Da Costa and De Carvalho (2004) used video games in a study with schizophrenics, finding that “a group of medicated schizophrenics respond positively to completing cognitive tasks in virtual reality” (Wilkinson, Ang & Goh, 2008: 375), suggesting another possible therapeutic use.

As I will continue to show, these games are about much more than just gaining XP. They are virtual social platforms players can use to learn interpersonal communication skills that are appropriate in online environments, which could also transfer over into face-

to-face interactions. Players in *World of Warcraft* learn to speak a specialized gamer language and behave in a socially agreed upon way that differs than in-person interactions. This ability to shift between realities and social contracts may help strengthen an individual's overall sense of self and enable them to be more proficient in their social interactions, like the way travelling abroad or going to therapy may challenge an individual's identity and prompt them to grow.

This is not to say that the use of video games in therapy is all positive. There have already been documented drawbacks to their uses. The content of video games and the style of play they require need to be considered, especially in work with children (Ceranoglu, 2010). Video games are an emotionally evocative and visually engaging medium, which through its absorption of the child and therapist may hinder the therapeutic process (ibid). Eye contact is lessened, which in some cases may be helpful, but in others may delay engagement. The positioning of the therapist and patient side-by-side changes the power dynamic, another element that could work for or against the therapeutic process (ibid). A child's conflict may be more easily expressed when sitting side-by-side, but the lack of orientation may be disruptive. And while little research exists on the negative effects for adult therapy, it is not too far a leap to assume some of these factors may be relevant there as well.

Negative stigma against video games or technological ineptitude may also mean that many therapists are hesitant to incorporate them into their work (Ceranoglu, 2010). Significantly, many therapists I've spoken to admit that they often trivialize their clients gaming, and rarely take the time to explore it further. I feel when a client expresses that they play video games, it is worthwhile to spend time exploring it with them. Why do they game? Who do they game as? Do they game with anyone else? How do they feel about their games/avatars? How do they view their avatar in relation to themselves? I have found that showing even a rudimentary knowledge of video games not only helped my gamer clients feel more understood but enabled them to open up about a topic that is often scrutinized by society. This usually meant that these clients would then begin to speak more about other issues in addition to their gaming habits, having established a deeper trust

in me and our relationship. By acknowledging that I understand and accept their gaming as something significant, they felt more comfortable in sharing other things with me as well. Therefore, I feel it is important for counsellors and therapists to recognize the importance of video games when they come up in our work. By treating them with ignorance and negativity, we are doing ourselves and our clients a disservice. Having even a basic knowledge of video games can go a long way in establishing trust with gamers (King, Delfabbro and Griffiths, 2009) and may provide crucial insight into their psyche. Things like play style and choice of game can indicate a client's state of mind, or what conflicts they could be re-enacting during play.

Speaking about the importance of play and its relation to reality, Berger and Luckmann (1991) posit that:

“Compared to the reality of everyday life, other realities appear as finite provinces of meaning, enclaves within the paramount reality [...] The paramount reality envelops them on all sides, as it were, and consciousness always returns to the paramount reality as if from an excursion [...] Similar ‘commutations’ take place between the world of everyday life and the world of play, both the playing of children and, even more sharply, of adults” (39).

Following this theory, entering a virtual space or a world of play may allow the mind to grow and experience things that can then be brought out into the ‘paramount’ or overall reality. By observing what happens in the client's world of play, we may have clues into their subjective psychic reality and how it effects their world outside of play.

This potential for self-exploration in MMORPGs can be especially important when it comes to concepts of gender identity. Dunn and Guadagno (2012) built on ideas introduced by aforementioned researchers, exploring avatar-self discrepancies in relation to gender and personality traits. Participants created avatars and gamed for 20 minutes, then completed a post-test questionnaire that included a self-esteem scale and Big Five Personality scale, but they were not told the aim of the study. The results suggested that “some of the gendered expectations for men and women may cross over into certain

aspects of virtual life and fall short in others” (Dunn & Guadagno, 2011: 104). In a questionnaire study on gender swapping and socializing in MMORPGs, Hussain and Griffiths (2008) had previously noted how gender swapping may be used by players to change how they are treated (e.g. male gamers getting preferential treatment when gaming as women), explore socializing as the opposite gender (e.g. women avoiding unwanted advances when playing as men), or to release aspects of their personality that did not have a place in real life. Avatars provide a unique opportunity for identity exploration, which may mean that players feel very connected to them.

Lewis, Weber, and Bowman (2008) elucidated on character attachment by creating a 17-factor scale that was distributed to 572 American University students. This result of this study showed that higher character attachment resulted in more enjoyment from the game and more time spent playing (Lewis, Weber & Bowman, 2008: 517). This may be because “virtual identities are embodied, sensuously experienced and contingently rhythmic and mobile” (Webb, 2001: 562), acting as extensions or permutations of our everyday selves. Exploring gamer clients’ relationships with their avatars could provide another valuable therapeutic insight into how the client sees themselves.

Studies on avatar attachment have shown that “an avatar is not just an object manipulated by the participant; it is a representation of identity” (Wolfendale, 2007: 114). In her empirical review, Wolfendale (2007) found that avatar attachment can both provide pleasure from exploring new aspects of the self and joy from subsequent achievements made with the avatar, but that they can also cause distress if harmed or killed. Taylor, Kampe, and Bell (2015) hoped to better understand identification and attraction to play by studying *The Walking Dead* video game. Through a micro-ethnography of two participants, the researchers looked at a variety of “attractors” to play, specifically: simulated (relating to the game world), lived (relating to the real world), conventional (relating to prior engagements and related media), and situated (relating to local and embodied settings of play). Through this they determined that “a player’s capacities for identification (with a gamic element) is shaped by these attractive forces, and the resulting differences in identification will account for radically different experiences, despite the

diegetic elements of the game remaining constant” (Taylor, Kampe & Bell, 2015). In other words, a variety of factors influence the level at which a player immerses themselves in a game, and this does not remain constant.

Character attachment and identification is heavily influenced by a player’s immersion in the game. Ortiz de Gortari, Aronsson, and Griffiths (2011) interviewed 42 frequent gamers to explore immersion in video game environments and how this can affect the player during and after the game. This is known as Game Transfer Phenomena (GTP), and “occurs when video game elements are associated with real life elements triggering subsequent thoughts, sensations and/or player actions” (Ortiz de Gortary, Aronsson & Griffiths, 2011: 15). As I (and others such as Speedy) argue, the mind shifts between various states in its day-to-day activities, including dissociative states. Research shows that altered states of consciousness occur while playing games, which can lead to changes in the perception of time or extreme psychological absorption – more commonly called immersion. The concept of immersion is built upon psychologist Csikszentmihalyi’s (1977) theory of being in ‘flow’, where there is:

“a merging of action and awareness, [...] the centring of attention on a limited stimulus field, a process of narrowing the consciousness, [...] a loss of self-consciousness during the play, a forgetfulness of other realities [...], [where the person or player] is in control of his actions and of the environment, [and the activity or game] needs no goals or rewards external to itself” (Brian Sutton-Smith, 2001: 185).

The more fully a player is in flow, the more deeply immersed they are in the game, or in this case, the virtual world. Ortiz de Gortari, Aronsson, and Griffiths (2011) looked at how virtual immersion can carry over into players offline lives, and found that:

“playing video games intensely can be associated with the elicitation of automatic thoughts, altered perception of real life sceneries, alteration of sensory perceptions, and dissociative experiences [...] players claimed they were well aware of the difference between the real life world and the game

world, but their automatic associations caused them, at least some of the time, to experience something they felt was bizarre” (28).

This shows how a deep immersion in a game can have real life repercussions, be they positive or negative. This phenomenon is evidenced in my research with my participant Cora, who experienced nightmares after becoming heavily immersed in a game that reminded her of a trauma from her youth.

Ng, Khong, and Nathan (2018) studied Affective User-Centred Design (AUCD) and its relevance to the game development industry, as “emotions are increasingly seen at the heart of user experience” (2). They conducted and analysed multiple case studies which showed the following 15 recommendations for a positive gaming experience:

“(i) user preference, (ii) user capability, (iii) pacing difficulty, (iv) providing goals, (v) providing rewards, (vi) interactive game environment, (vii) graphic quality, **(viii) fantasy, (ix) good narrative, (x) interesting characters**, (xi) reducing lagging, (xii) flexible options, (xiii) good game interface, (ivx) tutorials and hints, and (vx) ease of user controls. These recommendations are the main elements that affect user’s behaviour and emotional responses during the course of the game, which in turn affects their gaming experience” (emphasis my own) (Ng, Khong & Nathan, 2018: 7).

These findings are relevant to game designers and writers who are seeking to create a more immersive environment and avoid affective problems that will ultimately influence the sales performance of the game.

To understand how *World of Warcraft* has gained such mass appeal, Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell, and Moore (2006) created main and “alt” characters in a variety of classes and played the game in addition to taking census data and observations. They found that:

“above all, it appears WoW’s players are not much more casual than in other MMOs. [...] The attractiveness of the game could have a lot to do with its fine-tuned incentives and rewards structure, reminiscent of behavioural conditioning. Although many earlier MMOs were criticized for requiring

long, repetitive grinding sessions (often in groups) early in the game to progress, WoW seems instead to have been optimized such that players experience more of a “flow” experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), with challenges increasing gradually and rewards always in sight” (Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell & Moore, 2006: 314).

They also found that a large majority of players prefer playing races that conform to stereotypical beauty standards (‘good’, tall, lean, Alliance), even though both Horde and Alliance were designed to be morally ambiguous. Experienced players may even migrate to the ‘bad’ (ugly, large, brutish, Horde) side in order to avoid new players who are more likely to choose Alliance for their first experience of gameplay (Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell & Moore, 2006: 315).

So, while many studies have been conducted on MMORPGs, most focus on different socialization aspects, covering everything from addiction to avatar creation and attachment. Very few use qualitative approaches to study the phenomena and instead primarily rely on survey methodology. Furthermore, none focus on a broader exploration of experiences in MMORPGs using *World of Warcraft* as an example, instead centering on specific aspects of gameplay or gameplay in relation to addiction. This lack of qualitative data on the experience of playing *WoW* is what I hope to address with my narrative inquiry.

Addressing Stigma

I would like to take a moment here to acknowledge the stigma surrounding video games and gamers, as it has also been relevant to my research motivations and rationale. As mentioned previously in this chapter, much of the literature about video games is in relation to addiction, and gamers are frequently viewed like addicts. However, whenever *anything* new and innovative is invented, there often arises a moral outrage over its existence. For example, the creation of the novel opened a Pandora’s box regarding its perceived effect on the morals of average citizen (Furedi, 2016). Advances in printing and

distribution at the turn of the century meant a subsequent rise in literacy, including that of women. Previously, most English women's literature consisted of conduct books. Novels, by contrast, "had a reputation for displaying not only the seamy undersides of English political life, but also sexual behaviour of a semi-pornographic nature. On both counts, it was considered a vulgar form of writing" (Armstrong, 1987: 96). Novels emerged at a time when women's literature was strictly censored and controlled. Gender in English literature has historically been skewed in favor of men with female authors and female representation in novels typically absent. The emergence of a new kind of female voice, and a new kind of book that women could read, caused widespread controversy. Romances in particular were considered seductive and dangerous; there was a belief that women would be influenced by their 'frivolities' (Armstrong, 1987) and would engage in uncouth behaviour. This belief bears a striking resemblance to the argument that video games make players violent or that they will inoculate children against violence.

Innovation has historically been met with fear and skepticism. One could argue the same scandal has arisen today in reference to online gaming and its ensuing culture. The moral outrage began when televisions and computers entered the average household. Psychologists and sociologists warned parents that machines would turn their children into glassy-eyed zombies, immune to the horrors of violence and unable to connect with anything that wasn't a machine (Turkle, 1995).

"Throughout history, concern about the effects of exposure to violence in the media has circulated with the introduction and widespread adoption of many forms of media technology, including film, television, and the Internet. When each of these media types has found its way to the daily lives of the public, their use has triggered expressions of concern about the violent images and actions found within their content" (Scharrer et al., 2018: 5).

The fear grew that children would not be able to distinguish between what they saw on the screen and what happened in real life, which would lead to antisocial behaviours. This misunderstanding was then perpetuated by events like Columbine. "Debates over the impact of violence in video games tend to emerge after mass shootings, particularly when

perpetrated by young males” (Ferguson, 2018:1). Turkle (1995) argues the opposite, that “we are usually aware that pictures and screen representations are not in the world in the same sense that we are” (164). But this fear of desensitization has been persistent, and the debate continues to this day (see Scharrer et al., 2018; Drummond, Sauer & Garea, 2018).

Stigmatized media portrayal and a lack of understanding about gaming in general has led to a frequently misinformed public, who may see games as violent, addictive, and detrimental to those who play. The current literature often perpetuates this negative view, as much of the existing work has centered around addiction and internet gaming disorder (e.g. Eickhoff et al., 2015; Griffiths, 2010; Voss et al. 2015). “There is about the Internet and was about the radio an aura of the unknown and the forbidden. The virtual connections made between people and ideas impart an almost spiritual quality to both media” (Gackenbach, 1998: 12). This “aura of the unknown” cannot be easily dispelled, since to do so often requires someone to play a game themselves. Furthermore, gaming communities are often tight knit, contributing further to this sense of mystique (King, Delfabbro and Griffiths, 2009), particularly for those in generations who have not grown up with computers or gaming consoles, making it easy for them to be seen as dangerous and addictive.

Turkle likens the relationship between human and computer not to an addiction, but to a seduction. The things we see in ourselves, or perhaps want to see in ourselves, can be lived out through computational media. She argues that “computers can be extensions of the minds construction of thought” (Turkle, 1995: 30). Things we can visualize in our minds come alive on screen – words, graphics, a fantasy or idealized version of ourselves. There is a power and a pull to computers because they too ‘think’ and allow us to interact with them. As evidenced by previous research, computers tend to be the most dangerous for those whom addiction already lurks within (Lewis, Weber & Bowman, 2008; McCreery, Krach, Schrader & Boone, 2012; Smahel, Blinka & Ledabyl, 2008). As Dumbledore once said, “the happiest man on earth would be able to use the Mirror of Erised [Desire] like a normal mirror, that is, he would look into it and see himself exactly as he is” (Rowling, 1997: Ch. 12).

McIlwraith et al. (1991) argue that “the power and persistence of the addiction metaphor lies in the fundamental duality of our perspectives about media in society: On one hand, they are trivial amusements for the unsophisticated, on the other hand, they are profoundly disturbing social forces” (105). Similarly, video games are trivialized unless we think they are doing something *harmful*. They are time wasters, unless we find out that a school shooter plays them; then they suddenly become demonized, a handbook for murder, an accomplice in the crime. So, which is it? Do they mean nothing, or do they mean everything? By gaining further understanding into the experiences of gameplay, perhaps this will become clearer.

Now that I have outlined the existing literature on MMORPGs as well as their potential uses in therapy, in the next chapter I will discuss ideas on reality and virtual reality, and their relevance to my study.

Chapter 3 – What is Reality?

And is it Virtual?

“Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?”

-J.K. Rowling, Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, 2007; Pg. 723

The blurring of lines between what constitutes ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ has never been more apparent than it is now. “Today more than ever we blur the line between simulation and reality, between what exists on the computer and what is real” (Turkle, 1995: 164). It is staggering to think how far technology and virtual platforms have come since 1995, and how relevant the Turkle statement remains. The rise of online and console games has been concurrent with advances in technology that allow players to immerse themselves ever more deeply in the gaming experience. In 2018 alone, over 4 million virtual reality devices were sold, and this number is anticipated to rise to 6 million in 2019 (statista.com, 2019). Virtual worlds are no longer confined to 2-D screens; we can now experience them as though we are physically there too.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term “virtual” in the context of computing means “not physically existing as such but made by software to appear to do so” (Oxford Dictionaries, 2019). In other words, online things do not physically exist, but the software makes them appear to be physically present. Yet so often, the term virtual is used synonymously with “unreal”. Interactions that take place online are “fake”. Friendships formed there are somehow weighted with less importance than those in “real life”. Time and again virtual worlds are dismissed as being fantasy, undermining the experiences of those who enjoy them. Despite all this, many Western individuals spend much of their life in front of a screen, be it television or mobile (ComRes, 2014). Turkle (2011) speaks about how we live a state of continual tethering, whereby “demarcations

blur as technology accompanies us everywhere, all the time” (162). So where does the virtual world end and the real world begin?

With over 80% of residents in the UK and US having a personal computer with access to the internet, more and more of our time is filled online (statista.com, 2019). This statistic is not even factoring in the use of smartphone devices, the network and communication portals that we carry with us all the time (Turkle, 2011). Whether it is streaming movies, using social media, or playing games, as of 2017 the average internet user spent 10-19 hours per week online, with 10% of the population spending 50+ hours a week online (statista.com, 2019).

As I share the stories of my participants’ in Part III, you will see how a simple change in select vocabulary can nearly eliminate the boundaries that we perceive surrounding the virtual aspect of online gaming. From a research perspective, taking down these barriers may help the importance of the experiences that take place there become clearer. It also allows the mind to enter an imaginative space beyond the boundaries of everyday reality, one that we may enter often when we daydream or read a book.

Interestingly, the dismissal of virtual experience is not just limited to online; it is present overall in the discussion around reality and fantasy in life. Historian Michael Saler (2012) discusses how:

“imaginary worlds and their virtual manifestations have often been criticized as escapist, distracting us from the pressing problems of the real world; they have also been disparaged as dangerous sirens, seducing us from engaging in meaningful relations with others or appreciating our finite, corporeal existence [...] on the one hand, imaginary worlds are autonomous from the real world [...] on the other hand, these worlds are inextricable from ordinary life and interpersonal engagements” (283).

In her extensive work on magical realism, Jane Speedy (2011) discusses the curious absence of understanding around the boundaries between fact and fiction, despite the evidence that the human mind is often shifting between them. While her work is

focused on the therapeutic context, the message remains the same...the “scant acknowledgement of a movement between the various different realities (spiritual, magical, actual) that the human imagination might move between in the day to day” (Speedy, 2011: 429). A shift into a virtual reality created by zeros and ones is no less “real” in the lives of those who engage with it. Indeed, as psychologist Jerome Bruner (1987) puts it, “when actual minds find possible worlds constraining or oppressive, many of them can find a way through life’s thornier thickets by recourse to impossible and magical worlds” (quoted in Speedy, 2011: 434). Whether these impossible and magical worlds are in literature or online, the argument stands that the boundaries are permeable. Imaginary worlds provide safe and playful places to reflect on the real and discuss ways to effect personal and social changes (Saler, 2012: 7).

In the process of outlining different disciplines approach to play in his book *The Ambiguity of Play*, Brian Sutton-Smith touches on the field of neurology. From a neurological standpoint, “the brain is engaged in a ceaseless inner talking that is like fantasy. In [Sack’s] view, playful states have a priority and an indeterminism of their own in our brain [...] the brain is always creating some kind of ceaseless inner fiction, or is at play with itself” (Sutton-Smith, 2001: 60). This supports research I relate elsewhere, mainly that the brain is constantly in motion between states of reality and fantasy – we have our own internal worlds that are always interacting with our external realities. Sutton-Smith sees this movement as play in and of itself. “Play is, as it were, a halfway house between the night and the day, the brain and the world” (Sutton-Smith, 2001: 61). Play facilitates our minds shifting between unreality and reality, or between reality and virtual reality.

As I have gone through my research and the process of writing this thesis, I have noticed more and more conversations about video games and virtual reality happening around me. Whether this is a result of my piqued interest or due to an increase in public awareness, shows like Netflix’s *Black Mirror* and Channel 4’s *Kiss Me First* have begun prompting conversations about actual versus virtual and are asking tough questions about the nature of video games, reality, and their roles in our lives. In fact, I was sat on the train

listening to music one day when I heard “DragonAge” spoken by someone in the seat behind me. Two young men, probably in their early/mid-twenties, were discussing the various games they had played in the past. It was obvious that they had never met before and had just happened to be sat across the table from one another, but they had found common ground in their love of video games.

This type of scenario is not unusual for Millennials and those younger; many of us have grown up on video games and they can oftentimes be an easy ice breaker. The conversation moved to MMORPGs, as one of the young men was currently enjoying *DragonAge*, while the other had played in the past but had to stop. He claimed that he knew himself and that he had an addictive personality, and for him, MMORPG’s became too consuming. He said he knew it was too much when he began to turn down “real-life” activities in order to game. Again, I wonder, what defines our “real” lives? As more and more of us spend our leisure hours in virtual spaces, it is important to diligently study what is being experienced to provide insight and answers. In the next chapter I will elucidate further on these questions, while also exploring experience and narrative within the context of society.

