Univerzita Karlova

Filozofická fakulta

Ústav etnologie

Communication and Communities in World of Warcraft: Ethnography of a Guild

Komunikace a komunity ve World of Warcraft: Etnografie gildy

DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

Natalie Trušina

Praha 2021   vedoucí práce: doc. PhDr. Petr Janeček, Ph.D.

Acknowledgments

Prohlašuji, že jsem diplomovou práci vypracovala samostatně, řádně jsem citovala všechny použité prameny a literaturu a že práce nebyla využita v rámci jiného vysokoškolského studia či k získání jiného nebo stejného titulu.

V Praze 24.04.2021   podpis……………………..

Abstrakt

Tato práce je etnografickým pohledem do světa komunit uvnitř počítačových online her žánru MMORPG. Jejím cílem je představení MMORPG jako zajímavého pole pro antropologický výzkum a pohled na fungování herních komunit - hráčských raidicích guild ve hře World of Warcraft. V práci jsou zkoumány otázky toho, jakým způsobem se guildy drží pohromadě, co motivuje hráče k formování takových seskupení a co všechno jim v tom naopak překáží. Při výzkumu byly použity metody zúčastněného pozorování virtuálního prostředí uvnitř hry, zkoumání prostředí v Internetu kolem hry a rozhovory s hráči. Celý výzkum byl proveden online.

Klíčová slova: MMORPG, digitální etnografie, digitální antropologie, gildy, World of Warcraft,

Abstract

This thesis is an ethnographic look at the player communities inside of the setting of digital online games in the MMORPG genre. The goal of this work is introducing MMORPG as an interesting and vibrant field for anthropological research. Another goal is an inquiry into player raiding communities in the game World of Warcraft. Thesis is researching questions of what is motivating players to join into guilds, how are they staying together and why do they fall apart. Research was conducted through methods of participant observation inside of the game's virtual environment, interviews with players, and the Internet space formed around the game was also observed. Whole research was conducted online.

Key words: MMORPG, digital ethnography, digital anthropology, guilds, World of Warcraft

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1 Introduction

This work is an ethnographic research of communities in the digital world of Massive Multiplayer Role-Playing Game *World of Warcraft*. In the following chapters I will introduce readers to the concept of online multiplayer gaming, people who are playing those games and communities they are forming. Online computer games are still a rather exotic subject for an ethnographic survey, and this work will be going in-depth on the introduction to such an environment. When I started my research at the end of 2019, I was hoping to focus on a comparison between two specific guilds. At that point in time I had just left a guild and shortly after joined another one. In the end though, I had to move on, joining yet another, third guild. This way, talking to people from various different raiding environments, I have decided to describe raiding guilds as a phenomenon on their own, concentrating on things that made them similar, instead of doing a case study on how one guild declined and then disbanded, and the other managed to survive for over ten years straight.

Starting with a general description of what MMORPG genre is, I'm further going into more detail, introducing important concepts for such a setting in a way that will allow people with no previous experience with video games to imagine this virtual space. In chapter Gamers, Players, and Fandoms I am demonstrating the differences between those terms and pointing out in what ways game's design influences people's behavior and choices they make in picking in-game roles and how those roles then affect their social status inside of the game world. By explaining those terms I'm also showing different aspects of gaming and activities that are surrounding this media.

Further on, using previously introduced concepts, I am expounding on the details of *World of Warcraft* as a place my research was conducted in. Introducing concepts that are specific to this particular game and its community this work then defines how communication between people playing this game works. Going into even more details, the concept of the guilds in MMORPG is then explained, particularly in the example of *WoW*. This whole chapter is supported by academic research, emic examples from various online resources used by the members of the *WoW* community, gaming journalists and on my own experience from the field. The goal of this chapter is a comprehensive introduction of MMORPG as a complex field with a potential

for anthropological research, as a number of works were conducted in it by psychologists, economists and sociologists but relatively few anthropologists researched it.

In the Communication and in the Guilds more exposition is given on the setting and inner workings of player communities of WoW. Communication discloses how exactly people get to talk to one another inside of the game and what other channels are being used for the player communication about the game outside of it. Guilds is an introduction of the type of player community that this work is based around, explaining different types of guilds and reasons people join in.

In the chapter Methodology I am describing the details of digital field-work, history of digital ethnography and how I was approaching this work. This thesis is based purely on the virtual research, where almost no physical contact happened between myself and the community I was researching. However, because this community is formed and continues to live in the online environment, I argue that doing ethnography digitally is the only way to describe the life and dynamics of such formation.

Finally, my analysis is based on the interviews and observation of daily lives of players inside of the game, their relationships to the guilds they were part of and issues they have met along the way. In order to present a full picture of guilds structure, questions about hierarchy, goals, and cooperation were discussed in detail. This analysis will try to answer the question of what helps *WoW* players stay together in the ever-changing digital environment, where they might never see one-another physically and reward for their time investment can be reduced to a few lines of computer code.

2 Research Purpose

Purpose of this work is to investigate dynamics of social interactions between players in an online setting. To be more precise we are going to look into the inner workings of player guilds. Guilds are self-governing communities of like-minded individuals, on average they are 20 participants in one guild. The creation of guilds is supported by the in-game mechanics. One of the reasons I have decided to work on researching guilds in *World of Warcraft* is my long experience with this game and the world of MMORPG and the Internet as a whole. Transforming this experience into something useful and interesting for my Master Thesis seemed logical to me, after all I had a seemingly rather anthropologically unexplored field right in front of me. Being exposed to the online world on the same level as to the offline one I could not see a reason why would digital ethnography be qualitatively worse from a regular one–a sentiment I have encountered ever since I started studying anthropology.

Based on the previous works on social dynamics in MMORPG (Bainbridge, 2010; Bartle, 1996; Corneliussen & Walker Rettberg, 2013; Kolo & Baur, 2004; Nardi, Bonnie A, 2010; O'Connor et al., 2015; Pargman & Erissson, 2005; Prax, 2010; Tan et al., 2017; Uz-Bilgin & Cagiltay, 2015; Verhagen & Johansson, 2009; Williams et al., 2006) and on my own observations I want to describe raiding guilds of *World of Warcraft* and find out what makes raiding guilds stay together through cycles of *WoW*'s life. My working assumption is that good communication between the leadership and members, strong social ties and joined activities outside of raiding itself leads to a better environment and long-lasting communities. My secondary goal is to introduce MMORPG as a viable field for further research on human organization and communication.
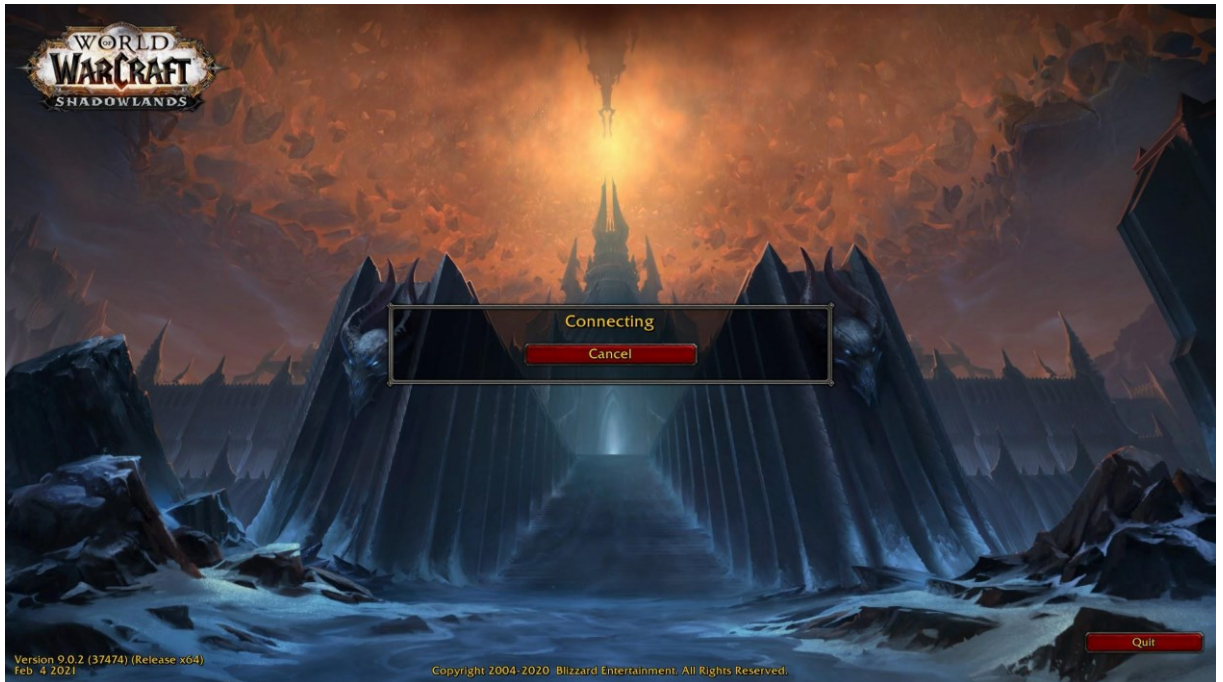
3 Theory of Game and Playing

Figure 1: *World of Warcraft* loading Screen (1.3.2021 screenshot by the author).

3.1 Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games

Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (**MMORPG**, also known as **MMOG** or **MOG**) are digital online games attracting millions of players. Those games allow players to choose their avatar (customizable in-game character that is controlled by the player) and through a process of **leveling** makes them stronger, explore the world they are introduced into, save it from the dangers and complete their own hero journey.

"MMORPGs are Internet-only games. This game form is a fully developed multiplayer universe with an advanced and detailed world (both visual and auditory), allowing a range of identities (and genders) to be explored by playing a character created by the player" (Freeman 2018).

Such games create a virtual world where players have general freedom of movement, a great number of other players to interact with and a variety of activities they can perform, both solo and by joining other players. Edward Castranova (Castronova, 2001), who is one of the earliest

and most known researchers in Massive Multiplayer Online Games field, has described virtual worlds of MMORPG in three defining features:

1. Interactivity
2. Physicality
3. Persistence

Interactivity and persistence in Castranova's work are difficult to argue with even in 2021. Even though games can exist on a variety of different physical and cloud-based servers, the idea of several computers connecting to them holds true. The world inside of the game is generally accessible from the day it was launched by the developers throughout the day the game is shut down. Actions taken by one player are seen and can after others, but interaction with the "physical" world around the player often does not lead to persistent change. Talking about physicality he says that those games simulate a first-person physical environment, which is in no way true today. First-person view games exist, but they are mostly centered around combat and even if multiplayer, are generally not part of the MMORPG genre. Castranova also says that those games are ruled by the natural laws of Earth and scarcity of resources, however games like *The Endless Forest* that feature no combat or trading, focusing purely on the social aspect of MMORPG, are again working against his original idea.

Another definition that, perhaps because of it being part of a newer work, creates a much better idea of what an MMORPG is belongs to Bonnie A. Nardi. In her ethnographic work on *World of Warcraft* defines virtual words (Nardi, Bonnie A, 2010) by players ability to:

1. create an animated character,
2. move the character in a three-dimensional space,
3. have means for communicating with others,
4. access a rich array of digital objects.

Perhaps because Nardi focuses her definition on players instead of the world itself, this definition still holds very well for modern MMORPG in 2021.

The way players interact with the game world has a big influence on the way they experience game-play and their role in it, as it is visible from discussions that often appear once game trailers are available for new games (Cavalcante, 2017; E. Wilson, 2018). Modern RPGs (Role-Player Games) with online features sometimes also are described by fans as MMORPG, which

can be seen in discussion on forums or videos posted on YouTube (Theocritus, 2019; Rhykker, 2018).

Before the emergence of MMORPG another type of online games existed—Multi User Dungeons (**MUD**). MUD as a prototype was created in 1978 and by the 1980 basic version was completed by Roy Trubshaw. What he made was a platform that allowed for creation of text based virtual worlds which would allow for more people to play simultaneously (Bartle, 2003). Thus, MUD is not only a type of a game, but also a platform to create games.