Interlude II

I am in the middle of Stormwind City, a bustling metropolis and capital of the Alliance. In this city, Horde and Alliance (the two opposing factions that inhabit Azeroth) mingle freely – there is no PvP play in Stormwind. Stormwind City serves as the main base of operations in many senses; it is here that you find auction houses, trading posts, and guild masters. You can sign up for dungeons, raids and quests, and you must return to Stormwind at many points as you progress through the game. I am waiting for my friend to arrive. He and I are trying to level up our characters to 110 together. I have created a new character, part of the Horde. Her name is Helianthys (after the sunflower), and she is a Blood Elf Mage. I have chosen this name purposefully, as the Blood Elves worship the light of the sun and I (coincidentally) had a sunflower on my windowsill the day I created her. I find the names of my avatars to be personally meaningful, and I try to study the naming lore of each race when making new avatars.

I have used a character boost (a bonus token that is given by Blizzard as an incentive to purchase the game) to bring myself instantly to Level 100. My friend has told me that playing *World of Warcraft* after Level 100 is almost an entirely new game, and this, coupled with the stories I have heard from my participants', makes me curious to play. In fact, all of my participants are over Level 100, though this was not a criterion for my study. Leveling from 100 to 110 takes a long time, and it is after 110 that full access to the maps and raids are unlocked. You must be at least Level 110 to enter all the raid or dungeon groups the game has to offer. Because levelling up can be arduous to complete at this stage, it is much faster and more enjoyable to do it as part of a group. My friend (Rob) and I have decided to partner up and go through it together. Rob has created a new character and used his boost as well. He has chosen to be a tank – a new battle role for him and one that he is eager to learn how to play. In this sense we are starting at the same level. We both are unfamiliar with our class and we are both going to be levelling at roughly the same rate.

I am waiting for Rob near the bulletin boards, where quests and raids can be sought. There is always a mass of people clustered in this area. I move over to the side and position myself near a building, watching the shifting milieu of colours and shapes. Characters come

in and out of my view, some riding fantastic beasts, others floating through like ghosts. There are sounds too – the clanking of armor, the murmurings of speech, the screeches and howls of mounts, all atop the triumphant music of Stormwind. Even now as I reflect, I am pulled back to the chaos. It is as I sit here, waiting, that my eyes drift to the lower left of my screen. In this corner is a constant scroll of text – general chat. This is an open channel for players to communicate with each other, used for all sorts of things, but most frequently for trade. These messages are specifically marked [trade]. Usually I don't focus too much on what happens in general chat, but I have little else to do as I wait, so I read.

As the chat scrolls by, I notice something. Words, phrases, and abbreviations for [trade], completely foreign to me. The first one that stands out is WTS. “wts [Fel flame Inferno Shoulder pads] 90k” it reads. I assume it must mean “willing to sell” (close – ‘want/ing to sell’). Basic enough, but just as I work that one out, I began to see more and more phrases scroll by that are unrecognizable. “WTS +15 our key 6/11 M raiders pst” follows closely behind. I cannot even begin to decipher what that may mean. It is at this moment that something seemingly profound dawns on me. This land, this world, these players, they have a language all their own. They have a *culture* all their own. Suddenly, this virtual world feels like a country of 8.5 million people. In so many ways, Azeroth functions in the same way as a country on Earth. There is trade, revenue and capital (that does transfer into the ‘real world’); people live, play, work, and in a sense, die here. They meet others, form friendships, become lovers. How different is it really from the world most of us spend our waking hours in?

Part II

Chapter 4 – Why Experiences Matter

Ontology and Epistemology

“Experience is not what happens to a man; it is what a man does with what happens to him.”

-Aldous Huxley, Texts & Pretexts: An Anthology with Commentaries, 1932

Studying the quantitative data on video games notoriously fails to capture the ‘human’ element, which can lead to widespread misunderstanding of the impact they have on a gamer’s life. It is a similar failing that influenced the emergence of qualitative research historically, specifically regarding the study of peoples. In the 1870’s, Wilhelm Dilthey emphasized the “importance of ‘understanding’ [...] and of studying people’s ‘lived experiences’ which occur within a particular historical and social context.” (Ormston et al., 2014: 11). Dilthey saw the relevance in studying experience, and his arguments would contribute to a growing demand for qualitative knowledge.

At the moment, there exists a lively debate around the pros and cons of video game playing, but very little of the dispute is grounded in qualitative data. For a collection of quantitative research outlining the debates, see Ferguson’s (2018) *Video Game Influences on Aggression, Cognition, and Attention*. So, because experiential data is few and far between, the debate is lacking in ‘lived experience’. It becomes easy for researchers, therapists, and public alike to be dismissive of gameplay when there isn’t much data that showcases the meaningful emotional impact they can have for players. By gaining further insight into the micro experiences of gameplay, we can gain a new perspective on gaming and its popularity. As therapists, further understanding into the experiences of gamer clients may enable a deeper and potentially more fruitful therapeutic relationship.

It was the search for understanding meaning that guided me to this topic in the first place. Early in my counselling career I had a male client in his young twenties who spent most of his time playing computer games. He struggled with severe depression and social anxiety – coming to see me was one of the only times in the week that he left his flat. I found myself struggling to understand why video games were so important to him and intrigued by the way in which he spoke about his computer, oftentimes anthropomorphizing it. Paired with my anecdotal knowledge of games and gamers, I became curious about the experiences people had while playing online video games. I further wondered about how gamers understood their gaming experiences in the overall context of their lives, and if it was influenced by societal perceptions. Slowly the aim of this thesis began to take shape – exploring, understanding, and sharing the experiences of gamers. This eventually led me to settle on social constructionism as my ontological position, as I understood the topic to be situated within a specific historical and cultural context, as well as being created and experienced interpersonally.

From the social constructionist point of view, humans do not live in isolated bubbles of experience. The theory challenges us to think critically about the societal structures that surround us, and how this influences our own knowledge and reality (Burr, 2015). Emerging from the qualitative paradigm, social constructionism takes the position that knowledge and reality only exist as much as they are implicitly agreed upon between individuals.

“[We] cannot exist in everyday life without continually interacting and communicating with others. [We] know that [our] natural attitude to this world corresponds to the natural attitude of others, that they also comprehend the objectifications by which this world is ordered [...] Most importantly, [we] know that there is an ongoing correspondence between *my* meaning and *their* meanings in this world, that we share a common sense about its reality” (Berger and Luckmann, 1991: 37).

The idea of common sense or taken for granted knowledge is central to the social constructionist argument, as this knowledge forms a reality that cannot be objectively

observed. As the nature of reality is agreed upon by those living within it, social constructionism argues that reality is not static, but instead subject to the changing tides of human advancement and society.

The nebulous and ever-changing nature of the internet is a perfect example of social constructionism at work, an innovation that reflects the historical and cultural movements occurring simultaneously while also being governed by its users. The internet has provided a platform where all ideas, all opinions, and all perspectives can be expressed freely with minimal fear of oppression or repercussion in most Western societies. Social constructionism “argues that there can never be one objective, final and ‘true’ account of phenomena; instead what exists are multiple perspectives [...] different ways of understanding the world coexist in parallel and none of them can be said to be the truth” (Burr, 2015: 223).

So, when studying a product of the internet and its influences on the human mind, it seems fitting that a researcher might turn to social constructionism. Berger and Luckmann (1991) argued before the internet was even invented that “the organism and, even more, the self cannot be adequately understood apart from the particular social context in which they were shaped” (68). Social constructionism and its implications regarding the historical and cultural context out of which knowledge arises are well suited for a topic that was only invented within the last 40 years. Historically, the internet has been loosely regulated, and even today remains a space that is subject to user manipulation. The websites people frequent, the language that is used, and the information that is available, are all in a constant state of flux.

More specifically, *World of Warcraft* as a virtual world does not exist solely in the subjective reality of an individual’s imagination either. It is a persistent reality as well as a transmedia franchise, existing perpetually online and continually expanded through film, fan fiction/art, licensed books, and conventions. This fact also influenced my decision to focus on social constructionism as my ontological position, since the *Warcraft* universe is scopious and influenced by millions of players, creating a similar backdrop for social phenomena. This emulates everyday reality, whereby:

“Life is not only taken for granted as reality by the ordinary members of society in the subjectively meaningful conduct of their lives. It is a world that originates in their thoughts and actions, and is maintained as real by these” (Berger and Luckmann, 1991: 33).

In other words, we live in the private reality of our own minds, but an objectively shared language and understanding of what constitutes knowledge or truth (and subsequently reality) then reinforces our subjective reality. Scheler (1952) further argues that “human knowledge is given in society as an *a priori* to individual experience, providing the latter with its order of meaning” (Berger and Luckmann, 1991: 20).

To expand further, as children we are presented by our caregivers with what appears to be an objective reality (Berger and Luckmann, 1991). We are able to understand our inner experiences and reality because there is a preexisting social structure that we have grown up in which aids us in organizing and deciphering them (ibid). This social structure provides the backbone of our knowledge and experience. Eventually we grow older and come to fulfill roles (typically) designated by organizational structures, and in so doing we implicitly agree to sustain the reality as it has been presented to us (ibid). Post-structuralist thinker Michel Foucault would argue that we come to fulfill these roles because of the forces of power that are constantly at work around us, shaping us into a productive workforce through use of observation and objectification (Smart, 2002). He stated that:

“this form of power applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize, and which others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects” (Foucault, 1982; 781).

Foucault’s theories on power heavily feature ideas on the foundation of knowledge and discourse, which makes them relevant as a social science researcher working in an institutional setting. Foucault spoke about power-knowledge, and the relation between the

two, saying that “power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations” (Flyvbjerg, 2001; 125). For Foucault, knowledge is both a solution to and a foundation of power, particularly knowledge of the human sciences (Smart, 2002). As a researcher, Foucault’s theories made me mindful of the powers being exerted on me by my institution (deadlines, degree success, power to effect my future), the powers I exert on my participants (disrupting their day to day, scrutinizing them, interpreting their stories), and the power my research may exert on the world. It is relevant to touch on Foucault’s theories of power as his ideas align with other social constructionist thinkers that I have mentioned. Furthermore, since power is present everywhere in reality, it should be held in mind when conducting social science research.

Berger and Luckmann (1991), Bruner (1987) and Foucault (1982) all felt that historical and cultural influences have a massive impact on the interpretation of reality and truth. Bruner (1987) discusses language, culture, and the transactional self in relation to reality, stating “once again we locate ourselves in a world of shared reality [...] the idea of culture as implicit and only semiconnected knowledge of the world from which, through negotiation, people arrive at satisfactory ways of acting in given contexts” (65). Video games have permeated our current society, and as mentioned briefly in Interlude II, at times I have found myself amazed by the ensuing culture that has been fostered both in and out of game. Language, apparel (branded clothing, bags, hats), conventions (E3, PAX, and Blizzcon to name a few), and meet-ups are just a few of the ways video game culture has manifested within society. In one rather dark example, the word ‘kek’ made its way out of *World of Warcraft* and into the real world through its adoption by alt-right groups as the name of their frog-headed “god,” Kek (Neiwert, 2017). It began in *WoW* with the encoding of English words (encoding based on Korean) to keep members of the opposing faction from reading text meant for allies. “Lol” or “laughing out loud” appears as “kek” on enemy screens. This slang was then taken and used by alt-right groups that have recently found niches for themselves on the internet (ibid). This is just one example of the ways in which online language and culture can be influential offline as well.

Furthermore, as Harvey (2015) discusses, many video game franchises (for example *WoW*, *League of Legends*, *Final Fantasy*, and *Halo*) have become transmedia franchises, spanning across multiple platforms real and virtual. Many of these virtual worlds are expanded through both licensed and unlicensed media, subjecting the franchises (and video game realities) to the wills of the user/consumer and influencing the development of the game. This supports the theory that the boundaries between everyday reality and that of video games are permeable, fluid, and subject to the collective culture that has arisen amongst players. It also means that the experiences taking place in virtual realities do not remain strictly there.

Researching these experiences as a social constructionist means “[acknowledging] that since context matters, human interaction and humans are embedded in context, and people, cultures, and events have histories that affect the present, findings from one setting cannot be effectively decontextualized” (Clandinin, 2007: 7). Online gaming cannot be looked at independently of the internet, and both cannot be separated from the culture and society in which they have grown and flourished. The fluidity of boundaries and contextual nature of this topic become especially relevant when considering concepts like gender and identity, which feature heavily in the existing research on online gaming (see Hussain & Griffiths, 2008; Webb, 2001; Lee & Hoadley: 2007). As Turkle (1995) posited in her early work, our postmodern era has made the idea of multiple identities more normalized, with many people experiencing identity as a “set of roles that can be mixed and matched” (180). Burr further (2015) touches on how:

“we cannot imagine dispensing with categories and dichotomies such as urban/rural, male/female [...] but social constructionism proposes that these are human constructions rather than objective descriptions of the world and at least some of them would not have made sense to people living in earlier historical times” (223).

How curious that even since her writing of that article three years ago, challenges to the idea of binary gender have been pulled to the forefront of discussions on sexuality, and many would argue that male/female should be dispensed with.

Speaking as a Millennial, I have been raised in a world of expanding awareness and understanding, particularly regarding issues of gender, sexuality, and identity. Where once they were rigid, they are now more widely seen as fluid and subjective. Social constructionism and online gaming culture often (though not always) facilitates this type of ideology (for research on increasing diversification in video games and ensuing pushback, see Consalvo 2012; Fox & Tang, 2013; Gonzalez et al. 2014; Todd 2015). “In terms of our views of the self, new images of multiplicity, heterogeneity, flexibility, and fragmentation dominate current thinking about human identity” (Turkle, 1995: 178). Since Turkle’s early study, further research has supported that online spaces can be ideal for identity multiplicity, though they are perhaps less fluid than originally theorized (Vasalou & Joinson, 2009; Hardey, 2002).

A study on identity in our networked era used a combination of quantitative and qualitative interviewing on 21 youth participants, discussing how the online and offline selves may experience tension in their identity multiplicity. Participants in this study would implicitly turn to one of four ‘spheres of obligation’ to help them navigate this tension. Responsibilities to self, interpersonal relationships, online social norms, and broader community level values all served to limit multiplicity and anchor the online and offline selves to varying degrees (Davis, 2012). Again, the ability of the mind to shift between realities and acknowledge their contextualized nature is made clear. The internet, and subsequently online gaming, “has become a significant social laboratory for experimenting with the constructions and reconstructions of self that characterize postmodern life” (Turkle, 1995: 180). Put differently, “to be modern is, in part, to exercise a “double consciousness” and to embrace complementarities, to be capable of living simultaneously in multiple worlds without experiencing cognitive dissonance” (Saler, 2012: 13). I will come back to concepts of self, gender, and identity as I share and analyze my narratives in later Chapters.

Once settled in social constructionism, the researcher is free to explore subjective experience with the knowledge that it is in a constant state of flux. All experience has worth as research and will be situated within a subjective cultural context. Implicit in this

ontology and derived from the same subjective paradigm is an interpretive epistemology. Interpretivism is defined by Norman Denzin (2001) as both a perspective and a method, whereby “the researcher listens to and records the stories persons tell one another, and then supplements these stories by conducting open-ended, creative, active interviewing” (27). The goal is for the researcher to listen, interpret, and perform the experiences of participants. For the purposes of my study, as an epistemology this means what we know as truth or knowledge can only be found through the process of interpretation. Social constructionism assumes that all knowledge is subjective; interpretivism assumes that this knowledge is found through listening and interpreting. “Interpretive researchers collect and analyze existentially experienced, interactional texts” (Denzin, 2001; 42). The act of interpreting and performing knowledge is what I have done in reconstructing my interviews in the form of third-person stories.

Linking my ontology and epistemology to an appropriate methodology, I chose narrative inquiry as my methodological position. Just as studied phenomena occur at a specific moment in history within a cultural context, so too does gaming occur at specific moments in a gamer’s life, and narrative creates a temporal timeline by which they can look back and understand their experiences. The concept of personal narrative is hugely important in therapy as well, thus as a psychotherapist researcher, I felt narrative inquiry would be the best way for me to learn about the experiences of my participants’. In the next chapter I will expand on the importance of narrative conceptually, as well as its relation to *World of Warcraft* and the fantasy genre overall.

Chapter 5 – The Importance of Narrative/Narratology On- and Offline

Methodology

“The narrative constructs the identity of the character, what can be called his or her narrative identity, in constructing that of the story told. It is the identity of the story that makes the identity of the character.”

-Paul Ricoeur, “Oneself as Another”, 1992; 147-8

Narrative research is well situated within social constructionism and interpretivism, for:

“in this turn toward narrative inquiry, the researcher not only understands that there is a relationship between the humans involved in the inquiry but also who the researcher is and what is researched emerge in the interaction. In this view, the researched and the researcher are seen to exist in time and in a particular context [...] They are not static but dynamic, and growth and learning are part of the research process. Both researcher and researched will learn.” (Clandinin, 2007: 14).

Furthermore, “narrative inquiry involves the reconstruction of a person’s experience in relationship both to the other and to a social milieu” (Clandinin, 2007: 3), and this relationship is a foundation of both aforementioned disciplines. Webb speaks in his ethnographic research on narrative, identity, and avatars, about how the online self is anchored to the offline self that exists within a social construct, stating that “virtual environments are accessed from an off-line world and become part of the participants’ ‘lived dimension’” (Webb, 2001: 564). He goes on to further theorize that virtual existence is merely an extension of what people usually do, and I would argue this claim holds true when considering my data, which you will see shortly. Narrative inquiry recognizes that reconstruction of experience cannot be conducted without considering the multitude of

relationships and interactions occurring in and around the individual (in this case, offline and online).

The works of Bruner (1987), Speedy (2011), Berger and Luckmann (1991), and Denzin (2001) were influential in my understanding of knowledge and ways of knowing from a social constructionist ontology and interpretive epistemology. In regard to their influence on my methodology, what drew me to these researchers and philosophers was their focus on the role that narrative plays in the construction of reality and identity. For the purposes of my research, what is primarily important is not the narrative structure, but instead what that narrative means in context. The components of narrative that are important to me are elements like the characters, plot, and story arc that imbue narrative with meaning. Writings by Coles (1989), Barthes (1982), and Clandinin (2007) have further informed my ideas on narrative and how they can be obtained and understood. It bears mentioning here that the field of narrative inquiry is huge, and there is not one set way to understand, create, or interpret narrative. You will see that I have drawn from a wide range of researchers and authors, and each one may not necessarily approach narrative in the exact same way. Given the breadth of the field and its highly interpretive nature, it would have been difficult for the purposes of this thesis to focus on only one researchers approach. Instead I have widely reviewed the literature on narrative inquiry and pulled from the research that is most relevant to the topic and methodology of this thesis.

The basis of narrative inquiry is that narratives are a fundamental unit for understanding human experience (Hiles, Ernk & Chrz, 2017). Delving deeper into this methodology, one follows the assumption that even our most basic learning is understood through story structures. In the words of Atkinson (2007):

“We are the storytelling species. Storytelling is in our blood. We think in story form, speak in story form, and bring meaning to our lives through story. Our life stories connect us to our roots, give us direction, validate our own experience, and restore value to our lives” (224).

Even our most fleeting memories have plots and story structures within them. We “use conceptions from narrative such as *plotline*, *characterization*, *theme*, *role*, and other literary terms to analyze and make general sense of experience” (Clandinin, 2007: 3).

As humans we are anchored in a linear system of thought (a product of our temporally bounded existence), which must organize its experience through this type of structure. Taking this further, “plotlines, character, setting, and action (Bal, 1997) provide ways of holding meaning together in more complex, relational, and therefore more nuanced ways than flowcharts or number tables” (Clandinin, 2007: 16). Narrative elements like plot and character help us understand our experiences, as well as provide a means for relaying that experience to others. Therefore, narrative inquiry can provide a unique insight into the complexities of human experience while simultaneously facilitating a method to share them. As Bruner suggests “‘great’ storytelling, inevitably, is about compelling human plights that are “accessible to readers”” (Bruner; 1987: 35). As qualitative researchers we seek, interpret, and share stories; as therapists we listen, interpret, and relay them back. From both perspectives, narrative inquiry can be an invaluable method of understanding experience.

Storytelling, much like social constructionism, interpretivism, and narrative inquiry, relies on social cooperation. Language and communication are primarily relevant and useful when occurring between more than one party, just as society arguably only exists between individuals, and the most compelling narratives will be those that are shared. “To study communication is inevitably to study social structure, social conflict, social strategies, social intelligence. Communication [...] does not begin when someone makes a sign, but when someone interprets another’s behaviour as a sign” (Knight, Studdert-Kennedy and Hurford, 2000: 19). Narrative and storytelling have been a core part of the human experience since the days of cave paintings, when stories were a crucial part of education and knowledge distribution (Mott and Marchant, 2016).

In his book *The Call of Stories*, Robert Coles elucidates the powerful nature of narrative, and how narratives interact between the subject and the reader. He recalls a moment interviewing the poet William Carlos Williams, where “[Williams] reminded us

that an important part of our lives [as doctors] would be spent “listening to people tell you their stories”; and in return, “they will want to hear *your* story of what *their* story means”” (Coles, 2014: 104). This constant process of listening, interpreting, and reinterpreting to understand also highlights one of the underlying tenets of social constructionism and interpretivism -- that all human psychological and social phenomena are constructed differently in each time and place (Burr, 2015; Denzin, 2001). This constant state of interaction and change that is present in narratives and social phenomena is reflected in the virtual worlds of video games, further justifying my ontological, epistemological, and methodological decisions.