First fully graphical MMORPG *was Neverwinter Nights* in 1991 (Walker 2016). Most popular with gamers were MMOs based around role-playing adventurers fighting inside fantasy or sci-fi worlds based on worlds *like Lord of the Rings*, *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Star Wars* (more on the fantasy genre see (Fine, 1983). In those games players could again create an avatar, but instead of experiencing social life through regular behavior like working at a job, dating or partying like people did in life simulators (Bell et al., 2009; Boellstorff, 2008) players would go on an adventure and in process of defeating monsters and all kinds of villains they would find fellow adventurers to make completing their missions easier. Because game-play was usually built around some sort of dungeon systems, where best treasures were only available through the hardest of challenges that required people to stay together for prolonged play-sessions, players were inclined to stick together, forming relationships and adding one another into contact lists. Without forming such connections, finding a group can get much harder later in the game, when people prefer to stay with those who they know are capable of coordination and completing needed tasks.

Most well-known MMORGPSs from the 1990's were *Ultima Online* from 1997 and *Ever Quest* from 1999. Asian regions had their own projects like *Lineage* (2000) and later *Lineage II* (2003) and *Ragnarök Online* (2002). Those games spawned hundreds of other projects and a number of articles and books looking at them from all fields of social sciences (Castronova, 2001, 2005; Holin et al., 2003; Kolo & Baur, 2004; Pargman & Erissson, 2005). MMORRPGs experienced their peak in 2008 (see Fig. 2).
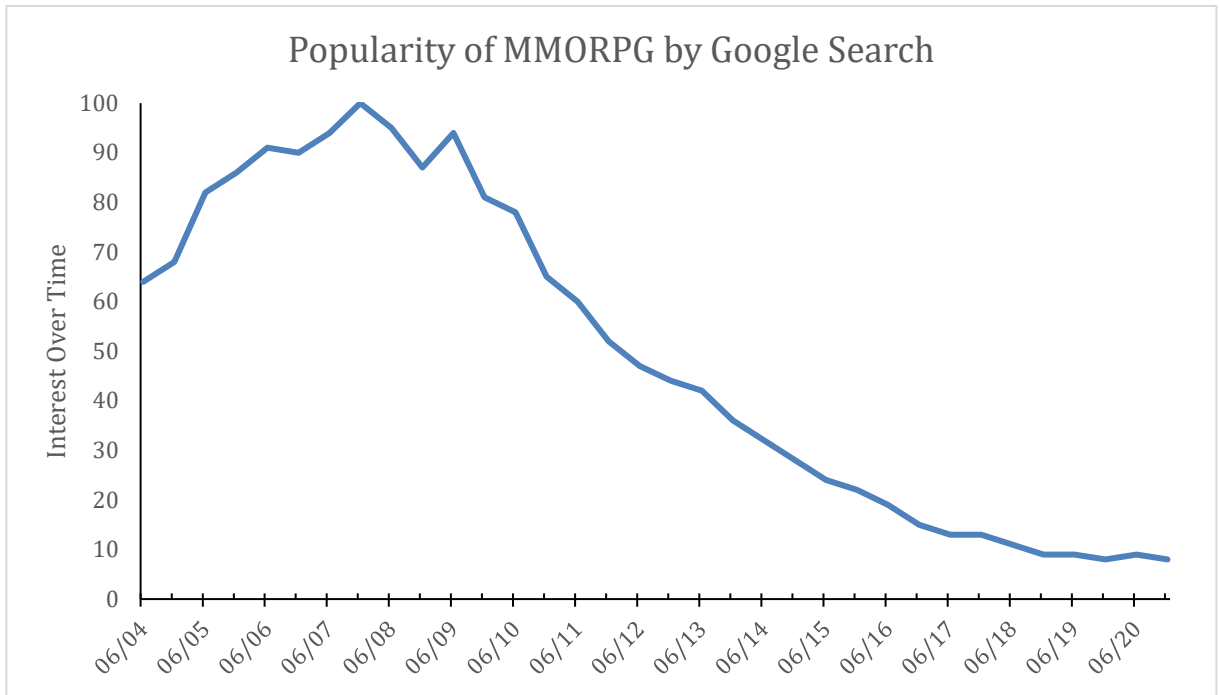
Figure 2: Popularity of MMORPg as term is searched by users of google.com.

World of Warcraft was released by Blizzard Entertainment in November 2004 in the USA. It immediately became a world-wide hit, gaining hundred thousand players right from the launch, reaching 1,5 million worldwide subscribers by the March of 2005 (Curtis, 2011). and getting to the peak of 12 million players in 2010, after Chinese servers were opened, thus becoming the most played MMORPG in the world. Today this game is still one of the most popular MMORPGs in the world, only being challenged by a Japanese MMORPG *Final Fantasy XIV* and another US based game called *Elder Scrolls Online* (altarofgaming 2021; see Fig. 2 and Fig. 3).

It is important to note that MMOs are just one part of the wider online gaming space. Developing such games takes a lot of resources and time and continues support from the developers, while success is not guaranteed, thus currently the market is dominated by old and proven survivors. With changes to the internet technology, increasing power of personal computers and rising popularity of computer games, more genres appeared. *World of Warcraft* is the most well-known and popular MMORPG in the Western market. In 2019 it has celebrated its 15th anniversary with still consistent, even if much smaller player base Blizzard Entertainment has not published subscription numbers for the game since the launch of their 6th expansion *Warlords of Draenor*, and as such there is no way to say how many people are playing the game. However, some numbers, like numbers of purchases of latest expansion Shadowlands on its release day were over 3.7 million copies (Meyer, 2020).
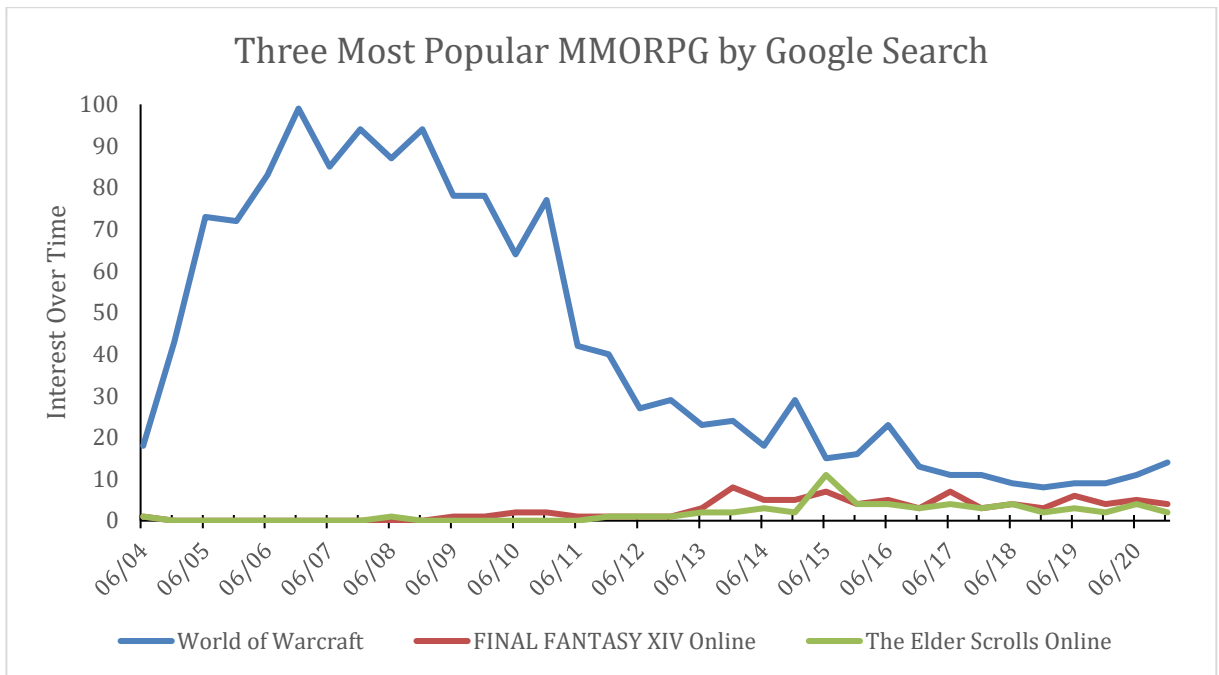
Figure 3: Three of the most popular MMORPGs from year 2004 to 2021 as the term is searched by the users of google.com.

Still, the vast majority of MMORPGs failed, with new generations of players seemingly preferring other types of games. Genres like Massive Online Battle Arena (MOBA) with likes of *League of Legends* (also known as *LoL)* or *Defence of the Ancients 2* (DotA2); or First Person Shooter (FPS) games like *Fortnite*, *Call of Duty: Warzon*e (*CoD*), or *Apex Legends* have overtaken MMORPG in popularity (see Fig. 4).

A common way of seeing which game is performing well is looking at twitch.tv, a streaming service, where people can watch others play. Yet the gamers are still looking for new MMORPGs as well as returning to old favorites with every new expansion of *WoW* beating record sales. In my view it is a sense of community, a common and long-lasting goal that binds people together and allows them to create new lasting relationships (Ducheneaut et al., 2007; O'Connor et al., 2015). This view is formed mostly from my own experience of meeting people online and knowing where others have met. Other multiplayer online games, like popular *League of Legends* with 115 million monthly players worldwide (Spezzy, 2021), are based on a different set of rules and only allow people to virtually meet up in the arenas, where the match is being played. After the match is done players leave this virtual space and then, if they do not have a pre-made party, they are again randomly assigned with 9 other players for another match (Freeman, 2018). Further research into the topic of forming relationships in different MOG shows lack of any data on the question of which type of games supports creation of meaningful

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relationships better. There are studies that partially support the idea of needing space for interactions outside of the immediate goal, for example *Networked Games Analyzing Implicit Social Networks in Multiplayer Online Games* and *Social Interactions and Games* (Iosup et al., 2014; Uz-Bilgin & Cagiltay, 2015). This suggests that more research might prove useful for further understanding of how different environments affect human relationships online.
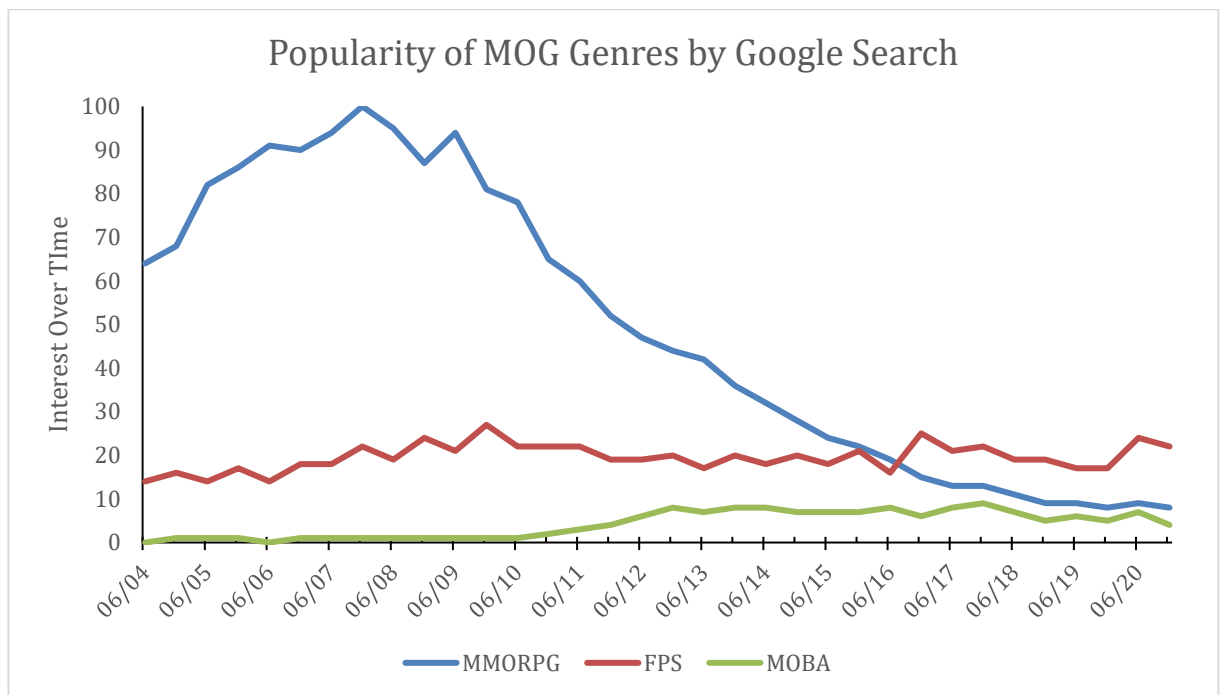

Figure 4: Comparison between popular online multiplayer genres by term search by the users of google.com.