Narrative inquiry is congruent to the focus of my research subject: what are players experiencing in *World of Warcraft*? Not only can narrative be viewed as one of the fundamental ways of understanding experience (Crossley, 2000), but narrative in video games is very important. In fact, the fields of narratology and ludology have been in fierce debate in recent years over how video games should be viewed/studied (Murray, 2005), though I believe this debate is largely pointless, for reasons you will see below.

The field of ludology, or the study of games, has its roots in the work of Johan Huizinga (though the field was not named ‘ludology’ until a few decades later). His 1949 book *Homo Ludens* explores the play element in culture, and how games and society are interrelated. Contrary to earlier evolutionary theories, Huizinga (2009) posited that “play is to be understood here not as a biological phenomenon but as a cultural phenomenon” (foreword). Huizinga makes the case that all previous anthropological studies point to play as serving some sort of biological purpose, as had been observed in other animals. He argues however that “in culture we find play as a given magnitude existing before culture itself existed, accompanying it and pervading it from the earliest beginnings right up to the phase of civilization we are now living in” (Huizinga, 2009: 4) and as such he views “play in its manifold concrete forms as itself a social construction” (ibid). Some of the most influential theories to come out of Huizinga’s work were his descriptions of play and the boundaries of play. He states that “all play is a voluntary activity” (Huizinga, 2009: 7), that “play is not “ordinary” or “real” life. It is rather a stepping out of “real” life into a

temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own” (Huizinga, 2009: 8) and this sphere is “superior to the strictly biological processes of nutrition, reproduction and self-preservation” (Huizinga, 2009: 9). He further delineates that play happens “within certain limits of time and place. It contains its own course and meaning” (ibid). Play begins and then it is over, though the limits of time depends on the play.

Even more striking to Huizinga was the limit on space that play demands, “the arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen [...] are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart” (Huizinga, 2009: 10). Within these spaces the rules of gameplay are absolute; they bring order to an otherwise disordered world. This concept of the “magic circle” remains one of the most influential theories in ludology. Coming together and playing in these spaces creates a “feeling of being “apart together” in an exceptional situation, of sharing something important, of mutually withdrawing from the rest of the world and rejecting the usual norms” (Huizinga, 2009: 12). In fact, “one of the most important characteristics of play [is] its spatial separation from ordinary life. A closed space is marked out for it, either materially or ideally, hedged off from the everyday surroundings. Inside this space the play proceeds, inside it the rules obtain” (Huizinga, 2009: 19).

Huizinga (2009) also discusses the concept of the mask and how this contributes to creating the play sphere, an element very apropos to my research. He speaks about the secrecy of play and how the disguised or masked individual in play can *become* another being (13). To Huizinga (2009) there is also something ritual about play (and vice versa, play inherent in ritual), which the donning of masks can contribute to – it “transports the participants to another world” (18). The masks help players leave behind the ordinary world and become part of the game. The avatar is akin to a virtual mask, disguising identity and allowing the individual to become someone else, creating a sense of magic and an opportunity to experience life as another. You could even argue that the computer itself acts as the mask, as someone can create whatever face they want to show to the internet.

Huizinga (2009) goes on to argue that culture arises from play, and that play permeates every aspect of our society, from music and art to government and education. Not too long after Huizinga's publication, Roger Caillois wrote *Man, Play and Games* in 1958, where he posits many similar ideas to Huizinga, while building upon ideas of games in society. He too defined play as a free and voluntary activity, separate from other aspects of ordinary life and existing within predefined limits of time and space. However, Caillois' research also looks to create a classification of games, differing from Huizinga who speaks almost exclusively to combative (Caillois' *agon*) games. Caillois (2001) defines games as falling into "four main rubrics, depending upon whether, in the games under consideration, the role of competition, chance, simulation, or vertigo is dominant. [He called] these *agon*, *alea*, *mimicry*, and *ilinx*, respectively" (12). He further outlines that games within these categories all fall on a scale between what he terms *paidia* (make-believe) and *ludus* (ruled) (Caillois, 2001). Most games fall nearer to *ludus*, possessing of distinct rules, due to the institutionalization of most popular forms of play. While he argues that *ludus* and *paidia* are mutually exclusive, I would argue that MMORPGs are both ruled and make-believe, highlighting the social construction of games and play and how they are ever evolving. Drawing on his theory, MMORPGs fall into *agon-mimicry*, as simulation combat games. This provides further insight into the success of these games, as they combine combat (which Huizinga argued is deeply entrenched within our culture) and simulation (which allows individuals to pretend and learn), creating magical, ritualistic spaces for experiencing. "Games of simulation lead to the art of the spectacle, which express and reflect a culture," (Caillois, 2001: 78).

Caillois (2001) argued that "the structure of play and reality are often identical, but the respective activities that they subsume are not reducible to each other in time or place [...] what is expressed in play is no different from what is expressed in culture" (64). As you will see, this theory supports the findings of my research, which show that experiences within the game world frequently parallel those outside it. Additionally, the culture of Azeroth (and other MMORPGs) shifts and changes with the culture offline, further justifying Caillois' ideas. When defining his sociology derived from games, Caillois (2001) posits:

“In fact, every culture has and plays a large number of games of different kinds. Above all, it is not possible to determine, without prior analysis, which are in accordance with, confirm, or reinforce established values, and conversely, which contradict or flout them thus representing compensation or safety valves for a given society” (66).

Caillois (2001) also reiterates the idea that play is a social activity, as it “lacks something when it is reduced to a mere solitary exercise” (39). Games are reflections of culture, and are thus best played together, as research shows.

A more recent work on ludology comes from Brian Sutton-Smith in his 1997 book *The Ambiguity of Play*. Sutton-Smith sees play as much more ambiguous than his predecessors and shows how every discipline regards play in a slightly different way, making it difficult to define. He also poses one of the driving questions behind my research:

“how can it be that such ecstatic adult play experiences, which preoccupy so much emotional time, are only diversions? Any why do these adult play preoccupations, which seem like some vast cultural, even quasi-religious subconsciousness, require us to deny that this kind of play may have the same meaning for children?” (Sutton-Smith, 2001: 7).

In other words, if play is so important in our culture and society, why is it viewed as a waste of time for adults?

Another highly relevant aspect of Sutton-Smith’s research is on the relation of play and identity. Sutton-Smith (2001) discusses James Fernandez’ work, citing that “such ludic performances are arranged to persuade ourselves (and others) to adopt the communal view of ourselves that we prefer. They are metaphoric representations of our own identity in grand terms” (Sutton-Smith, 2001: 92). While he is referring to the mass spectacle or carnival, I feel this holds true when thinking about online gaming. People enter communities and create versions of themselves (avatars) that fit communal ideals and represent the identity of the user. Play facilitates expression of identity, and in the case of

MMORPGs, allows a multitudinous formation of identity. “Play is a metaphoric sphere that can conjoin what is otherwise apart and divide what is otherwise together, and in a malleable way use these pretended identities to create a feeling of belonging” (Sutton-Smith, 2001: 93). My (and others) research on gaming communities prove this to be true – intense feelings of belonging and friendship exist amongst gamers, even if they have never seen the person in real life. The freedom to express an identity (or identities) that one chooses without the constraints of everyday life is liberating for players, and often results in bonding and tight-knit groups.

This has relation to narrative theory, as internal narratives form our self-concept. Sutton-Smith (2001) states that “modern play seems to have much to do with individualized narrative” (105), as opposed to communal myth that drove games of the past. Since the emergence of game studies, ludologists and narratologists have debated about the role of narrative in games. Frasca (2003) “believes that this debate has been fuelled by misunderstandings and that generated a series of inaccurate beliefs on the role of ludology, including that they radically reject any use of narrative theory in game studies” (1). Frasca (2003) argues that this debate is a non-existent one – it is grounded in misunderstanding and a difficulty to define both the fields of narratology and ludology. Furthermore, Frasca (2003) makes the case that the debate has never truly existed, saying “the puzzling thing is that, from its very beginning, “old” ludology never discarded narratology [...] basic concepts of ludology could be used along with narratology to better understand videogames” (3).

In his article on the importance of ludology, Joost Raessens (2006) touches on the debate between ludology and narratology, and how much of the debate is rooted in difficulties defining what exactly games *are*. “The definition of games studies as a discussion between (mostly Scandinavian) ludologists and (mostly American) narratologists is an oversimplification and a reduction of the field” (Raessens, 2006: 53). In other words, in modern society the debate between ludology and narratology is a relatively pointless one, as in today’s media culture “it is to be expected that narrative and game elements will continue to coexist in hybrid forms” (ibid).

Given that my entrance into research has been with both narrative theory and game studies in video games, it seems strange to me as well that the two fields would debate, as they seem deeply entwined (particularly in MMORPGs). Family therapist Jesper Juul has stated that “1) The player can tell stories of a game session. 2) Many computer games contain narrative elements, and in many cases the player may play to see a cut-scene or realise a narrative sequence. 3) Games and narratives share some structural traits” (Juul, cited in Frasca, 2003: 4). The debate seems to be grounded in an idea that ludologists have discarded all of narratology, when really, they just don’t use narrative as the *primary* means for understanding gameplay. Therefore, regarding my research and what I understand of both fields, the two overlap to varying degrees. When we speak about MMORPGs it is impossible not to acknowledge the relevance of both ludology and narratology – the narrative of *World of Warcraft* is strong and expansive. Furthermore, RPGs interact with and influence personal narratives, which is what makes them such interesting spaces for growth. From a ludology standpoint, not *all* of *WoW* gameplay is a narrative – much of it unfolds in the moment with no narration, with no predetermined outcome or structure, some elements due entirely to chance. These aspects are not the focus of this study, but it is worth recognizing that they exist and are a huge part of the gaming experience. Additionally, the relevance of ludology in culture and its influence on human development are hugely important and not to be overlooked when studying a game, even from a narratological perspective.

Narratologists argue that video games are stories in themselves, with narratives being “the fundamental enjoyment players are experiencing during gameplay” (Ang, 2006: 1); they use narrative as the primary means to understand gameplay, as I am. Ang (2005) talks about the relation of narrative and game rules, discussing how “as the players plan and take actions (gameplay) they are affecting the fabula (narrative) of the game” (19). As the players progress, the narrative of the game changes accordingly. In MMORPGs where there is no “right” way to play, the narrative will be altered differently for each player. Narrative and gameplay are interrelated, especially in a game like *World of Warcraft* that heavily features narrative elements both in game and out.

The story of Azeroth is paramount in *World of Warcraft*. It is the central motivator to gameplay and your play is guided by quests and raids that slowly unfold to reveal pieces of the story's puzzle. Each new expansion⁶ means a new story arc, with an ever-changing antagonist. Here there are more links between the importance of narratives in video games, life, literature, and therapy. Bruner (1987) argues that in literature it is not the arc itself that is important, but what it represents. Readers go from the details (stones) to the broader picture (arc) to construct a sense of the stories meaning. In life, we collate our experiences similarly to better understand them. Once we are able to look back over past events and see the bigger arc, we can better understand its consequences on our life, which helps us imbue it with meaning. In therapy, clients tell us their stories and in so doing often discover their life arc and its meaning. In fact, the field of narrative psychology focuses exclusively on the development of human narratives, "of the essential and fundamental link between experiences of self, temporality, relationships with others and morality" (Crossley, 2000).

MMORPGs and their structures mimic how narrative is constructed and understood outside of the game, which influences their ability to be therapeutic spaces. Furthermore, story arcs are relevant in video games just as they are in literature and personal narrative. Each new *WoW* expansion brings further lore, more worldbuilding, and a deepening backstory for the characters. Fan fiction, books, and films collectively deepen the worldbuilding as well, increasing immersion for many players. Many of Azeroth's characters have complex motivations and histories, making them more realistic and relatable to the players. This all adds up to a narrative driven space that can be experienced and understood just like narratives outside of the game.

To truly understand why MMORPGs are structured with such heavily storied gameplay, we need to again look back at the development of online games and their lineage from fantasy literature. As discussed previously, MUDs took their template from *Dungeons & Dragons*, which (though never explicitly stated) was very likely influenced by *The Lord of the Rings* and other works by J.R.R. Tolkien. Tolkien's work was

⁶ An expansion is an addition to an already existing game, so for example in *World of Warcraft* this would mean an additional software package that adds new areas to the map, new weapons, quests, dungeons, and usually a new narrative element.

monumental coming out of the Victorian era where positivism and sensibility reigned (Saler, 2012), and would prove to be extremely influential for much fantasy to follow (Gopnik, 2011). Terry Pratchett (2015), another well-known and much-loved fantasy author once said:

“J.R.R. Tolkien has become a sort of mountain, appearing in all subsequent fantasy in the way that Mt. Fuji appears so often in Japanese prints. Sometimes it’s big and up close. Sometimes it’s a shape on the horizon. Sometimes it’s not there at all, which means that the artist either has made a deliberate decision against the mountain, which is interesting in itself, or is in fact standing on Mt. Fuji” (112).

The lengths that Tolkien went to in providing context and backstory for Middle Earth are unmatched, and this is in part why his books remain the most popular fantasy series in history (Curry, 2015; Moor, 2018). The creation of languages, maps, and appendices served to make the imaginary seem plausible, allowing for “disenchanted enchantment” (Saler, 2012). Saler (2012) argues in his book *As If*, that at the time of Tolkien’s writing the world was in a state of disenchantment, having just suffered the first World War. His writing allowed people to connect with the enchanted stories of their youth, recapturing some of the magic in an otherwise bleak social landscape (ibid). The books defined the fantasy genre and subsequently had far reaching influences in the game industry (Dawson, 2016).

Dungeons & Dragons incorporated many of the narrative elements found in the stories of Middle Earth. For example, players assume the roles of elves, wizards and dwarfs, battling dragons and finding treasure, which has clear ties to the races and plights of characters in Tolkien’s works. The game is orchestrated by a Dungeon Master (DM), who writes up an open-ended story before the game is commenced and uses this story to guide the other players through the game. The DM orchestrates the battles and hinderances they will encounter as they play their way through the board, utilizing narratology to drive the game forward. The players decide their characters individually and create their own backstory as well. Players make decisions based on the options in front of them, which

may end in success or peril. This narrative structure creates temporal boundaries, but also fosters invention and creative thinking.

These early table-top games relied on the virtual space of the imagination, what Saler (2012) would refer to as “public spheres of imagination”. Originating in the works of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, J.R.R. Tolkien, and HP Lovecraft, public spheres of imagination became virtual spaces through their existence in a collective imagination, a theory reminiscent of Carl Jung’s concept of the collective unconscious. The imaginings of characters and worlds were happening communally between individuals; fan clubs were coming together to speak about fantasy worlds and fantastical characters, which made them exist beyond the pages. This created a virtual space where like-minded people could come together and enter a world of imagination, a state of “disenchanted enchantment” (ibid). This was a revolutionary concept at the turn of the century, coming away from the severe realist Victorian mindset (ibid). Table-top role-playing games would later create similar imagined spaces between players, laying the groundwork for fantasy video games.

MUDs took the basic principles of table-top role-playing games and applied them to a computer format, thus following the narrative formula. The earliest MUDs even had no graphics – they consisted of text only platforms. The most popular games have never strayed far from this core structure – a preexisting fantasy story, within which you are able to make your own choices that will influence the outcome. Tying back to Ang’s (2005) work on video games and storytelling, the players interact with the narrative of the game, and in so doing, change the narrative. Gameplay and narrative in an MMORPG are inextricably linked, and exist in palimpsest with fantasy literature⁷, all of which contributes to making them excellent places for experiencing. This is why narrative inquiry is well suited for my topic; it is the fundamental unit not just for human experience, but for the fantasy genre also.

Now that I have taken you through my ontological, epistemological and methodological positions, I will discuss the methods by which I collected my data, after

⁷ Another example of note: *Azethoth* was an unfinished novel by H.P Lovecraft, and “Azeroth” is the name of the world in *WoW*. Coincidence?

which the thesis will transition into my telling of the ‘Tales of Azeroth’. According to Bruner (1987), “what gives [a] story its unity is the manner in which plight, characters, and consciousness interact to yield a structure that has a start, a development, and a ‘sense of an ending’” (21). As you will see, I attempted to create this sense of unity with the stories of my participants’, instead of providing only quotations from the primary data. I wanted to not only share the experiences of my participants’, but to do so in a way that would capture the reader like any good story, to *perform* my data as Denzin (2001) suggests. I did my best to interpret the narrative elements of each with accuracy and relay them honestly.

Chapter 6 – A Quest for Narratives

Methods, Data Collection, and Analysis

“A well-thought-out story doesn’t need to resemble real life. Life itself tries with all its might to resemble a well-crafted story.”

-Isaac Babel, “My First Fee”, 2012

Methods

As discussed, given the importance of stories in MMORPGs and narrative in human experience, I chose narrative inquiry as my methodology. I decided on interviews for my method of data collection and narrowed that further to semi-structured interviews via email. Semi-structured interviews were chosen to allow for flexibility (Galetta, 2013); so that the interviewees could bring what felt important to them and I could modify follow-up questions and tailor each interview individually. I felt this would be the most fruitful for an inquiry concerned with understanding subjective experience. I also decided to conduct my interviews via email. This choice was made as it felt congruent with online gaming. In my experience, many people foster online relationships without seeing the other persons face, sometimes going years without meeting the other individual, if they ever meet at all. Communication is often text-based at first, only graduating to voice chat once a friendship has been developed. Having read how difficult it can be for a researcher to integrate themselves with the gaming community, I believed it may help the participants be open if they didn’t have to look me in the face and speak directly to me (King, Delfabbro and Griffiths, 2009). While many gamers do eventually meet their online friends in real-life and do not suffer from social anxieties, there is still something to be said about the anonymity of the internet that allows people to be disinhibited online.

This online phenomenon was proposed by Suler (2004) as “The Online Disinhibition Effect”. Like other theories previously mentioned, this posits that the self is

multi-faceted and that our online selves are not “truer selves”, but instead a different constellation of self-presentation within the self.

“When people have the opportunity to separate their actions online from their in-person lifestyle and identity, they feel less vulnerable about self-disclosing [...] people don’t have to worry about how they look or sound when they type a message” (Suler, 2004: 322).

I had an intuition that gamers would feel more comfortable opening up to me if they were not face-to-face, since “some players can feel as though researchers intrude on their right to be anonymous” (King, Delfabbro and Griffiths, 2009: 557). I assumed that computer-mediated communication would be a format that was comfortable to them, and would give them time to answer my questions thoughtfully. As mentioned, gamers can be a notoriously difficult group to study since scientific and media portrayal has given rise to the negative stereotype that exists around gaming. Gamers know that academia has historically painted them in a negative light, which doesn’t encourage trust and openness (King, Delfabbro and Griffiths, 2009). This too influenced my choice to conduct interviews via email. I felt that my willingness to engage through computer-mediated communication would help show that I was not looking to diagnose or judge their behaviours, but instead meet them on a platform that they would find familiar.

I also decided to begin playing *World of Warcraft* myself. I was familiar with MMORPGs and had played *Final Fantasy XIV* when it came out a few years prior to the start of this project (though never heavily). The choice to begin gaming was supported by the research of King, Delfabbro and Griffiths (2009), who stated that:

“for researchers, becoming a “gamer” has many benefits. By being directly involved with video games [...] researchers will benefit in learning more about gaming culture, gaining contact for research purposes, and developing a more critical perspective on video game-related literature” (560).

I aimed to familiarize myself with the game so that I could establish a more genuine rapport, as well as add some reflexivity to my research.

Etherington (2017) speaks about the importance of reflexivity as a therapist, and as a therapist-researcher. Tying reflexivity to the same social constructionist thinkers that have influenced my research (Clandinin, 2007; Speedy, 2011), she discusses how knowledge is co-created and subjective, and that being transparent about qualitative research and using your own voice allows the reader to judge the trustworthiness of the work themselves (Etherington, 2017). By sharing my own experiences, judgements, and interpretations, I hoped to “position [myself] transparently in ways that enhance the rigour and trustworthiness of [my] research processes and outcomes” (Etherington, 2017: 93). Doucet and Mauthner (2003) further elaborate on the importance of recognizing our social, historical, and cultural context as we approach research, and how voicing these processes can help both the researcher and the reader understand how interpretive decisions have been made. As is apparent, my reflexive practices have varied at different stages of research, with my voice sometimes a narrator, other times a researcher or therapist, and sometimes an active participant.