3.1.1 Types of Activities

Type of activities people might join in MMORPG is typically separated into 3 content styles, however doing one does not lock the player from another. Some developers also might prefer their game to be focused on one or another type of content. In this section, I will also be defining some of the most common terminology used in MMOs.

1. **PvE**—Players versus Environment type of content.

Here players either play by themselves or band together into groups (maximum number of people in one group depending on the MMO, generally being around 3 to 5 people) or raids (raid is any group above 5 players) to fight with computer-controlled monsters (**mobs**). This content is further separated into the **questing**: process of taking "quests" from non-player characters (**NPC**), that are traditionally marked in the world by a symbol, advising players to interact with marked NPC. Quests tell players to do various things like hunting monsters, saving people, or looking for some lost items for a reward—money, experience points (**EXP**) and sometimes **gear**. Experience points are needed for character to level up and get to the maximum achievable level. Levelling is often more of a single player adventure, while at max level people are often expected to band together for the raids and dungeons. The most difficult content is also usually only available for the max level characters. it is what players often refer to as the **end game.** Gear is what player avatars can equip, making them stronger. Often gear holds special meaning and amount of prestige, because some items are very rare and hard to get. Gear typically has different quality color coded levels (more on topic of gear in *WoW* section). Some quests might advise a player to get more people to complete it, but most of them can be easily performed alone.

Dungeons are typically a group content, where 5 people need to band together to go into a specific place and "clear" it. Dungeons have **trash** monsters and **boss** monsters in them. Trash is much easier to kill and does not give much of a reward as a **drop**, bosses on the other hand are hard to slay, usually requiring players to perform some **mechanics** to do the fight properly. On the kill they drop good **loot**—several pieces of quality gear, money and other important things players might want.

Figure 5: Example of loot dropping from the boss in MMORPG WildStar (14.04.2015 screenshot by the author).

Raids are the hardest PvE content, requiring many players to clear it. Number of players needed to form a raid varies from game to game, but usually it is about 10 players at minimum. Otherwise, raids are dungeons on a higher scale. Trash in the raid might be as dangerous as bosses in the dungeons. Bosses in the raid require a high level of coordination from players, good knowledge of game mechanics and their character abilities. Rewards from the raids are usually the best in the game, with unique looks that signal other players that the player holding such an item is very proficient at the game.

2. **PvP**—Player versus Player type of content.

The largest difference between MMORPGs usually lies in PvP content. The basic idea of players fighting other players, instead of very predictable mobs stays the same. But ways games allow people to do so differs greatly. Duels are persistent everywhere—allowing any player to challenge another with them being able to accept or decline such challenges through game user interface (**UI**). It is usually a show of skill or a way to spend time while waiting.

Battle Grounds (**BG**) are a group PvP, where big teams of players fight other teams. Goals are again very diverse, be it a flag capture game, where the goal is to capture another team's flag located in their base and get it to your own base, or some sort of a tower defence, with one team attacking and another defending. It could be both teams attacking one another's bases. BGs differ in scale of maps and size of player groups attending such events. Participation on BGs awards players with various currencies that can be then exchanged for good gear.

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Arena, also known as death matches, are much smaller and faster encounters, where teams of two or three players are fighting against each other. Arenas are usually associated with **rating**, which is awarded to winners, allowing them to fight with players on the same skill level as they are. High rating players are regarded with respect, also getting special rewards that separate them from other players, just like raiders on the highest difficulties are. BGs can also have rating systems, keeping games engaging and rewarding for skilled players.

3. **RP**—Role-Playing

This sort of activity is not about what kind of enemy players fight and the sort of loot they are interested in, but rather the way they engage with the in-game world. This activity is also not bound by the borders of the game, with RP sessions often being played out in the chats or forums. The idea of role-playing in MMORPG is based around creating a backstory and characteristics for the player's avatar, placing them into the in-game world according to the lore that the game supports. Same characters can still engage in PvE and PvP content but depending on the situation it can be played by different rules than regular, non-RP combat. Such rules are created and followed based on the consent of the people involved.

3.2 Gamers, Players, and Fandom

People who are playing games are usually called gamers or players in the English-speaking community. Games also often form fandoms around themselves by inspiring fans for every kind of creativity. To properly navigate space surrounding gaming, it is important to define such terms and understand what people imagine when they say they belong under the umbrella of one of those terms.

3.2.1 Players

We start with the word **player**; it is used here to describe a person who the game is made for. Players are anyone actively engaging with the game at some point of time. There are different approaches to how one is playing the game and each experience might differ greatly. In game development and research into gamer psychology some taxonomy already exists. The most known one is Bartle taxonomy of player types (Bartle, 1996). In his paper the author is exploring MUDs player base and proposes four types of players—achievers, explorers, killers and socialisers. Admitting that they overlap and might not present the best model as he is not a trained psychologist (ibid.). His idea was picked up by Erwin Andreasen and Brandon Downey creating the Bartle test (Andersean 2000), that was used by gamers and game developers alike (Kolo & Baur, 2004) Further developing on the model to research players' motivation Nick Yee (Yee, 2007, 2015) breaks up rather dichotomous ideas of Bartle's and creates a set of components and subcomponents, which should be used not as 10 different types, but as *"10 subcomponents that co-exist and together reveal the motivations of a player"* (Yee 2007).

Both of those models, but especially Yee's is well mirrored in the gaming community, where people often might refer to themselves as "hardcore", "social" or "role-player", which neatly correlates with the "achievement", "social" and "immersion" components Yee introduces (see Tab.1). In this research, however, no questionnaire was used to determine a player's type of motivation or such. I assume players' motivation based on the guild type they choose to join, the type of content they perform in the game and outside of playing and their own self-identification.

Achievement	Social	Immersion
Advancement Progress, Power Accumulation, Status	**Socializing** Casual Chat, Helping Others, Making Friends	**Discovery** Exploration, Lore, Finding Hidden Things
Mechanics Numbers, Optimization, Templating, Analysis	**Relationship** Personal, Self-Disclosure, Find and Give Support	**Role-Playing** Story Line, Character History, Roles, Fantasy
Competition Challenging Others, Provocation, Domination	**Teamwork** Collaboration, Groups, Group Achievements	**Customization** Appearances, Accessories, Style, Color Schemes
		Escapism Relax, Escape from RL, Avoid RL Problems

Hardcore, or an achiever, players goals would be completing the hardest task available in game, usually set by the game developers, and possibly completing it in the shortest time possible or to be the first to do so. By completing such tasks, they gather great amounts of prestige and social capital, as such tasks usually take a lot of time and skill and require several people to participate in. Other players interested in achievements follow the most hardcore ones, using knowledge shared by the best—such as written guides and strategies, to then complete their own goals in due time.

Bartle's explorers of game mechanics would be considered meta-players or theory crafters. Those people seek the best way to play the game at any point by using (and creating) databases of every item and ability and calculating the best sequences of actions (Mortensen, 2010). While often belonging to the ranks of the best pliers, their skill and interest lays in the creating and sharing knowledge, not necessarily in performing their own strategies.

Before talking about the other types of players it is important to note that MMORPGs overall and most importantly for us *World of Warcraft* does not have just one server where all players

could meet up in real time. Instead, due to technical, economic and language reasons *WoW* is split first into several big regions—Americas and Oceania, Europe, China and Korea. Inside of those regions people can choose country/language specific server groups, for Europe those are German, French, Russian, Spanish, Italian and English. Such division helps with time-zone issues, language barriers and connection. Furthermore, servers are then divided into realms with separate economics, restricting character movement between different realms. Today regardless of what realm or language group players are on inside of one region, they can party up and do almost everything together apart from joining the same guild, trading and doing highest difficulty raiding, however, to see one another inside of the game-played have to belong to the same realm or to be in party. This is important for the RP or role-playing realms that follow slightly different rule sets and for whom immersion into the virtual world is central for the way they play games.

Social players in Yee's and Bartle's work are what in player space is usually called casual players. Their goal in a game can be described as socializing and enjoying the game without spending many resources in it. Players main resource is perhaps time spent in the game "**farming**"—process of getting in-game resources, be it money, gear, ingredients, kills. When the process becomes too repetitive and less rewarding people often address it as "**grinding**". Farming is something players have to do to access what they want to do. As an example—to be accepted into a group to clear a hard and rewarding dungeon, players are expected to have potions that make them more powerful. Those potions are crafted and sold by other players, so to access the reward one has to have enough in-game currency (special currency used to get virtual items) to buy, or items to craft enough potions. Social players rarely spend their time on anything they do not particularly enjoy, unless it is about helping their friends. Thus, they are not often seen doing "hardcore" content, staying within an easer difficulty content.

Immersive players can spend a lot of time in-game, but their main activity usually does not possess the same level of prestige or even looked down upon by the hardcore players. Role-players, being a separate type of players often thought of as being focused on the social side of the game, create stories for their avatars and interact with the in-game world in a unique way through text chat and art. Their in-game characters often have detailed biographies set according to the game lore and they talk to one another as if two actual in-universe characters meeting on the street of a fantasy town.
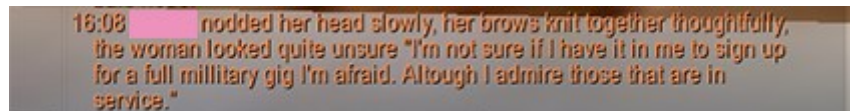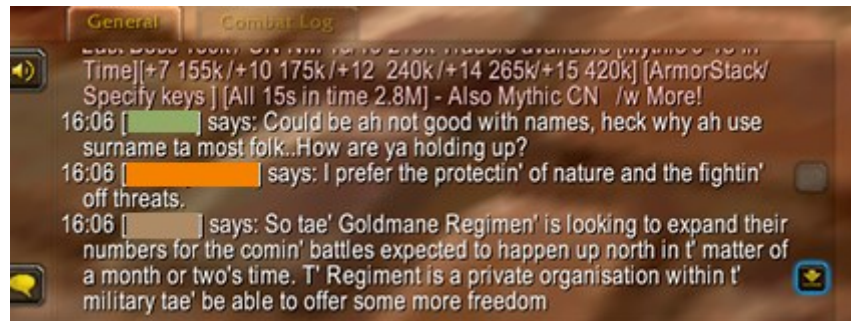
Role-players also do dungeons, raids and PvP activities. However due to specific population of servers they play on it is quite difficult to find a group or a guild that would be focused on progressing the most difficult game mode with the amount of recourse investment usually seen in hardcore guilds on non-role-play focused servers.

A sub-group of role-players are the erotic role-players, or the ERPiers. Those people use anonymous virtual worlds for the explicit purpose of fulfilling their sexual fantasies. Such role play can also vary in range of half- naked characters dancing on the table for fun, to pages long detailed descriptions of relationships between chosen characters (see Brown, 2012).

While every game is constructed for and around players, here I tried to point out specifics of *WoW* players using game's systems to show some of the identities people build based on how they play and how they perceive other people are playing.

3.2.2 Gamers

Term gamer is different. A person playing a game is always a player of this game, but they are not necessarily a gamer. Gamers are a collective of people whose primary hobby is playing digital games, usually on consoles such as Nintendo Switch, PlayStation or Xbox, or on personal computers. A gamer is something people identify themselves with, but debates on whether or not it is a subculture are still ongoing and considering how elusive the term "subculture" seems to be by itself, I do not imagine debates would soon end (Haenfler, 2013). The idea of a "gaming culture" and who gamers are is prevalent both in the social science (Haenfler, 2013, 2015; Kowert & Oldmeadow, 2012; Williams et al., 2008) and in journalistic online media with several prominent new sites existing that are based purely on gaming news