Reflexivity has also been defined “as the continuous process of reflection by the researcher on his or her values, preconceptions, behaviour or presence and those of the participants, which can affect the interpretation of responses” (Jootun et. al, 2009: 42). Throughout the writing of this thesis I had to hold in awareness the multitude of positions I had in relation to the work. I was firstly a researcher bound by my university, next a counsellor following therapeutic ethics, sometimes a friend speaking to peers, I was a girlfriend to a gamer, and for much of the project a more active gamer than I had ever been before. My position as counsellor meant I came into the project biased towards gamers – trying to avoid the stereotypes and stigmas that have plagued video game studies just as I try to avoid stereotypes in my day-to-day life. Furthermore, my care and empathy for the previously mentioned client who piqued my interest in the subject meant I already had a ‘soft spot’ for gamers. Interestingly he was a client that I felt did not gain much from counselling – would I have maintained this bias if I had believed my work with him to be more successful? Perhaps my misgivings about our work led me to a sympathetic position towards gamers. Or maybe my role as a friend and girlfriend to gamers influenced my ideas about what games were and whether they were ultimately good or bad. Regardless of

reason, I came into the research knowing I did not want to perpetuate a negative image of gaming. In fact, the first version of this thesis was a much different piece of work, more politicised and aiming to take a stance against those who would dismiss or slander gamers. In this sense I had to work hard to put myself in a more neutral position, though you may have noticed an intentional lack of engagement with gaming addiction material. This was a choice made because I did not want to give more credence to a body of work that is already extensive, choosing instead to showcase the meaningful and positive experiences that seem to make up a minority of the literature.

I kept a journal in order to help me make sense of the experiences I was having in and around my research. I wrote down my thoughts on gameplay and jotted down notes about conversations I had regarding my research topic (many of which made it into the thesis as the interludes). After the first critique of my research I took a step back to recognize my own bias, not looking to erase it entirely (as this cannot be done with qualitative research), but to ensure sound research practices. Writing down my experiences with non-participants helped give me an outside perspective on my work, while writing down my gaming experiences firmly grounded me in the process. My reflexivity was multi-layered, as I brought many different identities to this research. For as I argue, identity is not singular. There were many facets of who I am that showed themselves in this thesis, and the interludes were an attempt to be transparent about them. I will speak further in my discussion about my reflexivity, and the ways in which my research analysis challenged me and my previously held beliefs on MMORPGs and gamers.

Data Collection

Before beginning my data collection, I underwent an ethical review process. The biggest considerations were for anonymity and data protection. Given the low risk nature of my inquiry, both myself and the research committee felt that there would be minimal chance of psychological distress to my participants. All of my participants' names have been anonymized, and permission has been granted for the use of avatar names. *WoW* does

not link any personal information to avatars names, so it maintains the confidentiality of my participants. Other prominent considerations were regarding consent. Given that I never met my participants face-to-face, I had to think about legal implications of electronic signatures versus hard copy (i.e. authorization, authentication, non-repudiation), and I attempted to gain a written signature from my participants wherever possible. I also explicitly stated that an electronic signature would be considered contractually binding, but I gave them the option to leave the study and retract their information at any time during the two-month interview process if they wished -- none did so. To maintain data protection, all interviews and subsequent writings were conducted and saved on a secure University server. Participants also had to be over age 16 to take part in my study, to help protect vulnerable groups. This project then received approval from the CPASS Research Ethics Committee at the University of Edinburgh.

Once I had received ethical approval, I attempted to begin recruiting. I had outlined a few possible methods in my ethics, unsure of what would work best. I did not want to falsely portray myself as (just) a player, ingratiating myself in a guild to recruit, as this was ethically dubious. I thought about using the general chat channel to spread my message, but this channel limits you to small zones of the game at a time. I attempted to contact four different high-level international guilds with no luck. I was at a loss until a member of my doctoral cohort provided me with an email of someone who would end up becoming my first participant. They had been speaking about my project and her friend offered up her information. After this exchange, I decided that perhaps the best way in would be through a trusted player.

I asked my friend Rob if he would be willing to send out a recruitment request on my behalf. He was part of a high-level guild that was reasonably strict but not overly regimented. I was looking for a high-level guild because I felt this would ensure my participants had at least a moderate level of engagement with the game. 100+ level raiding guilds would only have members who were devoted to playing the game regularly, and to be above level 100 means they would already have invested significant time playing.

I was unsure how these gamers would respond to my inquiry, but I hoped my friend's active participation in the guild would incline more individuals to contact me. He sent a brief message that I had typed up, explaining who I was and a description of my study. In this way I was able to utilize a snowball sampling model, which "consists of identifying respondents who are then used to refer researchers on to other respondents" (Atkinson and Flint, 2003: 274). Two of my participants were from the same guild as my friend, and the third was recruited by one of those two. Snowball sampling can be particularly useful when accessing hidden, stigmatized, or otherwise hard to reach groups of individuals (Atkinson and Flint, 2003). As such, this became the easiest method for me to recruit.

Snowball sampling:

"can be placed within a wider set of link-tracing methodologies (Spreen, 1992) which seek to take advantage of the social networks of identified respondents to provide a researcher with an ever-expanding set of potential contacts (Thomson, 1997). This process assumes that a 'bond' or 'link' exists between the initial sample and others in the same target population, allowing a series of referrals to be made within a circle of acquaintance (Berg, 1988)" (cited in Atkinson and Flint, 2003: 275).

Snowball recruiting is usually only used for qualitative research, where the primary method of inquiry is interview. This form of recruitment is useful "where some degree of trust is required to initiate contact" (Atkinson and Flint, 2003: 276). I feared that my participants would be wary of me and distrustful of what I was using the data for. By recruiting through my friend and a participant, some of this could be mitigated. The mutual connection also provided us some basis to begin our research relationship. Through the help of others, both participants and otherwise, I was able to secure three more participants, bringing my final total to four. I had been aiming for between three and five individuals in order to keep my study manageable, so this number worked well.

Once the participants had been recruited and signed the consent form, the interviews took place over a two-month period. I sent each participant the following:

As we begin this interview process, I want to remind you that this is a non-judgmental space for you to share your experiences with me. If at any point you are confused, require clarification, or would prefer not to answer, please let me know! Feel free to use computer/WoW language if you desire - I am not concerned with grammar and spelling, whatever comes naturally to you is great.

When responding, feel free to use as much space as is required. As you will see, my questions are quite open ended, and I would like for you to take your responses in whatever direction feels right. As I mentioned in my information sheet, we have quite a lot of time allotted for interviewing, so please take the time you need to answer thoughtfully. If I have not heard from you in a week, I will be in touch to check in. Otherwise, let's begin!

My first question is actually more of an invitation. I would like for you to tell me the story of your World of Warcraft gaming, as best you can.

Since I had opted for a semi-structured interview, I wanted each participant to respond to my invitation in whatever way felt right. I had a further four questions but wanted them to emerge organically while still allowing space for new/additional questions as each interview took its own path. All the interviews were conducted via my University email on a protected server. As such I did not have to worry about transcribing, though computer-mediated communication can have its own difficulties, for example the lack of para- or non- verbal cues which can reduce context and complicate understanding (Smith, 2003). After the data was collected, each participant was provided an exit consent form for further data protection. Participants were also asked if they would like to share screenshots of their avatars, which all four did with seeming enthusiasm. These photos have been provided at the end of each tale. For the entire interview schedule, see Appendix II.

For the beginning of the interview, I invited each participant to share the story of their gaming with me. I did not outline what I meant by “the story”, instead leaving it to

them to interpret it in their own way. I was excited and unsure as to what I would receive back, and even more so surprised at how eager each participant was to speak with me – it felt like they had only been waiting for someone to ask them the right questions. You will notice that I claim to have interpreted excitement, even though we were not face-to-face. The use of phrases, emojis, and exclamation points are critical in understanding tone through computer-mediated communication (Webb, 2010). The language of the computer user is one I am familiar with (having grown up through the advent of computers), and I encouraged each participant to write in a way that felt natural to them; to not worry about grammar and spelling, to feel free to use *WoW* speak. Relying solely on text for communication means you are losing so many of the other signals we rely on to express a message. Without the use of emojis and specific punctuation, it can become difficult to grasp the emotional context of the information. Yet my gamer participants were familiar with this struggle. They knew how to convey themselves through text, and this was what I had hoped for.

Given that my interviews were taking place over email, there was often a few days or more between my posing of questions and the responses from my participants'. During this time, I would read through whatever communication had already taken place and formulate what question I wanted to ask next. Over the course of two months I collected the narratives of my four participants', and then concluded them.

Analysis

I found that I had a wonderful amount of data upon conclusion. 30 pages of transcript needed to be combed through and understood. I started by reading each interview and looking for narrative and non-narrative elements. While there are few “how to” guides on narrative analysis (Riessman, 1993), the separation of narrative from non-narrative aspects of the interview seemed to be present in most of the narrative analysis literature I encountered. So, for example, my first participant Cora seemed eager to meet me, inviting me both to a yoga event and out for a cup of tea before providing me with a response to my

first question. Though they did somewhat set the tone of my interview with Cora, I largely considered these invitations to be non-narrative elements, outside of the scope of my research. “Deciding which segments to analyze and putting boundaries around them are interpretive acts that are shaped in major ways by the investigator's theoretical interests” (Riessman, 2003: 6). In other words, my first task was to sift through my data and find the relevant aspects of the narratives to analyze, and doing so is in itself an interpretive task for the researcher.

Next, I began to categorize the narrative elements broadly into three categories – personal, social, and thematic amongst all of my interviews. I chose these three categories because experience is both a personal and social process, and the third because I discovered certain threads of continuity between my interviews as I was conducting them. Statements like:

“real life, wise, I had three children under the age of four, which meant that my play time was slices of 10 to 20 minutes here and there throughout the day. Once you hit max level, in order to "progress" in whatever moving target there is in a particular game, you need to be able to make a time commitment of at least several hours at a stretch. That's probably why I moved on - I was stagnant and there was no chance for furthering my character” (Ellen)

were considered part of a personal narrative, pertaining primarily to the self in relation to gaming. In contrast, a response like:

“I have met many friends through the game, and many of my real life friends play with me. I see couples who play together more often than not, families with parents playing with their kids, and lonely teens/folks with (Borderline personality disorder, severe anxiety, depression) that are able to get interaction with other people from the safety and security of their own home” (Mac)

were considered social elements of the narrative, as they touched upon the individual in relation to other gamers or a larger societal whole.

Lastly, responses that touched upon the history of the game or the gaming community were highlighted as commonalities, since they were present in all four of the interviews.

Once this process had been completed, I set out to construct a coherent narrative for each interview, which would eventually be relayed as the stories that you will read shortly. To analyze and interpret my data, I relied heavily on ideas from critical narrative analysis. “Emerson and Frosh (2004) define narrative as a relatively coherent personal story, with a beginning, middle, and an end, that is co-constructed by an interviewee and interviewer in relation to foci on which an investigation is to focus” (Wells, 2007: 2). Wells (2007) further elucidates on critical narrative analysis, likening the interviewer to a psychoanalyst in that “the narrative analyst takes seemingly disconnected parts of an individual’s story, generated through skillful and open-ended interviewing, and reassembles them into a new and coherent narrative” (11). As mentioned previously, there is no one way to conduct narrative analysis, so while my process of reconstructing my participants’ narratives was influenced by the process of critical narrative analysis, I did not address “how individuals construct personal narratives in situations in which there are disconnections between them and the social contexts of which they are a part” (Wells, 2007: 3), a key defining element of this type of analysis. Instead my analysis focused on “separating the narrative from the non-narrative text [...], conducting an initial analysis of the broad themes of the entire text; selecting and analyzing a small number of narratives that are well-elaborated and of the greatest theoretical interest [...], the broad themes that characterize the entire interview, and the societal discourses that may be informing the exchange” (Wells, 2007: 3).

Each of my participants had an individual gaming style, and all seemed to take something different away from the game. Though there were common threads between them, each narrative had its own feel, and this was what I hoped to convey by reconstructing each narrative into a story after analyzing it. Once I had a grasp on what each participant had experienced, I wanted to find a way to convey those experiences meaningfully. For weeks I was stumped on how I was going to do this. My fear was sharing the data in such a way that the individuality of each piece would be lost, and the

nuances of each narrative un conveyed. I did not want to rely solely on direct quotations, since they lost much of their meaning out of context.

As the weeks went on, I noticed that in my head I had given some of my participants' epithets. Cora was a Warrior Princess, Mac a Benevolent King, John a Clever Rogue...at some point in my reading I had attributed to them my own characterizations that I frequently found in fantasy literature. I began reading at a very young age, and fantasy has always been my genre of choice. As such, I feel I have a particular insight into common narrative devices that are employed in fantasy stories, since I have read so many of them. I had almost unconsciously created these epithets, and I began to play with the idea of reconstructing each narrative as its own story, highlighting a specific characterization that seemed to fit my interpretation.

To do this, I first needed to identify which characterization would be most appropriate for each participant. I started by first looking at stereotypes in fantasy literature, but they were controversial and one-dimensional (as many stereotypes are). Then I looked to archetypes, but they were broad and (I felt) rather static as narrative devices. It was only after conversations with friends that the idea of using tropes was presented to me. Tropes are difficult to distinguish from archetypes, but many are far more specific, and due to their frequent use as narrative/plot devices, I felt they contained more movement/potential for development as characterizations. I thought about what it would be like to retell each story as a fantasy, eliminating the words "video game" and "gamer" (and subsequently the preconceived understandings of those terms). As a social constructionist interpretivist narrative inquirer this idea appealed to me, as it both allowed me to look at each narrative individually and to retell the stories as I have interpreted them.

"We become narrative inquirers only when we recognize and embrace the interactive quality of the researcher-researched relationship, primarily use stories as data and analysis, and understand the way in which what we know is embedded in a particular context, and finally that narrative knowing is essential to our inquiry" (Clandinin, 2007: 5).

My ontology, epistemology, and methodology all allow that the world and what is known within it are shared and interpreted between individuals. By retelling their stories and touching on tropes, I was able to subjectively bring out details that seemed most important to me upon my reading, as well as link them to more universal characters that have emerged from the folklore and culture of our society. I should note here that three of my four participants were from North America (as am I), with the fourth originally from Eastern Europe and currently living in the United Kingdom. Given my own history, the tropes that I have employed are those found traditionally in Westernized culture.

As mentioned previously, a trope is a concept as opposed to a strictly defined object. “Tropes are particularized properties, also called ‘unit properties,’ ‘property instances,’ ‘individual accidents,’ and ‘modes,’ among other things. Intuitively, each is a way that an individual can *be*” (Jaworski, 2016: 38). The Oxford English Dictionary (2019) defines a trope as “a significant or reoccurring theme; a motif”. Tropes can be found in many literary, sociological, philosophical and psychological disciplines. Tropes are also likely to differ slightly between cultural, historical, and academic settings. In literature alone, tropes can be characters, settings, plot devices, or objects. There is no single definition of a trope, but for my purposes I defined them as linguistic symbols that signify a collection of shared traits between characters in different stories. Because the story is so pivotal to *World of Warcraft*, many fantasy tropes are easily identified from the introductory background sequences alone. For example, Gul’dan “The First Warlock”, the main antagonist in *World of Warcraft*, is like Lord Voldemort; both are power hungry outcasts who are willing to sacrifice their souls for dominance. Illidan Stormrage “The Betrayer” is our Sauron, or Lucifer, or Iago; the timeless role of an individual spurned or slighted by those they trusted who then turn to evil for revenge. In contrast we have Anduin Wrynn “High King of the Alliance” (a nod to Tolkien’s Middle Earth in itself, as the Anduin is a river in his world); the Aragorn, or Dumbledore, a good individual forced to make tough decisions in the pursuit of peace. You may have noted that all of my examples are male; this highlights the lack of complex female characters/tropes in the fantasy genre, something I will expand on before Ellen’s tale.

Fantasy literature is particularly rife with hero/anti-hero/villain tropes in the most flamboyant sense; sword waving heroes and skulking shadowy bad guys, fantasy literature is not generally subtle in its use of tropes. The same holds true for the plot devices used in fantasy games like *World of Warcraft*. Paralleling the genre from whence they have emerged, these games also make use of extravagantly obvious tropes. It seems appropriate that individuals who play the game may often fit into tropes themselves. When playing *Warcraft*, you are inserting yourself into the storyline, so to me it seemed unsurprising that certain tropes began to show themselves as I was interviewing and analyzing my data. Just as we are characters in our life story, my participants became characters in Azeroth's narrative.

My participant tropes were defined and influenced by a combination of factors – play style, real life history, personality traits, interview narrative – through my interpretation of their gaming, my participants slotted themselves into a role in the game narrative, emulating character types that would frequently be found in fantasy literature. The inclination to categorize our experiences and ourselves in relation to others, as well as those others themselves, is arguably part of human nature. While not always explicitly defined:

“with experience, our models both specialize and generalize, we develop theories about *kinds* of people, *kinds* of problems, *kinds* of human conditions. [...] They are rarely original, and are more likely to come from the folk wisdom of the culture in which we grow up [...] folk narrative of this kind has as much claim to “reality” as any theory we may construct in psychology by the use of our most astringent scientific methods” (Bruner, 1987: 49).

In other words, over time we develop ways of understanding ourselves and others, and these ways of understanding are rarely unique. They are culturally anchored and seldom challenged, and as such it is unsurprising that I began to group my participants in with familiar literary tropes, since they rang so familiar to existing “folk” narratives.

The idea of Bruner's "folk wisdom" and "folk theory" is reminiscent of what Berger and Luckmann (1991) would define as "common sense knowledge" i.e. the "knowledge that constitutes the fabric of meanings without which no society could exist" (27). From the social constructionist point of view, the knowledge and fabric of meaning is established intra- and inter-personally in the interaction between our internal and external worlds. This results in the emergence of things that are "known," though what constitutes "knowledge" will inevitably be shaped by the time and culture from which it has been borne, as Foucault (1982) states in his theory of power-knowledge. Amongst these things that are known are likely to be myths, legends, folk tales, and mystical figures that have shown their faces in many forms throughout the cultural fabric. So, for example, coming from a Westernized, Caucasian, Christian culture, biblical tropes such as David and Goliath, the Prodigal Son, and the Antichrist would be familiar to me. My extensive reading and familiarity with the fantasy genre has further deepened my awareness to literary and narrative devices, as "I live in a common-sense world of everyday life equipped with specific bodies of knowledge" (Berger and Luckmann, 1991: 56). It was this more specialized subset of fantasy knowledge that aided me in reconstructing each narrative as its own story, tied to a familiar literary trope.

As you begin the four tales of my participants', I ask you enter the place of disenchanted enchantment. I want to take you on a journey to lands afar, where magical beasts and terrible ghosts inhabit the landscape. I would like for you to try for a moment to picture yourself there, alongside my participants, and see what they do not as "playing", but as *living*. I have deliberately removed the word 'game' from these accounts, and in place of 'gaming' I have used the word Travel. For how different is it, truly, from travelling to a foreign destination? Yes, one cannot smell the air, or feel the sun on one's skin, but one can see the beasts, can hear their cries. People can talk, dance, laugh, sing, and learn here. Simply put, one can *experience* this story, and be a part of it. So, I ask you to immerse yourselves in these stories, and hopefully in this way, some of the meaningfulness will be drawn out from the narratives as I have relayed them to you.

You will find a photograph at the end of each narrative as well. At the conclusion of each interview, I asked my participants if they would like to share a screenshot⁸ of their *Warcraft* avatar(s). Three sent multiple photos, the fourth sent one. I chose the picture that I felt best represented each participant and added it to their tale. These have been included to provide context and give you a sense of what avatars in *WoW* can look like. I also felt that providing a photo would help deepen engagement with the tales by offering a glimpse of how my participants choose to style themselves in-game, and to allow the reader to see the face that my participants' show to other gamers.

All my tales begin on Earth, a small planet rotating around a mid-sized star, located about $\frac{2}{3}$ of the way out on the Orion arm of the Milky Way Galaxy, spinning amongst countless other galaxies in the Virgo Supercluster. Yet from this humble rock my Travelers will journey far and wide, to galaxies only imagined; here they will face beasts both ordinary and unfamiliar, fight in wars great and terrible, and experience innumerable triumphs and failures. By stepping through portals and creating their own Skins⁹, they can become whoever they want. They will find their place in worlds unknown, and through this often find their place on planet Earth. Let us now venture within, and take heed to all that we encounter...

⁸ An image of the data displayed on the screen of a computer or mobile device.

⁹ I have used the word Skin to replace avatar or character. I have done this because I feel the word avatar already holds many preconceived connotations in the research world and would serve to strengthen boundaries that I want to remain permeable.

Tales from Azeroth

“For ages, the fallen titan Sargeras plotted to scour all life from Azeroth. To this end, Sargeras possessed the human sorcerer Medivh and compelled him to contact Gul'dan, an orc warlock on the world of Draenor. There, Sargeras' demonic servants among the Burning Legion worked to corrupt the once peaceful orcs and forge them into a bloodthirsty army known as the Horde. This cursed force invaded Azeroth through the Dark Portal, a dimensional gateway created by Medivh and Gul'dan, and clashed with the human nation of Stormwind. Aided by the half-orc Garona, human champions like Anduin Lothar fought valiantly to protect their kingdom. Yet, in the end, the mighty Horde shattered Stormwind's defenses. Amid the city's tragic fall, Garona betrayed her allies and assassinated King Llane Wrynn, sealing the nation's defeat...”¹⁰

¹⁰ www.worldofwarcraft.com

Mac the Captain

Mac's story has humble beginnings, as do all rags to riches tales. Growing up the son of a car mechanic and moonlighting musician, his Father taught him the value of hard work from a young age, setting an example as he toiled tirelessly day and night. The gravity of kindness, dedication, and charity was impressed upon Mac as a small boy, not just by his Father but his Grandfather as well. A farmer and veteran of World War II, his Grandfather taught him the importance of giving back to others, a trait carried through the generations. Mac lived by the motto "do unto others as you would have them do unto you". This honor code would drive many of Mac's life decisions, and these values would follow him across the universe.

Mac grew into a teenager, and it was at this age that his life would be forever changed. He was in his freshman year of high school, adjusting to the rigors of life as an adolescent. One fateful day, his best friend Oli excitedly told him about a new world he had just Travelled too, a fantastical place that you could get to from a home console. Consoles were commonplace, a technological marvel now normalized; one could be found in almost every home. Mac was soon convinced he needed to go, and he became one of the first ever Travelers in the infant land of Azeroth. In those early days, Azeroth was still getting on its feet. It was a very different place from the Azeroth you would see today. The economy was slow, and money was nigh impossible to come by. Conflict was emerging on all sides; weapons were scarce and frequently stolen by looters. The locals in Azeroth were isolated and difficult to find in an uninhabited landscape, which meant embarking on quests was a lengthy endeavor. Further, as Azeroth was a largely unexplored world, the maps were underdeveloped and offered little help. It was a time of lawlessness in Azeroth.

Mac spent most of his first year in the skin of Night Elf Druid, dancing on the steps of Stormwind City for money. Stormwind lies on the northwest coast of Azeroth, a massive tiered city hewn into the cliffs, a shining beacon for the human race (being their capital city). As he danced, Mac envied the beautiful mounts of the richer Travelers, those who had more time to spare from their home worlds and thus earned more gold in Azeroth.

Travelling throughout the land without a mount was tedious and time consuming; summoning stones had not been created yet, so all in-world travel had to be mounted or on foot. With a mount, Mac knew his skill as a Druid would improve exponentially since he would be able to find quests much faster. Sadly, it was a luxury he simply couldn't afford. As he danced, he watched them pass by – elegant Tigers, fierce Wolves, majestic Gryphons, ridden by high level Warriors and Druids – and dreamt of the day that he would be one of them. He wandered aimlessly around Azeroth, uncertain of his place or what to do, coveting that which he could not yet have, hoping for more.

His first year gone, Mac's dancing finally paid off, earning him enough gold to buy a mount. He journeyed to Darnassus, the capital city of the Night Elves, a canaled city sheltered under monstrously lush trees and filled with columned buildings of white marble. Once there he searched out a vendor and bought his first mount – a gorgeous white Tiger. It was a momentous occasion for Mac, and he felt the first stirrings of the great leader he was to become, as though acquiring this mount had unlocked the door to his success. The world was now his to explore, and he didn't waste any time seeking out quests and dungeons to hone his craft. Mac joined a guild and was soon approached to take part in weekly raids. Raiding was new to him, since his first year had mostly been spent saving up gold for his beloved Tiger. He joined a raid group who called themselves "Saturday Morning Core Tunes" (a pun on the Saturday morning cartoons that take place on Earth), and this raid group would provide him the opportunity he needed to flourish as both a Druid, and a leader. Mac quickly fell in love with raiding and Travelling with his friends every Saturday morning would create some of his fondest memories in all his time as a Traveler. Each week they would return to Molten Core, raiding and exploring deep in the depths of Blackrock Mountain, working their way to the lair of Ragnaros the Firelord.

He quickly moved up in rank and began to raid with more serious guilds. He had a passion for raiding, and soon was completing Heroic raids, those that only the most experienced would even attempt. As he expanded his skills, so too was Azeroth expanding. New enemies reared their heads, unexplored lands were discovered, and Mac was fighting his way through it all. He and his guild battled their way to the Lich King, the Master and

Lord of the undead Scourge army, and defeated him in record time. Mac was becoming powerful, which fueled his competitive spirit. He loved coordinating raids and ensuring a perfect execution that would lead to a Realm First kill of a boss. His knowledge of battle extended beyond the borders of Azeroth as well, as he was not just a Druid but a soldier, and conflict on Earth would eventually pull Mac away from his guildmates.

Mac had enlisted as a member of the military in his home country when he turned 18, and he was deployed to serve overseas. To his dismay, he was unable to access the portal to Azeroth during his deployment. While he served his country deep in the deserts of the Middle East, Azeroth expanded and changed without him. The Cataclysm hit, and the return of the evil dragon Deathwing marked a shifting change in the politics between Horde and Alliance. Deathwing was defeated, but Warchief Garrosh Hellscream seized this chance to gain control, murdering Horde and Alliance alike. Bodies washed ashore on the misty islands of Pandaria, a land that had seemed to appear overnight in the middle of the ocean. Mac was unaware of all this change, but soon would discover what a different place Azeroth had become in his absence.

On Earth, Mac returned from deployment, but did not yet feel the call to Travel. Time away had lessened Azeroth's hold on him, and his leadership skills were utilized elsewhere. He devoted his time to study at college, too busy to enter Azeroth's war. Until, suddenly, the entrance to Molten Core was reopened after 4 years, the selfsame one he had battled in so many years before. This was not a raid for the fainthearted, and only the most elite warriors were even allowed access. Completion of the raid would also mean receiving a Core Hound mount as part of your winnings – and Mac knew he could not pass up the opportunity to procure an exclusive mount. He was pulled back into Azeroth, reliving his glory days in Molten Core. Mac tried to keep his Travelling casual, as he still had Earth responsibilities, but he soon discovered that new communication techniques had been invented, and he now could find groups to raid with at any time of day.

His fire for raiding was reignited in the same way the Molten Core had been relit, and as an additional bonus, many of his Army friends now visited Azeroth as well. He was able to band together with his brothers in arms, now Travelers, and fight alongside them

like he had on Earth. Together they decided to join the battle on the side of the Horde as shifting politics meant changing allegiances, and Mac quickly found he could not resist the call to war. Being able to quest and raid with Travelers he knew from Earth was intoxicating, and Mac was having too much fun to keep it casual. Mac basked in the new challenges that Azeroth was always able to offer him. He worked his way through the Warlords and bosses, gaining mounts and achievements at every turn. He was challenged to create better strategies, to direct a team, to think abstractly and problem solve efficiently and effectively. A defining moment for our protagonist was his singlehanded defeat of the great Warlock Archimonde, the ruler of Hellfire, lord of a ruined zone that was once the site of a Draenai massacre. It took him over 200 attempts to defeat him, and the confidence boost from the eventual win carried him further in Azeroth than he thought possible. He battled his way back to best reigning class as a high-level Druid and became part of the top Horde guild, reminiscent of when he was once part of a top guild for the Alliance.

One of the real treasures for Mac was not just the mounts and the gold, however. Mac met many people in Azeroth as he Travelled. People that he would see on Earth as well. The game brought him joy, friendship, and connection. It taught him teamwork and leadership. His competitiveness continued to grow, but so too did his desire to share knowledge, coordinate tactics, and raid as successfully as possible. As he grew older his love of the “stuff” (mounts, toys, pets), became secondary to his place as a leader. He loved setting an example for newer Travelers, helping them through raids that he had once struggled with. He soon became a Traveler that other, younger Druids would come to for advice and tips, and he loved his ability to be a resource for the less experienced. Mac was always willing to drop whatever he was doing to help these Travelers, remembering that he was once fresh-faced and dancing on the steps of Stormwind City. How far he had come! But to Mac, being great at something was meaningless if you didn’t use that greatness to help others.

Mac liked to show his generosity in a variety of ways. It was not always generosity with his knowledge and experience. Sometimes it would mean carrying a lower level guild through raids to help them gain achievements just because they were nice people, asking

nothing in return. Other times he would mail large amounts of gold to random Travelers with the message “pay it forward,” knowing that could help turn someone’s day around. Other times he would cast healing spells on fighters out in Azeroth who were battling while low on health, improving their chances of success. To Mac, these little things were what made Azeroth such a wonderful world to spend time in. He knew that there would be nasty people out there, those who liked to hurt and ridicule, and this was his way of giving back and tempering that negativity. Though highly successful, Mac had never lost the values taught to him by his Father and Grandfather. He wanted to use his success for good, and to make Azeroth a fun and safe place for all Travelers.

To this day, Mac continues to Travel to Azeroth often. He feels particularly attached to his original Druid Skin, the longest running and most exalted. Mac has come a long way from being a teenager who was lost and confused in this ever-shifting land. He began as a beggar and is now one of the top Travelers in his realm. In his transformation from rags to riches, he never lost sight of where he began, and never faltered in his desire to set a positive example to those around him. He worked his way through the ranks, using his honesty and hard work to obtain a position of leadership and power, in turn helping others enjoy Azeroth the way he does. Though he may not reign in Azeroth forever, he has stayed the course from the very beginning, improving the lives of all he encounters. Mac always stayed true to himself, and it is this quality that has made him the leader he is today.



Cora the Action Girl

The hero in this story is Cora, and her tale begins in the dark basement of a country on Earth, also being torn apart by war. At the tender age of 14, young Cora found herself surrounded by the ravages of a fight for independence. Ringed by the sounds of bombs and gunfire, she quickly learned that 14 was old enough to help her father and brothers should the fight arrive at her doorstep. Disillusioned, she thought, *“I cannot be a little cutie-pie girl who waits for my prince Charming to come and save me...I must be strong and brave, the independent woman Mother and Father taught me to be!”* She watched as her country fell to pieces – buildings destroyed, families ripped apart, knowing it could just as easily be her home, her family. Two long years later, her country emerged victorious. She and her family survived the war, and her people’s fight for independence was successful. Yet these early experiences with conflict would stay with her.

Cora grew older and settled into a normal life; she worked an office job, had a stable boyfriend, even owned a small dance studio. Though she felt she was doing well in life, she found herself managing increasing frustrations in her workplace and was often angry and disgruntled when she left the office. Cora’s boyfriend suggested that she try Travelling somewhere new to blow off some steam. Cora had always known that different worlds existed on the other side of her console, but she had never visited them herself. In fact, she had often wondered why her boyfriend spent so much time in them and had never considered going personally. For the first time, she was to become a Traveler herself. She picked up the console device, looked through the portal, and there she was – in a new world. She had transported to a lawless archipelago, and with a rush of adrenaline she began shooting bad guys and letting go of all the stress of her workplace. *“Shooting criminals, monsters, blowing up shit...this feels great! It’s only been ten minutes and I’m hooked!”* she thought.

This was a world where she could shoot and kill monsters with impunity until all her anger had been released. A universe where she was strong and in control, and where her aggression would not have consequences. She loved being there, and soon began to

visit other worlds where she fought different battles and learned new fighting techniques. While most brought her great joy, through her exploration she came to learn that not every world was safe for her. One world specifically began to haunt her dreams. Fighting her way through the Black Mesa Research facility, located deep in a nameless desert somewhere, Cora began to feel a creeping darkness that stayed with her even after she had transported home to Earth. Cora had connected with this world, but had not realised it also ignited something deeper, something traumatic. The architecture of this place felt familiar, vaguely Eastern European, an all too present reminder of her past. The war-torn landscape she found there was too much. She had to stop visiting, as the nightmares got worse and worse.

Then, a door to a new world opened to her. Azeroth. Azeroth was a fantastic and revolutionary world, combining elements from many of the lands she had visited before. *“I think this world will probably suit you better,”* her boyfriend explained, *“you can create your own Skin to look like you, and you can even communicate with people from all over Europe!”* The landscape in this world was ever growing and changing with input from the Travelers that visited. Millions of people were coming to this world for the first time, helping to create something extraordinary. Azeroth was a place where Travelers came from all over to live, work, play, and fight together. Cora was skeptical but intrigued by the option to create your own Skin. This was a land full of mystical creatures and monsters, where she didn’t even have to be human if she didn’t want to be. For in this world, you could be whatever you wanted to be. There was freedom to be good, or evil. To follow the rules or break them. Cora stepped through her console, and four hours later was running around the Forests of Azeroth in her gown. *“This is amazing!” she thought, “I feel as hooked as I was the first time I Travelled!”* Before she knew it, she was Travelling there for 6-8 hours a day, on top of her day job and owning a dance studio.

At first, she was unsure of what to do. Unlike the worlds she was used to, Azeroth did not immediately have a clear-cut directive for her. Dressed in a gown and carrying her sword, she was naïve to the power she would wield here. She spent much of her time wandering around Elwynn Forest, a beautiful place full of bright green and purple plants,

where huge trees towered overhead against a bright azure sky. Large blue butterflies swam lazily in the air around her, leaving sparkling trails with their wings. Rabbits and squirrels chattered and played amongst the vegetation, and there was always the faint sound of gentle music on the air; maybe the music of fairies or elves. She pottered around, slaying wild boars and rabid wolves with no real purpose, occasionally finding herself the subject of teasing from other inhabitants of Azeroth. “*Get some serious armor you noob!*” she heard, finding herself on the receiving end of a derogative term for inexperienced Travelers. “*Look at this girl, a warrior in a dress??*”

It was then that fate chanced upon her in Elwynn Forest. A short, fat little gnome with a great big beard noticed the fair maiden Cora and decided to approach her. He asked if she would like to join his small guild and meet his friends. Cora happily accepted, seeking inclusion and advancement. He turned out to be a great guy who loved to help everyone in the guild, and they soon began to form a strong friendship. She learned that in Azeroth, all was not as it seemed. There was much more to do than slay pigs in the woods, as there was a war here too, an ancient one that had been going on since the beginning of time. And, like all Travelers here, she was needed to aid the fight.

It was at this point that Cora began to blossom into the woman she was meant to be. She grew stronger and learned how to fight, honing her skills and acquiring achievements. Soon her dress was traded in for a jerkin, pauldrons, a breast plate, and leather leggings. Her slippers gave way to boots. Her reputation began to grow, and she eagerly watched her rankings tick upwards. Being in a guild had brought her more than achievements as well; she made friends, other Travelers who she spoke with on Earth, as well as in Azeroth. She fought and quested, her casual habits giving way to more serious ones as her desire to advance grew.

In time Cora said goodbye to the first guild, leaving with many good memories and relationships that would last a lifetime. She joined a larger, more powerful guild, and began to work her way up the ranks – a rare occurrence for a female. Instead of insults, she was now the subject of adoration, sitting on her horse in the Dwarven District of Ironforge, surrounded by new Travelers admiring her gear. “*I’m with the big boys now*” she thought

to herself “*these idiots think that only men can play this well!*”. For many other Travelers doubted her; they did not believe she could be a woman. Cora got a thrill from proving them wrong. Her armor was all upgraded to a vibrant purple as she reached the pinnacle of her strength, a clear signal to others that she was highly successful. Young warriors began to seek her aid and advice, and she quickly became the most reliable tank in her guild.

Her strength in Azeroth was soon reflected in her strength on Earth. She discovered that she felt trapped and stagnated in her current relationship and was conflicted on how to proceed in her life. Somewhere along the way she had become the primary earner in her household, and as her boyfriend was fired from yet another job, she felt she was bearing a responsibility she didn’t want. She decided it was time to visit some other Travelers in their home worlds, spend some time with friends to help clarify her feelings. It was here that fate entered Cora’s life again. The little hunter gnome who had welcomed her into his guild had remained her friend over the years. Though Cora was still in a relationship, when she met her gnome in his home on Earth and saw his true skin, she fell in love. She returned home, troubled and confused. “*I can’t believe I’ve fallen in love like this...like a stupid, immature girl!*” Cora chastised herself. But her heart would not be denied. She had been with her partner for many years, but finally concluded their relationship had no future. So, she gathered her strength and ended it.

Our two warrior lovers did not end up together immediately. It took time for them to see that they were meant for forever. Years passed before their relationship transitioned from friendship to more. This tale ends happily, with a marriage between the two in the country of her soulmate. Together they Traveled to Azeroth for a few more years, before deciding their time in that world had come to an end. As it had been since the beginning of its creation, Azeroth was ever shifting. The community of Travelers there became younger, cultures shifted, and the conflicts of Azeroth continued. Cora and her husband felt it was no longer for them and decided never to return. It had become nothing more than a beautiful memory for them.

So ends the story of young Cora, our heroine having found both herself, and her soulmate, in Azeroth. Finally, she was able to blossom into the warrior that she always

knew lived inside of her. Power and strength were hers to wield, and she was not afraid to use them. Not only this, but the course of her life was changed when she met the man of her dreams, and though he may not have been Prince Charming, they both lived happily ever after.



The John-of-All-Trades

The first thing John could remember was the sound. *Bah-ding!* That cheerful (and eventually iconic) chime of a coin being grabbed as Mario jumped and punched a block overhead, releasing its treasure. *Bah-ding!* The wonderful noises, the enchanting colours and graphics, beckoned him to join in the fun. As soon as he was old enough to hold a console device, John began Travelling off Earth. His parents had bought a Nintendo Entertainment System, one of the original Travelling consoles, for their own leisure. But to a young John, the sights and sounds that awaited on the other side of that console were too enchanting to resist. He would grow to become a widely successful and supremely competent player, a self-ascribed “Power” Traveler.

The first two worlds he visited were the Mushroom Kingdom (as Mario), and Hyrule (where he fought as Link). These were some of the earliest places people could Travel to on their home consoles, and the objectives were engaging and easy for a young boy to pick up. The Mushroom Kingdom was colourful and pleasant to spend time in, its music catchy and simple. While there, he enjoyed the landscape and the challenge posed by puzzling out where to head next to find the Princess Peach. Soon after, he began to Travel to Hyrule, a vast kingdom of soaring mountains and sweeping forests. As Link, John loved to complete quests for treasure that he would then use to defeat dragons and bosses. He found great joy in the linear structure of adventure and exploration in Hyrule and would find himself drawn to worlds such as these in his Travels over the years. Since he began using his console at such a young age, John quickly honed his dexterity and coordination, and his skills grew exponentially. He had started on a path that would lead him to greatness.

For John, Travelling was often a family activity. Not only had his parents introduced him to his first console, but his Uncle as well. His Uncle introduced him to a whole different type of place, the world of Multi-User Dungeons, where people worked together with other Travelers from all over the world. In MUD’s, you did not interact *as* someone else, but instead you had the freedom to create your *own* Skin. In these worlds

you designed how you looked, what your name was, what race and class you were from. In addition, unlike the worlds of Hyrule and the Mushroom Kingdom, MUD's did not have an "end". You could continue to battle, work, play and engage here (theoretically) forever. This had a massive appeal for John. He and his Uncle would begin together in their home, barely 10 feet apart, and Travel to mystical worlds unknown where they would play and fight alongside each other, the most momentous being their forays into Azeroth.

"Ray, I could use a heal!"

John would yell to his Uncle, while they simultaneously were battling as cleric and warrior. They spent countless hours killing spiders for their silk and trying to monopolize the bazaar for gold. These moments were precious to John, and he remembers these early days fondly, a time of companionship and togetherness. His Uncle did not stay long in Azeroth, as obligations with his wife and children drew him away from Travel and into a more settled existence, but the memories would remain bright for John throughout all his adventures.

John's passion for Travel burns strong, though he has found that not all worlds pique his interest. What he loves most is to fight and quest with others, a hail to his early days working alongside his Uncle. If John is unable to find others, even just for a chat, he finds himself bored and listless. This is what has made Azeroth such a special place for John. Here he can find groups to raid with at any time of day. He can chat with others over Discord, a special program that links together other Travelers so that they can easily communicate. Discord is the first thing he checks, making himself available for chat and advice. John even became an officer so that he could help others in the community, sharing his vast knowledge and skill. This is important to him, as the community was friendly, helpful, and welcoming to him when he began Travelling, and he wants to give back that same sense of acceptance.

John's first and most important Skin goes by the name of Akine. Akine is not one but many, a Skin that has had different faces and fought as different classes over the 12 years of John's Travel; but at its core it is always Akine. Akine began as an Orc Warlock,

and though it has occasionally been different races, it is still the foremost Warlock that John plays. John has rerolled¹¹ many characters, but *never* Akine. Akine has always been and will always be John's primary Skin. When he has tried to roll other Warlocks, it has never felt the same. He has, without exception, brought Akine over to every realm he has been active on.

Akine has helped John become the 'John-Of-All-Trades'. Together they have shared a special bond that has not been broken over 12 years. They have battled far and wide in Azeroth, maxing out trade skills in tailoring and engineering, casting down enemies as an Affliction Warlock. His success with Akine led John to branch out and roll other characters. To play as a Rogue, a Hunter, a Monk. Most commonly John fights in the melee, but he has also played as a tank and a healer. John has found himself everywhere from high level guilds to casual progression guilds, and he sees no scenario where he will stop Travelling. To him, there is always something to achieve as there is no 'end' to the quest. When he stalls or reaches max level, he can simply begin the story anew. He never tires of the adrenaline rush he gets from fighting in Azeroth. The thrill of gathering your friends to defeat a new boss, or coming out victorious in a one-on-one fight, is special to John.