such as Kotaku, PC Gamer, and Polygon. The gaming culture is broadly based around people, who are playing computer games as their main hobby. Many of the biggest games are made with "gamers in mind", targeting this specific audience. By examining such games and discourse around them, many things could be said about this group and things they find interesting. However, this work's purpose is not finding if such a thing as a gaming culture exists, or who exactly gamers are.
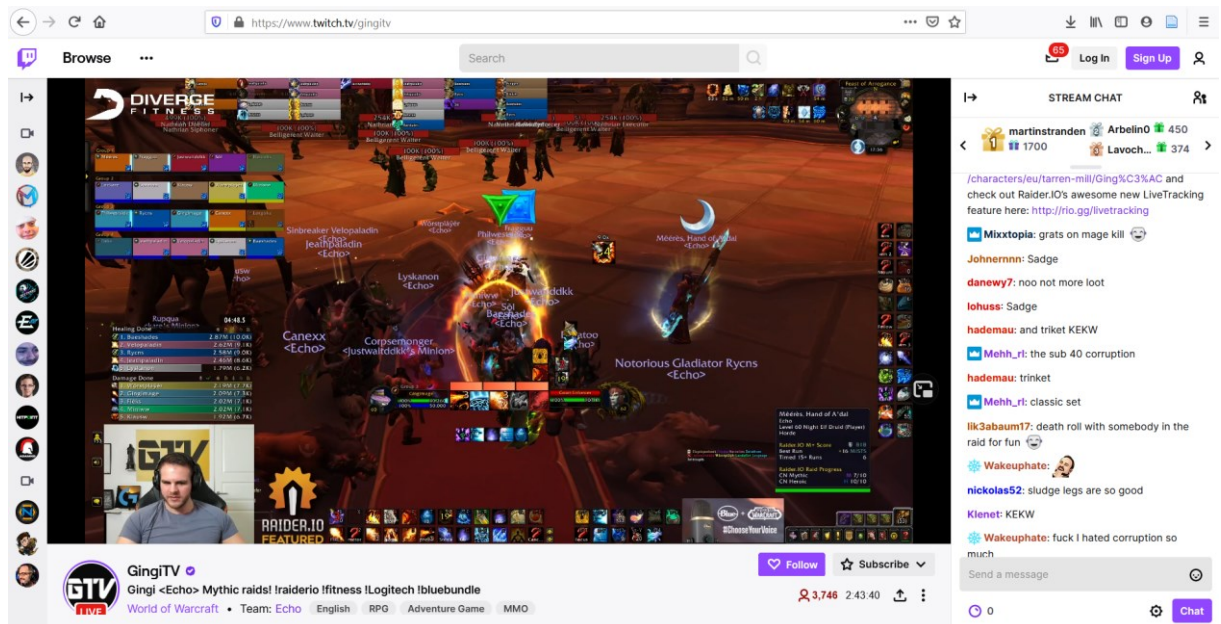

Figure 8: Streamer on twitch.tv—Gingi—prominent PvE player streaming his dungeon play with 3746 people watching him live (24.02.2021 screenshot by the author).

An important hub for almost any kind of gamer is Twitch. The most known players create their own streams. A stream is a live video, that any number of people, from ten to few thousand, can simultaneously watch streamers play a game. Twitch.tv launched in June 2011 and reached 1 million concurrent viewers in April 2018 (twitchtracker). There are reported 7,46 billion hours of watched streaming content over all platforms and games just in 3rd quarter of 2020. Twitch has over 10 million unique channels (streamlabs 2020). *World of Warcraft* being the 14th most popular category on the streaming service with an average 37 million hours watched per month (twitchtracker). Other than twitch, YouTube is also a popular service used by the gaming communities to share news, guides, opinions, jokes, and in-game lore videos. Most popular for *WoW*, judging by subscription numbers are news and lore channel BellularGaming and lore channel Nobbel87 with 603 and 608 thousand subscribers each in February 2021. Other ways players participate in the community are servers of messaging app Discord, where every in-game class has its own hub where players share their knowledge about the game and actively

socialize outside the game. Any Discord user can create a server for their guild or a smaller private server for their friend.

For the purposes of this work, when I use the term gamer, I mean a person who specifically identifies themselves with the gaming community, and are using Internet media such as Reddit, Twitter, Discord servers, Twitch and YouTube for purposes of sharing and finding news on games, game personalities and publishers. Within the broad gaming community, that includes people with diametrically opposite views on what a good game is and how it should be played. It is a social identity, not a question of playing a game once in a while. I am interested in those who enjoy MMORPGs the most but are interested in the games outside the genre.

3.2.3 Fandom

Between gamers and players there is another group of people that engage with the games in a unique way—they participate in creating fan content around the game's characters and stories. Each somewhat popular media has its own **fandom**—people creating fan-fiction (literary works created by the fan community), fan-art and costumes (cosplay) and sharing it on Twitter, Tumblr and YouTube (Booth, 2018). Fandom studies is a growing field introduced by Henry Jenkins in his book *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture* (Jenkins, 1992) inspired by the shift in the cultural studies and works by his colleagues (Jenkins, 2006). Fandoms surrounding games are interesting, in my opinion, because games are already a participatory media to begin with, yet fans still feel the need to create more ways to express themselves and participate in their favorite game outside of playing it themselves or watching other play. In case of fandoms, playing the game itself is optional, as many people seem to continue consuming and producing content through various media (fan-sites, Twitter, YouTube, Tumblr), without playing the game anymore. Reasons for people to stop playing can be being dissatisfied with the choices game developers take, lack of time, issues with computers or with finances.

3.3 *World of Warcraft*

For this work my main body of research was conducted in the digital 3D world created by Blizzard Entertainment in 2004. Since the launch the game has gone through several graphical and game-play changes. Every two to three years the game received a big expansion that moves the story along and brings new systems for players to explore. To start the game everyone needs to first create their in-game avatar, a character they will use to experience the game with. When creating a character the player must choose one of two opposing factions—Alliance or Horde; gender of their avatar; one of many fantasy races and then class.

Most of these choices will affect the player's experience in the future. When it comes to game-play itself, faction plays a role in creating two opposing sides for players to cheer on, feel a sense of belonging and generally enjoy the "us versus them" emotional spectrum. The gender of the character does not play any role unless one is a role-player. Each race has its own perks giving some competitive advantages depending on what job one wants to perform in game. Those perks usually truly interest only hard-core players and most of the people seem to go with whatever race they like visually the most. Choosing the Horde or the Alliance will effectively split players from the other faction with only allowed interaction in-game between them being combat. For many players a question of belonging to one of those factions is a rather serious issue that does not end with their avatars, but rather continues to affect their daily experiences of other players outside game-space—in various internet discussions. Both factions have stereotypes about them built in the community and game-related forum posts accusing the

game developers of preferring one faction over the other appear, especially after a new story update.