The most memorable raid for John took place deep in the bowels of Molten Core, against the final boss Ragnaros. As Akine, he worked his way up to Warlock Class Officer. He and the guild made quick work of a few bosses, but others were more challenging, and in those days a failure meant starting the raid over from the beginning. They toiled for weeks in Molten Core, frequently only being able to attempt a run on Ragnaros before they were slaughtered. After a month and a half, they finally defeated him. Ragnaros expelled a mountainous roar, dropped his mighty hammer, and vanished in a burst of flame. John and his guildmates screamed over Discord, a triumphant battle cry for a foe finally vanquished! This battle was John's first taste of a final raid boss death and it will be forever imprinted on his memory.

¹¹ To reroll a character means to change your focus from one avatar to another with the intention of levelling it up.

To John, Travelling means many things. It means honing your skills both in battle, and in more “mundane” tasks. It means spending time with friends and family and keeping in touch with people from far away. It means worlds with endless quests to complete, where there is always new treasure to unlock and secrets to discover. Azeroth is a sacred place to John; it has allowed him to blossom into a supremely successful warrior who has skills in many different areas and who is always willing to share this knowledge. He is a true renaissance man and fine example of the Traveler many others seek to be.



Interlude III

I am speaking about literary devices with a friend, bouncing ideas off him as I try to determine how I want to analyze my data. “Three of my participants seem to fit so clearly into classic roles,” I explain “but the fourth is elusive. I can’t seem to pin down where she fits.” I tell him about the other three participants, The Action Girl, The Captain, The Jack-of-All-Trades. But the fourth, her motivations are less clear. “It’s interesting,” he comments “it seems as though it was easy for you to identify classic male roles, and a woman fulfilling a more traditionally masculine role. But the more nuanced feminine position is more difficult to identify, and harder to find in fantasy literature.”

Gender in Fantasy

Before beginning my final tale, I must take a moment to discuss gender in fantasy. As months passed and I was rewriting the stories of my participants’, I found that I could not settle on a trope for one of my participants. This statement from my friend relayed above sticks with me. It is indicative of a larger issue of gender dynamics and the roles they play in *World of Warcraft* and fantasy overall. Historically, most fantasy tropes and archetypes center around a male character, not a female. Many female roles are stereotypical, offensive, and one-dimensional, and though this is shifting in modern fantasy, they are still within the minority (Campbell, 2014). There are few strong, capable, intelligent women who exist in fantasy literature (let alone women who are sexually empowered), and I think this may have contributed to the difficulty I had in pinpointing a trope for my last participant. Many female characters, even when performing heroic deeds, are doing so only as reactions to their male counterparts (Campbell, 2014).

Regarding the video game industry, the “lack of visible female role models” and “lack of aspirational female characters” not only perpetuates the stereotype that all gamers are male but discourages women from being open about identifying as gamers (Paaßen, Morgenroth and Stratemeyer, 2016: 428). Female portrayals in video game franchises are

also often oversexualized, further contributing to male-centric gameplay (ibid). These factors combined to create difficulty in categorizing Ellen, a more complex female player who embodied both traditionally feminine (motherhood) and masculine (sexual minded) traits.

I discovered I was reminded instead of a specific character from a science fiction show by the name of *Firefly*. While science fiction and fantasy are not technically the same genre, the delineations between the two are frequently blurred (Harvey, 2015). In the eyes of Todorov, science fiction instead falls into the genre of the “uncanny,” where “events are related which may be readily accounted for by the laws of reason, but which are, in one way or another, incredible, extraordinary, shocking, singular, disturbing or unexpected” (Todorov, 1975: 46). Examples of science fiction would be Lovecraft’s *The Cthulhu Mythos*, Gibson’s *Neuromancer*, Rodenberry’s *Star Trek*, or Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (although again we must remain aware that the genre definitions are murky, and some researchers may argue differently). The origins of science fiction are often traced to the Gothic Romance and the works of authors such as Emily Brontë and Mary Shelley (Brantlinger, 1980). Perhaps the emergence of a strong female voice as the foundation of the genre is why science fiction frequently does not fall victim to the sexist stereotypes that so often plague fantasy literature, and why I ended up looking to *Firefly* for Ellen’s trope.

The show had only one season and though not widely viewed, it has become something of a cult hit in the sci-fi/fantasy community (Saporito, 2016). I will speak here with some authority on the subject having seen the show myself. One female character by the name of Inara is what’s known as a Companion. Companions are probably easiest equated to a geisha or courtesan – they are women or men of high social standing who make their living from entertainment and sanctioned prostitution. However, they are well-educated, dignified, trained in many talents (sexual and otherwise), and treated with great respect.

They are even sometimes utilized as neutral mediators during conflict, a factor that influenced my settling on this trope. There was something about Companionship that kept popping into my mind as I was analyzing the transcript of my participant Ellen. Perhaps it

was the fact that the social outlet and ability to be her unfiltered sexual self was so important. Ellen defined herself as “the sweetest pervert you will ever meet,” going so far as to express she might “imagine [a hot guy] starring in a B&D porn flick as a bottom”. It was this seeming dichotomy that made her so difficult to fit into a single category. She is sexually empowered but isn’t promiscuous; she is (to the best of my knowledge) happily married with three children. She enjoys having good standing with her guild but does not need to be the best, instead applying herself to many different interests from stats to skills. She likes being a conflict negotiator between members of her guild, and diffusing tension when it arises. Furthermore, her recognition that she cannot be her unfiltered self in all social circles reminded me of Inara, who often had to tailor who she was to suit her social surroundings.

The vast majority of tropes that have to do with sex and a woman are negative. The Slut, The Scarlet Letter, The Red Lady. For all these tropes, sex is ultimately the only thing that defines them. In fantasy literature, female sex workers are usually sneaky, backstabbing, and money-hungry; perhaps destitute, sickly, addicted to drugs, or in need of rescue. As another researcher described:

“reading about women in fantasy novels had set me an even more unrealistic point of view. The *Lord of the Rings* doesn't help, with its sexless visions of elf maidens who may as well be speaking paintings, and neither does other fantasy literature, where women seem to exist solely to be rescued or slept with” (Barrowcliffe, 2014).

Rarely are they empowered, strong, healthy women who use their sex as it suits them and not to be degraded or demeaned. I recently read *Dune* by Frank Herbert, a prime example of the cross-over between genres, a blend of science fiction and mystical fantasy. In this book as well, all but one of the main characters are male, and every female character is relevant only as an accessory to the males, a trend previously noted by Campbell (2014).

Ursula K. Le Guin, an award winning and highly renowned fantasy author has been the subject of a recent documentary at the Sheffield documentary festival. In the film, the late author reflects on the difficulties she faced when fleshing out her female characters. According to Le Guin, “when she started writing ‘men were at the centre’ of fantasy, with women ‘either marginal or essentially dependent on men’” (Le Guin as quoted by Alison Flood, *The Guardian*, May 30, 2018). Le Guin elaborates that “from [her] own cultural upbringing, [she] couldn’t go down deep and come up with a woman wizard” (Flood, 2018). Le Guin is best known for her Earthsea series, a much-loved cornerstone in fantasy literature. The first three books in the series center on Ged, a male wizard. However, the fourth centers on her female protagonist, Tenar. It took her 17 years to write Tenar’s story. Le Guin revealed to Arwen Curry (the filmmaker behind the documentary) that:

“what [she’d] been doing as a writer was being a woman pretending to think like a man...[she] had to rethink [her] entire approach to writing fiction...it was important to think about privilege and power and domination, in terms of gender, which was something science fiction and fantasy had not done” (Flood, 2018).

I similarly struggled when trying to write Ellen’s story. I found myself continually hesitating, fearing that I would not do her justice, or that my rendering of her story would paint her in a false light. Just as it is harder to find a sexually empowered female hero in the fantasy genre, I struggled to analyze the participant who was a mother, a fighter, a negotiator, and a dirty-minded flirt. I too fell victim to the longstanding literary patriarchy that favors male leads over female, and that rarely gives female characters depth beyond their use to the male protagonists. I felt that to do her story justice, I would not be able to follow the existing tropes that so frequently fall flat when typifying women. And so, for my last story, I give you my own trope – The Companion.

Ellen The Companion

Ellen had been a Traveler for as long as she could remember. At a young age, she began with *Dungeons & Dragons* and a group of friends who loved to role-play. In those days Travelling to new worlds meant entering a world of communal imagination, where she and her friends would pretend to be warriors and wizards around a table-top board game. Ellen was very socially oriented but found that she struggled in face-to-face conversations. She loved getting to know people and learning their stories, but interaction did not come easily to her. As a young girl, role-playing gave her the confidence and freedom to be herself through playing someone else, and it was this appeal that would eventually lead her to the world of Travel. She and her friends progressed from board games to live action role-play, and as soon as technology allowed, they began to Travel off-world together. It all started in 1998, and her Travelling would prove such a momentous shift in her life that Ellen would hardly be able to remember the time before. Amassing a large group of friends over several years, Ellen Travelled from world to world with them, improving her skills in the realms of Felucca and Norrath before finally finding Azeroth. She found her home amongst these Travelers, feeling as though she could be her unfiltered self, a more authentic version of who she was.

In her earliest adventures in Azeroth she stayed true to her role-playing roots. She created Makari, a female Orc warrior, and would remain “in character” whenever she used that Skin. She enjoyed goofing around, heckling the natives in each world, communicating with a Cockney accent that she had settled on for Makari. She enjoyed the attention she got from other Travelers, even if it was only to exclaim “what the f*ck?!” at her outrageous behaviour. Ellen loved that she could let loose and have fun, be rude and crass, all without fear of repercussions on Earth.

Being a mother to three children under the age of four at the time of her early Travels, she was not always able to go as much as she wanted. Ellen had a job on Earth, as well as the massive job of raising children. She and her husband visited Azeroth for a brief stint of time but found that they were unable to balance their Earth commitments with

those in Azeroth, and they drifted away from the world. Yet Ellen did not remove herself completely from the world of Travel; rather she visited other lands where the burden of responsibility was lesser. Ellen was not willing to give up the sense of freedom that was bestowed upon her as a Traveler. Being a mother and a professional, Ellen felt there were aspects of her personality that needed to be stifled for fear of the reaction she would get in certain social circles. Knowing herself to be flirtatious, dirty-minded, and frank, she often felt that she had to hide the more forward aspects of her personality. In fact, a friend once described her as “the sweetest pervert you will ever meet,” and Ellen felt this was a most apt description of herself.

Ellen always loved to flirt and have direct conversations, something that can be challenging to do when looking someone in the eye. A very sexually forward woman, Ellen often felt that in her real life she could not reveal some of her innermost thoughts for fear of how she would be received. This left her feeling as though something was lacking from her social life, since there were not many people around whom she could be fully transparent. Travelling allowed her to exist in a space where she would not be judged, and where she could rest easy knowing that if someone was bothered, they could choose to ignore her. This freedom to ignore and be ignored offered Ellen a sacred space that became her main social outlet. She could be upfront and engage in the genuine conversations that she found so nourishing, offering a unique place to develop companionship.

After Travelling for many years in other worlds, Ellen found her way back to Azeroth, the land she had visited only briefly early in her career. She became a regular in Azeroth after meeting with a wonderful group of people that she could adventure with at any time of day. With her children grown up, Ellen had more free time to deeply engage with the quests and raids in Azeroth. She and her husband played together, and found themselves progressing quickly, soon two of the top members of their guild. Yet it was not these achievements that Ellen found so special in Azeroth. The mounts, outfits, the *stuff*, never really meant much to Ellen. For her, it was always about the people. Her constant desire for connection, genuine conversation, flirtation, and true friendship, is what has made Azeroth so special to Ellen. She found the community to be kind and helpful, and

she quickly joined another guild recommended by a friend. Ellen flourished in making connections with new people and fostering friendships. She found herself often assuming the role of mediator; helping others to get along within her guild and doing her best to put herself in the shoes of others. It brought her fulfillment to help diffuse arguments or help arrange guild meetups. Whatever the task, Ellen was up for it.

Never content in complacency, Ellen also loved to discuss the inner workings of *Warcraft*, even though this was an area she found challenging. She enjoyed being able to communicate with people from all over Earth, talking shop and stats, pouring over the data from the most recent raid. She actively worked to strengthen weak areas of her knowledge and would take any opportunity to pick the brain of a more experienced Traveler. She was not ashamed of her areas of ignorance, instead seeing them as an opportunity for growth. This allowed her to develop skills in a variety of areas, and foster friendships around different aspects of life in Azeroth.

Whether it was to flirt, banter, discuss, or analyze, the most important aspect of Travelling for Ellen was the relationships she formed. Toxic communities led to a loss of interest, and the lack of such is what made Azeroth so special. Most people who Traveled to Azeroth were kind and helpful, a community that wanted to succeed, not put others down. Unless the community changed, Ellen did not foresee a scenario where she would no longer Travel. The freedom to be who she was, connect with individuals across space and time, learning and growing in the process, created a dedicated Travelling companion who would sacrifice all for those she loved.



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¹² Ellen sent me two photos, one of which showed her flying on her mount, the other this rather sexualized photo. I chose this one because I felt it better encapsulated her Companion story and represented the often sexual nature of her gameplay. While it may at first glance appear like an example of sexist gender representation, the fact that Ellen chose to show herself to me in this way seemed another illustration of her owning her sexuality. The photo shows a woman who is strong, powerful, and seductive; sexy at her own behest. However, the photo does also provide an example of how female characters are often portrayed in video games, and frequently it is not coming from a place of empowerment as in Ellen's case.

Part III

Chapter 7 – Discussion

Take a moment to come back now. If reading the tales has engaged you the way writing them engaged me, you will need a moment to enter back into the headspace of this thesis. I hope they will have left you with a sense of the fantastic in the everyday, with a heightened awareness of the depth of experience that occurs in Azeroth. I hope that they resonated with you, in part or in total, helping you enter the *Warcraft* sphere of imagination like so many millions do. By analyzing, interpreting, and presenting my stories in the way I have, I have striven to show how interconnected online experience and daily life is for player. It was also to highlight how easily our minds move between real and unreal as readers, just as Speedy (2011), and Caillois (2001) argue. In this way, we can enter the fantasy experiences of my participants' and perhaps take away something into our own lives, just as they are taking away something from their gaming.

You may have noticed that all my stories were those of success – this was not selective editing. Apart from minor comments, none of my participants had a tragedy to share. Instead, I learned of their triumphs, friendships, and hard-earned skills and gear. I came to understand that, at least for my participants, *World of Warcraft* has constituted a meaningful and impactful part of their lives, as I will now discuss in further detail.

Social Connection

As I pored over my interviews, one of the strongest undercurrents in each narrative was the community of *World of Warcraft* and how gaming has been a social activity. Tying back to Huizinga, Sutton-Smith, and Caillois, games and play are an integral part of our social life, deeply ingrained in our collective culture. Each participant was introduced to the game by a close friend or family member and would often play the game with that

individual. John gamed regularly with his uncle and expressed how fun this was for them both since they bonded over their gaming.

“When [my uncle and I] started EQ [*EverQuest*] we were in adjacent rooms. He was playing a cleric, and I'd just yell, "Ray, I could use a heal." Not even yell, he was ~8 feet away. It was amazing. We spent countless hours killing spiders for their silk and trying to monopolize their bazaar for gold.”

Both his parents and his Uncle gamed regularly, likely influencing the development of his finely-honed gaming skills that led him to becoming a Renaissance man of sorts. Mac would game with his best friend and housemate, as well as with many of his high school buddies that he may have lost contact with otherwise.

“I was in my Freshman year of High School, and my best friend Oli, whom I am still friends with/live with today, was the one that got me into the game [...] I love this game, It has brought me much joy, and I have made A Lot [sic] of friends because of it. Friends that I actually see when I'm traveling around the US.”

Similarly, Cora gamed with friends that she eventually met in real life and built relationships that continue to this day, even though she is no longer gaming.

“I developed a great friendship with my WoW mates outside the game too, we were Facebook friends, we would email each other to talk about our strategies, but also everyday stuff too [...] After 3 years of playing my friend and I went on a wee UK trip and decided to meet with some of my WoW friends in person”.

For my participant Ellen, *WoW* is her primary social outlet, and it is the community aspect of MMORPGs that keeps her playing.

“The social interaction is what brings me back, as I've said. It's not the game itself, it's the people therein. The platform doesn't really make a difference, I've had this same level of connection in other games. *WoW* is just the place

that it happens to be at the moment [...] It IS [sic] my main social outlet and I'd have to find something else to fill that role if it went away.”

For Ellen, *WoW* constituted a vital part of her social life, and it was this emphasis on connection that influenced my Companion trope.

From a therapeutic standpoint, an awareness of video game's potential to provide social connection is relevant, particularly when considering how isolating mental health issues can be. MMORPGs may provide a lifeline for clients who are unable to satisfy their social needs face-to-face. An ESA study showed that 56% of gamers play with someone else, with an average of 5 hours per week spent playing with someone in-person. 54% of frequent gamers play in multi-player mode at least weekly, with an average of 6.5 hours spent per week playing with others online (Entertainment Software Association, 2015). As opposed to it being an isolating experience, gaming has brought people together both in person, and around the globe. Even more uniquely, because *World of Warcraft* requires teamwork to succeed, it helps build feelings of togetherness and comradery.

“Players’ reliance on others gives rise to robust communities in which players transact their relationships through their virtual characters not only in the game but also Web forums, e-mails, and voice over IP networks” (Bessière, Seay and Kiesler, 2007: 530).

This harkens back to Caillois’ theories, where he explains that when humans play the same game they will naturally congregate with other players to test their skill, form organizations (or guilds in this case), share tips and tricks, and play together (1958). In *World of Warcraft*, it is necessary to get help from other players. Most of my participants took a lot of pride in their ability to help other players, and similarly did not like playing with people they considered unhelpful or bullying.

“I think that these small things are what people remember about the game, and someone being kind to someone else even in a game, can change their mood in real life. People don't remember the trolls of trade chat last

expansion, people /ignore¹³ folks that are jerks, but people log in to the game for hours each day to share an experience, take part of a story, with millions of people around the world” (Mac).

Mac’s emphasis on being kind, being a good leader, and helping others led me to the Captain trope that I felt best personified him. In the quote selected above, he also unknowingly reaffirmed the position this thesis takes – that people log on to share an experience and take part in a story together.

It seems that at least in part, what makes this game so important is the positive community of *World of Warcraft*. Described by my participants as “amazing”, and “helpful,” my participants felt the number of friendly, social players at the very least equals the number of “trolls”¹⁴, if not outweighing them. Being able to meet new people and form genuine friendships was important for all my participants, and each spoke about how it was the community that would make or break the experience of a game.

“What drives me away from a game is when the community becomes toxic. My last game, towards the end it was almost impossible to find a person who was helpful, non-sarcastic, or non-troll. It got to the point where I was logging on to do "chores" - various daily things - and discovering that, no, I really don't want to go in to voice chat. Not interested in what stupid thing someone said to someone else that started yet another flame¹⁵ war. With WoW, for the most part, I've found that the reasonable people outnumber the trolls by a fair amount. As that proportion changes, the likelihood of me leaving increases” (Ellen).

The ability to /ignore someone meant that Ellen could foster relationships with individuals whose company she enjoyed. She could have “frank conversation” in *World of Warcraft*, an experience that certainly increased her emotional attachment in the online

¹³ /ignore is a key command that allows players to ignore other players, i.e. their text will no longer show up on screen

¹⁴ Players who intentionally engage in antisocial conduct.

¹⁵ Flaming is defined as, “an uninhibited expression of hostility, such as swearing, calling names, ridiculing and hurling insults toward another person, his/her character, religion, race, intelligence and physical or mental ability” (Kayany, 1998, p. 1138)

friendships, and one that she struggled with in ‘real-life’. Touching back to her Companion trope, the element of consent and control in social interaction felt relevant and important. A Companion “chooses her own clients, that’s [the Companion Guild’s] law”¹⁶. Similarly, Ellen could be herself knowing others did not have to listen, just as she did not have to consent to social interactions that were unhealthy for her. She could choose who to be friends with and who to ignore. Arguably this is beneficial for any player, as they are rarely forced to be subjected to prolonged abuse at the hands of a single person, an ability many bullied kids probably wish to possess in their offline lives. This too has therapeutic implications, as it provides a digital social platform where players are in better control of who they interact with and in what way. This could help inoculate individuals with social anxieties and help them build confidence in themselves and their boundaries, mitigating real life stressors.

Expanding on *WoW*’s social implications, it was not unusual for my participants to meet other players in-person; this had occurred for three of the four participants.

“Discord, Ventrilo, Mumble, and Teamspeak have all been amazing as a way of ~instantaneous [sic] communication while you’re playing. Before I even log on to WoW [sic] currently, my first step is to open Discord and see if anyone else is on. I try to jump in chat anytime I’m online, both for company, and because I’m an officer (should anyone have a need)” (John).

“I am on Ysera/Durotan and have made friends with a good portion of the community. So for me a lot of what keeps me playing are the people, it would not be as fun, if I logged in and had no-one to talk to/interact with” (Mac). All my participants expressed that they preferred to game with someone else, and two explicitly stated they would often go offline if there was no one around to play with; without a friend, MMORPGs seem to lose much of their luster.

¹⁶https://firefly.fandom.com/wiki/Companion%27s_Guild

World of Warcraft has also helped people that have moved away from each other stay in touch and has brought together individuals from across the globe who now have maintained relationships outside of the game.

“There's a guy in Spain that has my evening hours, there's someone in Australia I meet up with for morning dungeon runs, there's people moving in and out throughout the day that I can banter with. I know who's going to be playing what day for the most part. There are three or four different people I can talk to about the "innards" of the game - statistics, trends, and class structures, how to min/max abilities for peak performance - and then there are those I can just shoot the breeze with” (Ellen).

In one case, playing *WoW* even resulted in marriage:

“I organised a wee meeting with my mate (future husband) and as soon as I saw him in person I actually fell in love like a stupid immature girl [...] it still took my husband and I another year or so until we realised - we cannot live without each other. We got married after 2 years of long distance relationship” (Cora).

For Mac in particular, a real bonus of the game is the ability to stay connected to family and friends. *World of Warcraft* is designed in a way that you can pop on and off at times that are convenient for you, and there will always be others to play with. The addition of the “looking for group/raid” (LFR) feature has been especially helpful in this regard. Mac has been able to relive his glory days as a teenager (“I was invited to go to “Saturday Morning Core Tunes”, which was running Molten Core instead of watching TV. Saturday Morning Cartoons used to be the best! Basically, we would group up, run to the meeting stone, since you couldn't get summons back then, and raid Molten core all day on Saturday. It was some of the most fun I’ve ever had playing a game”) with his buddies through the re-release of Molten Core, as well as advance in the game with new players using LFR. These features mean that even if someone is on a different schedule than the people in their time zone, they will always be able to find someone else to play with. Mac

has been able to connect with his Army friends who play all over the United States, joining them all up in a guild together. *World of Warcraft* lets him easily stay connected to friends that he has met at various stages of his life. As I will showcase below, the global networking elements of MMORPGs can be hugely influential for some individuals.

Interlude IV

I am sitting in a crowded café in the middle of a bookshop. The murmur of conversation and the bustle of Christmas shoppers blends with the hiss of milk being steamed and clatter of cups being washed. The shop is comfortably warm, and the scent of spices and new books surrounds me. I have always been drawn to these cafes, much like I was drawn to libraries at a young age. I find myself feeling soothed and contained when I am amongst books, and the meeting spot has been well chosen for the serious conversation topics we would find ourselves in that morning. I am settled in my wooden chair, perpendicular to a close friend and her dog. We have not seen each other in many months, and the first hour or so is spent catching up on the many huge changes that have happened in both our lives. As our conversation meanders from life, love, and loss, we find ourselves discussing the most dreaded of topics – our theses. She has been studying LGBTQ+ communities in areas where it is not only unacceptable to be so, but frequently dangerous as well. “It is so interesting how video games transcend geographical space,” she muses, “many trans people find that they are able to be trans online and in video games before they can even be so in their actual lives.” She goes on to speak about how video games allow people from all over the world to connect to each other, which also means that trans individuals in countries where it is forbidden can find support, acceptance, and hope from trans individuals in inclusive countries like the United Kingdom and United States. It is this ability to move beyond physical space that creates such a unique opportunity. Coupled with complete anonymity, video games and the internet become a haven for those looking to explore different aspects of themselves without fear of repercussion. As my friend has made so clear to me, this untethering from physical space can often provide a lifeline for those who are unable to safely be themselves all the time.

Identity and Self

Because MMORPGs are social games, they offer something unique when looking at their relation to identity. Conceptions of self, gender, and identity are central to therapy, and clients may use video games to explore them, as I found with my participants. A common thread among the narratives was the ability to play around with ideas of identity and self in *Warcraft*. In a sense, you can be whoever you want to be in these worlds, and thus a player's identity is never static. This freedom and release of the everyday self is reminiscent of Huizinga's (2009) concept of the mask, whereby the internet/avatar act as a mask that disguises the face of its wearer, allowing them to assume a new identity. All my participants expressed variants of feeling freer, more powerful, accomplished, etc.:

“Not sure about other people but for me it was quite interesting to form a character that looked like me, but was living this double life. I could totally switch off and dive into this weird medieval fantasy world where I can put my amazing gear on (that I was working hard for, slaying monsters and dragons and fighting against all these amazingly creative characters of WoW) and be this fearless woman on her horse [...] Maybe some people play as someone totally different but for me it was almost like - this would actually be me if the real world was WoW. I would be more like Joan of Arc than a wee maid, sitting in a castle, reading poetry. (haha). I could have picked a sexy night elf, or a healer or a mage, but I wanted to almost be equal to men in this game” (Cora).

I interpreted that gender played a large role in determining Cora's play style (tank warrior). This interpretation guided my choice of trope, as the Action Girl must often challenge and overcome the misogynistic beliefs of other characters, upsetting the status quo. Cora was often met with disbelief that she was “actually female,” since there is a pervasive belief that women are not as good as men at video games. “We often see female gamers receiving help from male gamers, whether wanted or not. The stereotype that women are subordinate, less experienced, and less intelligent may indicate why men might

feel as though they need to fill a “white knight” role” (Brehm, 2013: 2). Frequently it would not be until they heard Cora speak over Discord that they realised she was a woman. Cora said that:

“the female characters [she] met were mostly healers, rogues, night elves, but here [she] was - human, female, tank warrior, purple gear (meaning – [she] went to all the important raids and got the most epic gear) so [she understood] that they were a bit confused.”

Dissecting this statement, we see that in her experience, female players are drawn to what may be considered more “feminine” roles; that of a healer, or of an Elven race (notoriously depicted as sexually ambiguous or feminine featured). Even I was drawn to the Elf race myself, because I found them to be the most physically attractive. Looking back, I feel this was likely motivated by the fact that I was feeling very unhappy with my body at the time that I began playing.

Interestingly, preceding Cora’s answer I had asked her if she felt gender issues were a factor in *World of Warcraft*, and she replied no. As a woman, therapist, and researcher, this felt to me like an example of the deeply rooted and often subtle hand of patriarchy. Gender was “not an issue” in Cora’s mind, yet in her experience most women play as healers, and when a female warrior is successful it is met with disbelief and requires proof. Furthermore, it has been widely researched and proven that sexism is hugely present in the gaming community (Brehm, 2013), and that women must be proactive in ensuring a positive gaming experience. In her study on how women cope with harassment while online gaming, Cote (2017) concluded that:

“female players have developed five main strategies to making online gaming more pleasant, and they apply these differently according to the situation they encounter. These strategies are leaving online gaming, avoiding playing with strangers, camouflaging their gender, deploying their skill and experience, or adopting an aggressive persona” (137).

Women are forced to be active media users, particularly in spaces that are widely viewed as ‘mens’. Cote’s 37 participants all reported various degrees of sexism and harassment they had faced both online and in real world events. “Players who attended in-person gaming events were often touched or photographed without their permission, while those who played online recounted many sexualized insults such as “slut,” “whore,” and “cocksucker”. A few players even experienced threats of assault” (Cote, 2017: 138). Women must continually be aware of their language, behaviour, usernames, voice, and skills when playing online games if they want to avoid persecution.

However, another aspect of MMORPGs that makes them unique social spaces is that harassment and sexism can be much more obvious, as they often take place over chat, or are present in how women are presented online. In a study on gender swapping in MMORPGs conducted by Hussain and Griffiths (2008), one male participant said “if you play a chick and know what the usual nerd wants to read, you will get free items [...] very simple. Nerd + Boob = Loot” (50). In contrast, a female player stated she gender swapped “because [she] was tired of creepy guys hitting on [her] female characters. It’s utterly ridiculous, very annoying, and not the reason why [she plays] the game” (ibid). We see here that even MMORPGs are not free from sexism, but gender swapping can at least provide some relief for female players, a luxury that doesn’t exist in the real world.

Furthermore, the very nature of what an avatar is (a digital representation), calls into question how we construct gender, and what it means. Does an avatar have a gender? If the gender we construct online is different than the one we do elsewhere, which one is our authentic gender? Can we be both? Avatars call into question the nature of gender itself by highlighting its social construction. They also allow players to experiment with gender expression and identification with minimal risk to their livelihood, as noted by my friend in Interlude IV. This ability to experiment in interactive spaces could be hugely beneficial for certain clients, particularly those who are struggling to understand their gender identity.

Massive multiplayer online role-playing games provide an unparalleled opportunity to play with one’s identity and “try out” new ones. Players can choose to be themselves or

flesh out an aspect of the self that is embodied as a separate self in the game space. Williams, Kennedy and Moore (2011) studied role playing in MMORPGs and found that “identity play revolved more around a person being able to express things they were socially constrained from doing off-line, rather than a journey to discover their true selves” (188). In other words, players who role-play are often finding ways to express parts of themselves that are suppressed in the everyday, rather than creating whole new versions of themselves. This highlights how MMORPGs can be spaces for self-discovery. This is particularly relevant culturally, as we are learning about the vast spectrum of human genders, identities, and conceptions of self.

“The culture of simulation challenges traditional notions of human identity [...] When we live through our electronic self-representations, we have unlimited possibilities to be many. People become masters of self-presentation and self-creation. The very notion of an inner, “true self” is called into question” (Turkle, 1994: 164).

The interface allows gamers to create persistently existing avatars which they can use to experiment with a ‘second life’, experiencing an alternate reality that embodies aspects of the self, pre-existing or otherwise. These avatars can be presented however the player wants, regardless of who the individual sitting behind the computer is. In virtual spaces, people can reinvent themselves as better, worse, or altogether different from who they are offline. However, Williams, Kennedy and Moore (2011) did find that dedicated role-players were more likely to be lonely, less happy, disabled, and more likely to have been diagnosed with mental health disorders, suggesting that players who immerse heavily in role play are doing so because they are dissatisfied with themselves/their lives. This harkens back to Smahel, Blinka, and Ledabyl’s (2008) and Zhong and Yao’s (2012) studies, which showed that those who are unhappy in themselves are more likely to identify with their avatar, and thus more likely to be engaged in pathological gameplay.

Because avatars are ongoing (exist continually and can be played whenever), anonymous (no one knows the face behind the avatar), invisible (can have any physical feature and will be treated accordingly) and exist in multiplicity (players can have more

than one), they can also provide a means for working through identity or interpersonal communication problems (Turkle, 1994). This again has highly relevant therapeutic implications, as clients can work through issues online, or perhaps implement strategies discussed in therapy in a safe social space. Players/clients can create avatars to suit any variety of needs, insecurities, or desires. Some may play characters that represent an ideal, while others may embody aspects that they hate or fear.

Whatever way someone constructs their avatar is an important part of their online identity, and players may feel strong attachments to them. Wolfendale (2006) elaborates on this in her study on avatar attachment, asserting that:

“an avatar is far more than an imaginary object; it is a form of self-expression and online identity [...] attachment to an avatar is attachment to a self-chosen and self-created object; an object that you control, that you act through and that you use to interact with others” (116).

Players “feel psychologically connected to their character, often keeping the same one for months or years” (Bessière, Seay and Kiesler, 2007: 530). John, for example, has had the same character (Akine) since he began playing over a decade ago. He proclaimed that this character was extremely important to him, and that he would feel a sense of loss were the account to be deleted or lost.

“I consider Akine incredibly special. I have rerolled many, many characters, but never Akine. I've tried rolling other warlocks, but none of them feel the same. I have, without exception, brought him/her over to *every* [sic] server I've been active on. Honestly, I've only transferred them *because* [sic] it is the toon once known as Akine” (John).

When Ellen began playing, she fully immersed herself with a character known as Makari, where she would role-play, create backstory, and remain in character fully while she played.

“I had two different characters, Makari and Del. I wrote a backstory for each of them, and whenever I played them I was "in character", especially with

Makari she was an orc with a speech pattern - I typed everything as if I had a Cockney accent and a really bad cold. The memories I have of those characters and their interactions is really strong even almost 20 years later” (Ellen).

Similar to John, Mac also felt the most attached to his first avatar, but it seemed much of what he loved was how successful he has been with it.

“I believe that my Druid is the most special to me. It is the avatar that i [sic] have the most reputations to exalted and the most achievements completed on. I just love that it has four specs, and allows me to make certain mechanics/"impossible to solo" things obsolete. I remember trying really hard to work out the timing for the Soft Hands achievements inside Throne of Thunder. Folks said you could not do it solo. I put bleeds on the bird, jumped off the edge, grab my feather, caught the eggs, and the boss died to DoTs [Damage over Time]” (Mac).

It is interesting to note that in this case, unlike the others, Mac has not gendered his Druid when he speaks about it to me, instead referring to it as “it”. He was the only participant to do this. This may speak to gender differences in role-play and avatar attachment, as Williams, Kennedy and Moore (2011) noted that “high role players tend to be slightly younger, [and] have a higher percentage of females” (182). Furthermore, “based on their sexuality, religious affiliation and racial group, the more RP the player engaged in, the more likely they were to be from the minority subgroup” (Williams, Kennedy & Moore 2011: 182). This suggests that players from non-minority groups (i.e. Caucasian cisgender males) may have less need to role-play (reducing avatar attachment), since they are not likely to face oppression elsewhere in their lives.

Regarding my own gameplay, I aimed to be strong and beautiful; not traditionally masculine *or* feminine, but a woman with edginess. This is like how I aim to style myself in real life, but my avatar enabled me to create an idealised version. I began this dissertation and my *WoW* gaming at a time when I had just been through a series of major

surgeries, so my body did not feel like my own and I had the addition of many new scar. Recovery was difficult physically and emotionally, and creating avatars helped me feel powerful – in fact, for me, creating the avatar was almost more fun than playing the game itself. Makatzaa was strong when I felt weak, and Helianthys was free when I felt trapped.

“I do notice the higher level I get with her the more I enjoy just attacking things in the surrounding environment. It does give me a sense of power in some way. She is strong and beautiful and the more power she gains the more power I feel I gain. It is really quite tangible” (personal gaming diary).

One study conducted by Turkle (1994) draws another link to the psychotherapeutic world by illustrating a case whereby the massive multiplayer online role-playing game serves like a Rorschach inkblot, projecting the participant’s inner fantasies:

“The possibilities the medium offers for projecting both conscious and unconscious aspects of the self suggest an analogy between MUDs and psychotherapeutic milieus. The goal of psychotherapy is not of course to simply provide a place for “acting out” behaviour that expresses one’s conflicts, but to furnish a contained and confidential environment for “working through” unresolved issues” (Turkle, 1994).

This strengthens the argument for why video games are relevant to the field of psychotherapy and require more qualitative study. In the next section I will discuss how the fantasy genre is particularly well suited for personal exploration, whether it is through video games or literature.

Self-Exploration Through Fantasy

As mentioned in Chapter 4, MMORPGs are undeniably linked to fantasy literature and heavily feature narrative gameplay. Drawing further parallels, self-exploration in MMORPGs is not so different from the way that individuals use books and stories to better understand themselves and explore aspects of their identity through the characters in

novels. As Huizinga (2009) argues in *Homo Ludens*, all forms of art and literature are also ultimately play, which bolsters my argument that the mind experiences MMORPGs similarly to literature. In his book *The Call of Stories*, Robert Coles looks at the myriad of ways stories can be used to help us understand ourselves, our lives, and all the problems therein. He believes “the beauty of a good story is it’s openness – the way you or I or anyone reading it can take it in and use it for ourselves” (Coles, 1989: 47). As we read novels, we find ourselves connecting with certain characters and deeply understanding certain motivations. This is another justification for why I presented my data in the way that I did – in the hopes you would connect with it, perhaps see something of yourself in the stories I wrote; and if you did, I wonder which tale was memorable to you. We don’t all connect to the same characters or understand motivations in exactly the same way, as “there are many interpretations to a good story, and it isn’t a question of which one is right or wrong but of what you do with what you’ve read” (Coles, 2014: 47).

The fantasy genre provides a particularly fertile space for personal growth, for “the imaginary provides us with experiences difficult or impossible to attain in real life, but at the same time makes us yearn for the real” (Saler, 2012: 199). Saler (2012) further posits that “the literary prehistory of virtual reality does reveal that living in the imagination is a cultural practice we have gradually honed over time and will continue to exercise as new conditions warrant” (198). In other words, we have been accessing and utilizing public spheres of the imagination for many centuries, but advances in technology are now letting us visit them in a more concrete way. Imaginary worlds can help individuals embrace difference, diversity, and multiplicity, as well as challenge essentialism (ibid). Thinking as a therapist, the avoidance of unitary and essentialist narratives is important for client growth and change to occur. As a social constructionist interpretivist researcher, it is already assumed that there is no universal truth, further justifying this point of view. By entering enchanted disenchantment, individuals are challenged with the unfamiliar, which encourages them to think critically about themselves and how they see the world. Furthermore, things which are learned in fantasy worlds are often brought into the real world through peoples desires to share and discuss what they have experienced (Saler, 2012). The need to think creatively while also anchoring to what is known as reality is

unique to fantasy worlds, separating them from other works of fiction and “[reinforcing] the distinction between the real and the imaginary, while at the same time highlighting their necessary imbrications” (Saler, 2012: 198).

In this way, virtual worlds like Azeroth, “foster a quantitative and analytic mindset even as they stimulate creative thinking” (Saler, 2012: 199). Just as there are many interpretations to a good story, there are many ways to use a video game for personal exploration. There is no real ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ way to play *World of Warcraft*, and each player will take something different away from the game. Regarding novels, Coles (2014) said:

“we all remember in our own lives times when a book has become for us a signpost, a continuing presence in our lives. Novels lend themselves to such purposes; their plots offer a psychological or moral journey, with impasses and breakthroughs, with decisions made and destinations achieved” (68).

In both literature and MMORPGs, we assume the mantle of a character. We think about the ways in which we are alike and unlike them. We question the decisions they make and agree or disagree with their choices. Engaging with a book means empathizing with the main character and putting yourself in their shoes. In a video game we *embody* the main character or, as in the case of *World of Warcraft*, we *create* the character. In a video game we are given a plot and make choices within it. We may or may not be given a back story through which to understand the “heroes” and “villains”. Games like *Warcraft* have extensive lore setting up the conflicts; races have complicated histories and expansive political motivations. *World of Warcraft* has further blossomed into a transmedia franchise, incorporating films, fan fiction, artwork, blogs, and a book series, which all serve to expand the universe and deepen character motivations. Through my research, I discovered how reflections of my participants’ lives and histories were played out in *World of Warcraft*. Be it becoming the warrior, leading the team, or expressing the repressed, each participant found a version of themselves that could flourish in Azeroth.

Choices on how to play, who to connect with, how to speak, what to look like; all will influence the overall experience of the game for a player. These choices are also relevant in a therapeutic sense as they indicate what a player client may be taking away from the game. Sutton-Smith (2001) discusses the rhetoric of power in play, citing examples of how play can and has been used to settle conflict, influence power dynamics, and act as a societal catharsis. He states, “play not only assuages personal conflict, it can also increase social adjustment” (Sutton-Smith, 2001: 85). Huizinga (2009) also discusses how play and games have historically been used to resolve disputes, both at a personal and national level. Therefore, stresses in real life can be mitigated by success in-game, as evidenced by Cora and her work frustrations.

“At that time, my ex was a bit of a gamer, he played his games and I never even considered trying to play. But my office job got quite stressful and I saw him shooting some bad guys so he suggested I try FPS game (FarCry) and...within 10 minutes I was hooked. From that moment I became a FPS woman, releasing my tension, stress and frustration by shooting criminals, monsters, blowing up shit...and it felt great” (Cora).

Cora found a strength and power in Azeroth that she had trouble finding in her everyday life. Having grown up in war-torn Croatia, she had quickly been forced to recognize that she was old enough to be of help if the fight came to her doorstep. Wanting to shed her identity as a weak and fragile young girl, she sought to become one of the “big boys.” In Azeroth, she was able to embody this role by gaining power and status, earning high level gear, and helping those less competent than she.

Difficulties being one’s unfiltered self in real-life, which could have led to anger and self-hatred were instead assuaged by the acceptance of an online community, as shown by Ellen.

“I’ve got a mind that always, always goes straight to the gutter. IRL I stifle it for the most part, although anyone who knows me would not be surprised if I came out with something outrageous. However online my filters are looser

and I feel free to take things one step further than I would in person. For example, at work people will know that I'm checking out a guy - online, people would know I was imagining him starring in a B&D porn flick as the bottom” (Ellen).

Ellen was able to engage with the sexually empowered parts of herself that she had to filter in real life. She recognized that she has a “dirty mind,” and that generally there is no place for this with coworkers, for example. Online she can say whatever she is thinking and will likely be accepted for it. She doesn’t have to worry about offending someone, because they can /ignore her if they are upset by the things she says. Being in Azeroth allows her to release and share the darker bits of her mind that she would have to otherwise keep private.

“This process and the anonymity offered by the game allows players, as their character, to escape real-world norms and expectations and to act out roles and try out personas that range from enhanced versions of their real-life self to alter-egos who behave in reprehensible ways” (Bessière, Seay and Kiesler, 2007: 531).

The anonymity offered online is not wholly unlike the anonymity of counselling. Players and player clients may feel free to speak openly and behave differently online because no one there “knows” them, just as clients may feel safe talking to therapists because they are a neutral third party.

John exemplified how struggles to keep in touch with old friends and loved ones, which could have resulted in sadness and isolation, are instead made easy by gaming. “A lot of my Army buddies played so I joined up in their guild, Horde side, on Ysera/Durotan. It was a blast having in real life friends to play video game with again” (John). It would seem *World of Warcraft* provides a space where people can work through some of the more complex and difficult aspects of themselves and their lives, providing an unbounded space for psychological growth, should the player require or desire it. As a therapist-researcher, these experiences are important to understand. Clients frequently come to us

because of anxiety, low mood, low self-esteem, isolation; there is a potential for MMORPGs to help mitigate these issues. Or perhaps for clients who are heavily engaged, they may be prone to pathology because of how they view themselves. Either way, it is important as therapists to take time to explore and understand the experiences and their motivations.

For my participants, spending time in Azeroth often meant releasing tensions and frustrations from their jobs or escaping the stresses of their home lives. Gaming allowed them to shelve all the burdens they carry throughout the day, offering a place to relax and unwind where it is safe to express thoughts and feelings that may otherwise have no outlet.

Another Thought on Stigma

From studies, to conversational anecdotes, to the data provided by my participants', there is no one mold of a 'gamer' and no single way to categorize habits. As I have shown in previous chapters, everyone interacts with video games differently, from how they play to what they play and why. What motivates a gamer may evolve based on what is happening in their lives (for example Ellen not having time to game when her children were young), the content and community of the games (as shown by Cora who stopped playing *WoW* when the community changed), and what they feel they are gaining back from it (the social engagement evidenced by all of my participants'). It is trivializing and inaccurate to assume that every person is playing for the same reason. Furthermore, more than one of my participants used language that would suggest they see their own gaming habits as addicted or unhealthy, even though there was little evidence to suggest their lives were impacted negatively. Cora told me "we [her guild] had to commit to be online at exactly 8pm for our important raid, haha [sic]...that sounds so silly to me now, but I totally understand how hooked I was." Looking back on her past behaviour, Cora felt it was silly how important raiding was to her.

Another example is the opening response from my participant John:

“I am what others have described as a "Power Gamer." [sic] I have no qualms about spending 8+hours a day playing games. As such, the concept of an MMO is very enticing, as a game without an "end." I can and have spent countless hours farming up materials for raid supplies, leveling new toons, and even wasting real and game time by running around the upper level of Undercity, or the Valley of Strength in Orgrimmar, waiting for a friend/guildy to hop on or want to do something. WoW for me is an endless rpg. As soon as I run out of things to do, so to speak, I simply swap toons and begin again. As a bonus, along the way I have made incredible friendships. I don't regret my time spent in game for a second” (John).

To me, this response felt almost defensive, his exclamation that he does not regret his time spent in game, as though I had suggested or insinuated he should. I interpreted this response as reactionary to other responses he may have received in the past that looked negatively on his “power gaming”. This shows how the societal image of a gamer can (and does) interact with an individual’s perception of themselves, another example of social construction in action.

Each side of the pro and con argument over gaming presents a rather sensationalized view of the media and its influences on psychological development and is frequently presented in stark black and white. I argue the truth lies somewhere in between, in the interaction between personal history, online experience, and sense of self and identity. As Gary Gygax stated:

“even the most outspoken of the critics must admit that long before we had print and film media to "spread the word," mankind was engaged in all forms of cruel and despicable behaviour. To attribute war, killing, and violence to film, TV, and role-play games is to fly in the face of thousands of years of recorded history” (Gary Gygax, 1987).

Reflexivity

“Parahoo (2006) defined reflexivity as the continuous process of reflection by the researcher on his or her values, preconceptions, behaviour or presence and those of the participants, which can affect the interpretation of responses” (Jootun et. al, 2009: 23). As I continued analyzing, I began to reflect upon myself and the tropes I may fulfill, both in my gaming and in my life. It brought into sharp focus how I view myself, and how I thought others may view me. I have often been compared to a Mother Hen trope, someone who is frequently caring for and “clucking” over others. But in my gaming, I felt almost the total opposite. I was a loner; quiet, avoiding contact with others unless absolutely necessary, playing only with people I knew. Conducting my research forced me to look at myself and how I would characterize my own behaviours. Clandinin (2007) speaks about how:

“in this turn toward narrative inquiry, the researcher not only understands that there is a relationship between the humans involved in the inquiry but also who the researcher is and what is researched emerge in the interaction [...] They are not static but dynamic, and growth and learning are part of the research process. Both researcher and researched will learn” (11).

As I took stock of my participants’ and their location in *World of Warcraft*, I began to see where I was positioning myself in that narrative. I was not the Mother Hen because my insecurities around gaming didn’t allow me to be; to be the Mother Hen requires a certain level of confidence and competence, enough to feel responsible for others. As I began to learn about myself, I realised that my online persona is very similar to the one I take at large parties – I hate being the center of attention, instead preferring to post up in a corner quietly, conversing primarily with people I know. In these spaces I become more of the Nerd; a socially awkward bookworm who isn’t used to having loads of friends and who borders on introverted. The Nerd in me only really feels comfortable around other Nerds who know my likes and interests, and who I can be sure won’t judge me. This shows how for me, my online life reflected elements of my in-person social life but did not wholly encompass my sense of self. As Turkle (1995), Webb (2001) and others have argued, my

online self seemed to represent an aspect of my personality, like the one that emerges when I am in large groups of new people. Being surrounded by strangers on a digital platform felt just as stressful as being surrounded by strangers face-to-face. In both scenarios I find myself anxious and unsure about how to behave, becoming more introverted and only speaking on topics I am familiar with.

I was additionally struck by my own frustrations and prejudices that became clear as I was analyzing my data and reconstructing the stories you read above. Not regarding my participants, but about my then partner. I noticed that I would get frustrated with his gaming habits yet felt empathic towards Cora, who alluded to her play being unhealthy at times. I would get angry when my ex needed to cut plans short to be at a raid but saw this as perfectly normal for my interviewees. In my research I came across accounts of the difficulties partners of gamers would face; lower marital satisfaction due to quarrels over the game or not retiring to bed at the same time (Ahlstrom et al., 2012). I heard two first-hand accounts; one from a classmate, another in conversation with a customer at my part-time retail job. Both women expressed how they felt that they were second-best to their partner's gaming (on MMORPG's specifically). One of them said "I lost a relationship to that game," further alluding to what could be called an 'emotional affair'. This is an instance where there has not been a physical affair, but instead a deep emotional connection shared with someone other than the partner. Something of these feelings were present in myself as well, creating prejudice where I would have empathy for a stranger. I wondered at the conversations my ex was having online, and often felt like he spent more time playing the game than he did with me. Reading and rewriting the narratives of my participants' brought to awareness areas for my own personal development and empathic abilities. Similar to how a novel may make one question their beliefs (Coles, 2014), the narratives of my participants' resonated and challenged me. This was also reminiscent of my work as a counsellor, whereby certain clients and the topics they bring may challenge my beliefs and worldview.

As I have discussed, one could argue that books and video games are akin to a therapeutic space. While they are of course not a substitute for therapy with a professional,

for the average individual these forms of media can provide an easily accessible place to cope with life's stresses and become a more congruent individual. As evidenced in the literature and my participants' narratives, MMORPGs provide a unique space for expressing parts of the self. In a more serious example, one participant of a different study conducted by Turkle (1995) was able to use a Multi-User Dungeon to get through an extremely turbulent and depressed time in his life. He had become destructive and suicidal, and the only thing that distracted him from these thoughts was the MUD. The game became a place where he could reassemble his boundaries in a safe and controlled space. This enabled him to pursue more open relationships with others in his real life, and ultimately move forward in a healthier way (Turkle, 1995). These examples showcase how MMORPGs can enable beneficial experiences to those who play them.

Conclusion

In this thesis I have explored the experience of playing the MMORPG *World of Warcraft* through narrative inquiry. I have discussed the importance of narrative in understanding experience and looked at the role narrative plays online and offline, as well as the influence of ludology and theories of play. I have tied video games to their literary predecessors to highlight how fantasy worlds are conducive for personal exploration, and how fantasy literature and fantasy gaming can be similarly experienced and understood. All this exploration has been done to contribute to the psychotherapeutic conversation around video games and gamers.

Studying psychological phenomena linked to technology inevitably means that research is playing catch up. Technological advances are difficult for social science researchers to stay abreast of, but this is why it is so crucial that we try. Even in the two and a half years since beginning this thesis, new games, new expansions, and new technologies have become available that could influence the ways individuals experience the games they play, and how this may affect their lives. As I have shown, the experiences players are having in MMORPGs are meaningful and influential in their lives, and it would behoove therapists to recognize and explore clients gaming habits.

Through my participants' narratives, I discovered the deep and meaningful relationships they developed, the importance that *World of Warcraft* had for each of them, and how each one took something unique away from playing. My own prejudices were challenged as I obtained their stories, and in the process of interpreting my interviews I learned about myself as well. Themes of connection, friendship, hard-work, and dedication were prevalent in each narrative, and I experienced firsthand the power and pull of Azeroth.

While the topic of this thesis has been centered around one game, there are many directions for further research. This could include research into different types of games

(i.e. MOBA¹⁷, FPS¹⁸) and how individuals experience them, how virtual reality games are experienced psychologically, different avatar attachment styles and if they vary by game, and developing more games tailored to improve mental health issues, to name a few.

Finally, the acknowledgement by therapy practitioners of the relevance of video games in client's lives is an area needing development; the aim of this thesis was to contribute research to this gap and provide an opportunity for continuing professional development to my contemporaries.

¹⁷ Massive Online Battle Arena

¹⁸ First Person Shooter

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Appendix I Ethics Committee Decision

The applicant's response to our request for further clarification or amendments has not satisfied the requirements for ethical practice and the application has therefore not been approved.

The reviewers feel that the applicant's argument in relation to point 1 is not satisfying the requirements for ethical practice, especially in relation to clarity of information around data generation and research aims. They feel that the 'informal getting to know them a bit' is unclear, and needs to be part of the formal interview and clearly stated as such, as the applicant will be collecting data that will inform her analysis ("In order for me to understand the nature of the relationship someone is developing, I feel I need to understand it within the context of their lives").

Participants need to know how information 'about themselves' will be used, just like the rest of the interview process. Please make the relevant changes in your research design and documentation to clarify this. Opportunities for participants to ask questions about you can remain separate, as part of the pre-interview phase.

The following points also need to be amended on your documents as per previous recommendations:

1. 'information for participants' - bottom of page: The ethics handbook gives clear guidance as to the role of Head of School, namely for **formal complaints** (not for more information). Amend accordingly.
2. Consent form:
 1. The requirement to have Level 60 or above is not stated there. Amend accordingly
 2. In 'Data Use' remove the ' ..unless you specifically request....true name"

Please respond to the above recommendations by submitting an amended ethics application and relevant documents (with highlighted changes and a response to the reviewers' comments) when you are ready. As there is no formal section for a further response, please append your response in this section, below the signature.

Signature: Lorena Georgiadou

Position: CPASS REC co-chair

Date: 9/6/2017

Applicant's Response:

After much consideration of the reviewer's comments, I have decided to eliminate the 'informal' conversation section from my study. Following the pre-interview questionnaire, participants will be given the chance to ask me any questions, after which I will move directly to the interview and see what context emerges through the interview process. Amendments to the supporting documents have been changed as suggested.

The applicant's response to our request for further clarification or amendments has satisfied the requirements for ethical practice and the application has therefore been approved.

Signature: Lorena Georgiadou

Position: CPASS REC co-chair

Date: 21/6/2017

Appendix II

Information for Participants & Interview Schedule

Information for Participants

Who Am I?

My name is Elise DeFusco, and I am a third-year Doctoral student at the University of Edinburgh. I am earning my Doctorate in Counselling and Psychotherapy. During the course of my client work, I began to develop an interest in video games, specifically Massive-Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games. I am a casual gamer, and am friends with many gamers as well. As such, I am writing my dissertation on how a gamer experiences their relationship with the game World of Warcraft. This is what I am hoping you will help me understand!

One thing that I feel is very important for me to make explicit is that I am **not** in any way seeking to judge or diagnose your gaming habits. In fact, I find the negative stigma surrounding video games to be frustrating and inaccurate, and I am hoping that my research will benefit both the scientific community and the general public in understanding that video games are more than just violent, addictive, “time-wasters.”

What Am I Asking of You?

If you are willing to participate in my study, we will engage in a two-month interview conducted via email. I know this sounds long, but this is only to allow you the space to answer thoughtfully. The length of the interview will be dependent on your engagement – two months is the *maximum* length. You will not be required to leave your home, and you can answer my questions at your own leisure. I am looking to explore what World of Warcraft means to you, and for you to share the story of your gaming with me. I want to understand what the experience is like for you as an individual, and you will have some freedom to take the interview wherever feels right.

In this way, we will journey into my research together. You will have the chance to read my dissertation if that is something you desire. It is my aim to broaden knowledge about the psychological/relational aspects of MMORPGs, and the many ways that gamers interact with and experience them. I hope that you will give me the opportunity to hear your story!

Additional Information:

After completing my short questionnaire, I will contact you if you meet the criteria for my project. Criteria are as follows: you must be above age 16, above level 60 in Warcraft, and you must have access to the internet. If the criteria have been met, I will contact you to obtain consent for participation and use of data collected. Feel free to ask me any questions you may have about the research/myself. After this point, we will commence the actual interview. Your personal information will be anonymized in my writings/publications, and your avatar’s name will only be used if you give me permission to do so.

This project has received approval from the Ethics Committee in the School of Counselling, Psychotherapy and Applied Social Sciences at the University of Edinburgh.

If you have any further questions, you are also welcome to contact my supervisor Jonathan Wyatt, Director of Counselling and Psychotherapy at the University of Edinburgh, at: Jonathan.Wyatt@ed.ac.uk. You may also contact my Head of School, Charlotte Clark, at Charlotte.Clark@ed.ac.uk or visit <http://www.ed.ac.uk/health/research/ethics-policy-procedures> for formal complaints.

I am excited to embark on this quest with you, and it is my hope that you feel the same!

All the best,

Elise

Interview Schedule

1. Tell me the story of your gaming in World of Warcraft as best you can (for example, if you are stuck, when did you begin playing and why)
2. Has the way you've gamed changed over the years, and if so, why do you think this is?
3. How important is World of Warcraft to you, and why?
4. What would you say your avatar means to you?
5. What does World of Warcraft mean to you?

Appendix III

World of Warcraft Expansion Introductions

The Burning Crusade:

Released in January 2007

The Doom Lord Kazzak reopened the Dark Portal to Outland, flooding Azeroth with the ravenous demons of the Burning Legion. Expeditions from the Horde and Alliance, reinforced by their new blood elf and draenei allies, passed through the gateway to stop the invasion at its source. On Outland's desiccated Hellfire Peninsula, the Alliance discovered several of their heroes who had crossed through the portal many years before, while the Horde made contact with the Mag'har - 'uncorrupted' orcs who had not participated in their race's original invasion of Azeroth. The expedition into Outland dragged Horde and Alliance armies further into conflict with the agents of the Legion and the lieutenants of Illidan Stormrage, who had claimed the shattered realm for his own.

Wrath of the Lich King:

Released in November 2008

In the wake of the Sunwell's purification, a period of suspicious quiet had swept over the world. As if on cue, the undead Scourge launched a massive assault against the cities and towns of Azeroth, this time extending its reach far beyond the Eastern Kingdoms. Under pressure to respond with a full army, Warchief Thrall deployed an expedition force to Northrend led by Overlord Garrosh Hellscream. Meanwhile, the missing human king Varian Wrynn at last returned to Stormwind City and reclaimed his crown. He sent an equally powerful Alliance army, commanded by Bolvar Fordragon, to defeat the Lich King—and any Horde forces who would stand in their way.

Cataclysm:

Released in December 2010

You've toppled the undead armies of the Lich King and brought Arthas to his knees. Now the breaker of worlds, Deathwing, has burst forth from the heart of the Maelstrom and unleashed his rage upon the land and sea. Azeroth has been changed forever, and you must enter the elemental planes in an epic quest to stop the Destroyer from shattering the world itself.

The Mists of Pandaria:

Released in September 2012

You've ended Deathwing's destructive rampage and saved the dragonflights from extinction.

Now you must unlock the mysteries of the lost continent and discover the dark secrets of Pandaria's past. Explore ancient kingdoms hidden since before the Sundering, plunder vast treasures from the depths of the forgotten vaults, and rise to defend Pandaria from the shadow of a long buried evil - before it's too late.

Warlords of Draenor:

Released in November 2014

Garrosh Hellscream escaped justice with the assistance of the bronze dragon Kairozdormu, eventually finding himself in an alternate Draenor in the time before the original Horde had come to Azeroth. Hungry for vengeance, Garrosh provided his father, Grommash Hellscream, with the technology to assemble his ideal army—the conquering force called the Iron Horde. Grommash was quick to unite Draenor's orcish clans under his banner, and the clan leaders became the Iron Horde's warlords. Among them were the bloodthirsty Kargath Bladefist, the cunning Blackhand, the elder shaman Ner'zhul, and the fearless Kilrogg Deadeye. The Iron Horde took command of several vital locations on Draenor, subjugated the ogre city of Highmaul, and built massive fortifications like Blackrock Foundry to outfit the warlords' armies. Once the Iron Horde had Draenor in its grasp, the orcs invaded Azeroth through the Dark Portal, razed Nethergarde Keep, and seized control of Dreadmaul Hold. In retaliation, Khadgar assembled the champions of the Alliance and the Horde, leading them through the portal to stop the Iron Horde on Draenor once and for all. Garrosh ultimately met his end at Thrall's hands, and after an exhausting campaign, the heroes of Azeroth were able to defeat most of the Iron Horde's warlords. Khadgar's offensive dealt a crushing blow to the Iron Horde. Grommash's failure to give his warriors the victory he had promised bred dissent within the ranks, affording the warlock Gul'dan the opportunity to usurp the Iron Horde and summon the demonic Burning Legion to Draenor...

Legion:

Released in August 2016

Following the battle for Draenor, the deceitful Gul'dan found himself on Azeroth. Gul'dan, tormented by whispers of Kil'jaeden the Deceiver, opened the Tomb of Sargeras and with it a gateway for the Burning Legion to invade Azeroth. The warlock bent the denizens of the Broken Isles to his will, including the ancient nightborne city of Suramar and their leader, Grand Magistrix Elisande. The Alliance and the Horde assaulted the Broken Shore, hoping to pre-emptively stop Gul'dan and the Legion's forces. Their efforts ultimately failed, costing High King Varian Wrynn and Warchief Vol'jin their lives. A desperate effort by Archmage Khadgar to unite the shattered factions ultimately resulted in the recovery of the Pillars of Creation, the only instruments capable of sealing the Tomb once more. As the dwellers of the Broken Isles are rescued from the Legion's grasp, the forces of the Alliance and the Horde close in on The Nighthold—Gul'dan's base of operations, poised to end the warlock's menace once and for all...

Battle for Azeroth:

Released in August 2018

The wounds inflicted by Sargeras the Dark Titan on Azeroth brought forth a volatile substance known as Azerite—the blood of Azeroth herself. Tensions escalated between the Alliance and the Horde as both factions came to realise the true power of Azerite, igniting a full-scale war leading to the fall of Teldrassil and the Undercity.

Weakened and in need of new allies, the Alliance and the Horde called upon their greatest heroes to bolster their ranks. Jaina Proudmoore travelled to her home kingdom of Kul Tiras, hoping to bring them once more into the Alliance. She found squabbling nobles and a resentful people, united only in their contempt for Jaina's past actions. Meanwhile, the Horde rescued the Zandalari princess Talanji from the Stormwind Stockade. Talanji worked to convince the Zandalari trolls to aid the Horde, though her father—King Rastakhan—initially refused to listen. Both factions' diplomatic efforts were successful in building trust, however, and their war campaigns alongside new allies led to new footholds being established in Zandalar and Kul Tiras.

United in arms with new allies, the Alliance and the Horde stand once more upon the shores of war, as the tides of vengeance loom on the horizon..

Appendix IV

World of Warcraft Maps

Cosmic Map:



https://wowwiki.fandom.com/wiki/Cosmic_map

Azeroth:



<https://www.planetminecraft.com/project/world-of-warcraft-wow-map-of-azeroth/>

Draenor:



https://www.reddit.com/r/wow/comments/1q76z8/new_continent_map_draenor/

Pandaria:



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZKSZiyE49Uw>

Outland:



<https://www.scrollsoflore.com/gallery/displayimage.php?album=65&pos=7>