Race choice in *WoW* includes variations on classic fantasy races introduced by J. R. R. Tolkien such as Elves, Dwarves, Orcs and Humans. There are also Trolls, minotaur like Tauren, race of blue skinned humanoids with horns and hoofs Draenei, and only faction neutral Pandaren, that are heavily inspired by the Chinese culture. Launched in 2020 expansion Shadowlands has added many more customization for *WoW* races, including more face shapes, hair types and skin colors for the humans—finally moving from stereotypically white only peoples face and

Figure 9: Character creation screen (screenshot by the author).

hair-styles (for example, no curly hair option was available). Also included were darker skin tones for previously fair skinned Elves, Gnomes, and Dwarves. Those changes prompted heated discussions between fans starting from cheering for representation on one side, ending with accusing Blizzard of pandering to "political correctness" on the other.

"... What? Stop being so sensitive. This isn't a racial issue in the least and I won't retract my statement because it has a chance to offend someone that is overly concerned with race. Azeroth is a fictional world, with a fictional version of humanity. Are people mad there's no option to make Kratos from God of War Asian? No. Because Kratos is how the designers designed the character. Similarly, humans on Azeroth have been designed as entirely Caucasian for over a

decade. Changing this all of a sudden is clearly forsaking artistic integrity in favour of being politically correct (Brutalis, Icy-Veins, 02.11.2019)*.”*

*Nutri**: “I don't want to be that guy, but it looks like they just Blackfaced the darker skintone options.”*
Eurhetemec: “With humans they didn't. There actual different facial feature options too. But obviously you can choose face/skin separately.
With other races, well, they're not humans, so it follows that their darker skin tones would necessarily equate to different features. I mean Gnomes gonna Gnome, no matter what tone the are (indeed, in traditional Dungeons and Dragons, Gnomes don't have pale skin—they have earth-tones and browns—though later Gnomes have been all over the place) (Eurhetemec, mmo-champion, 10.12.2020)*.”*

Avatar's gender often does not correlate with player's and does not seem to have that big of an impact on the way people experience the game world. However, men are playing female characters much more often than women are playing male characters (Paik & Shi, 2013). Interesting to note is that when it comes to communicating with other players, due to the number of men having female avatars and the general stereotyping that more men are playing the game, people assume that the person they are talking to is male. Due to English' gender neutrality in first person (unlike in Russian or Czech) one would usually have to specifically point out their gender if they did not want to be addressed as male in conversation. Being a woman in online games is a topic on its own, again being discussed on every level of the gaming community, starting with players in game, through journalism to academic research (Pace, 2008; Paik & Shi, 2013).

Figure 10: Tirisfal Glades—Starting locations for Undead players (22.2.2021 screenshot by the author).

Arguably the most important part for every player in avatar creation is picking their class. Class decides on how players will be interacting with the world, their chances of joining groups of players and in some cases the story of the game. Their class also impacts the roles players can perform in-game. *WoW* roles are described as the "holy trinity"—being three classic roles most commonly found in every game that has any sort of class system—those roles are a **Healer**, **Damage Dealer (DD)** and a **Tank**. There are 2 classes that can play all those roles— paladin, druid and monk. Others can usually pick from two, tank and DD—warrior, demon hunter, death knight or healer and a DD—priest and shaman. The least versatile role wise are rogues, mages, warlocks, and hunters – those classes can only deal damage.

Figure 11: Raid finder tool—shield represents a tank, cross a healer, sword a DD (25.02.2021 screenshot by the author).

Each role brings certain advantages and disadvantages with it. The most competitive people usually strive to play damage or healing roles, as their performance is easily traceable by third party websites and in-game addons, which leads to people comparing their numbers or damage per second (**DPS**) or healing per seconds (**HPS**). Healing is considered the hardest role in the game by fellow players, as their job is to keep up with the health of 3 to 40 people at a time and at the same time perform all the in-game obstacles. Meanwhile damage dealer's only job is to do as much damage as they can to the target and sometimes performing some tasks necessary for the fight to continue. Tanks are people who are usually leading the way, being the ones who the in-game monster should be attacking. While not the hardest, tanking is certainly the most stressful job with people often being criticized for being too slow, or too fast, not getting enough monsters to kill or getting too many for healers to maintain people alive. Their mistakes in a raiding environment usually leads to the whole group dying. Luckily due to group requirements tanks are also the least required role—for raiding the group only requires two tanks with third being optional for some fights. And for dungeon groups only one tank is needed. Healers are needed both in PvE and PvP environments, with raiding requiring anything from two to five

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healers in the group and dungeons again only one. Damage dealers are the most numerous roles in the game, with biggest raids including up to thirty damage dealers and dungeon groups always needing three of them.

This difference leads to a certain hierarchy between classes and roles in game, that is both driven by the arbitrary game rules and by the players themselves. Cooperation is needed to achieve anything meaningful in game and with not every class being the same when it comes to raw numbers and every role having different requirements and open slots in the raid or dungeon people have to negotiate and think hard of what they want to do in game and who with. *WoW* being a social game with a strong competitive side it is social dynamics of guild groups formed around raiding that seems the most fascinating to follow for me, as such a guild is a sport team, a commercial company and group of interest at the same time (Chen et al., 2008; Prax, 2010; Williams et al., 2006).

3.4 Communication

The central way of communication in online games is texting in the in-game chats. For various reasons, chiefly because you have to use both hands to control the avatar's movement and combat abilities, it is difficult to utilise a text chat during a fight or even while traveling inside of the game world. Therefore voice chats are the preferred way of communication for guild raiding and playing with friends. For many years *WoW* did not have a voice chat option built into the game, but in 2016 it was introduced (Flournoy, 2018). This option, in my experience, is not as popular as other voice communication applications—mainly Discord—but has its use for groups of random or semi-random people that do not know one another well enough to comfortably share their Discord information with one another.

Figure 12: Example of /say chat (26.02.2021 screenshot by the author).

World of Warcraft has several chat options for texting, all of them are also color-coded for better orientation. White text is regular "speech" (referred as the "say" chat due to the /say command), it is also visible as a bubble above the avatar's head (see Fig.12). It is only visible to people in the chat in the "hearing" (a certain distance from player's character specified by the in-game mechanics) distance from one's character. Players from the opposite faction cannot read what is being said, because the text is automatically "translated" into gibberish.

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Party, raid and guild chats—light blue, orange and green respectively,—are based on the group player's avatar belongs to and can be seen by anyone inside of such a group.

Whispers are private messages colored in pink for regular players and in blue for account friends, they are still generally referred to as "pinks" or "whispers" by players. Such messages can only be seen by the receiver and the sender. Players can also block one another from receiving such messages, by adding people into their ignore lists.
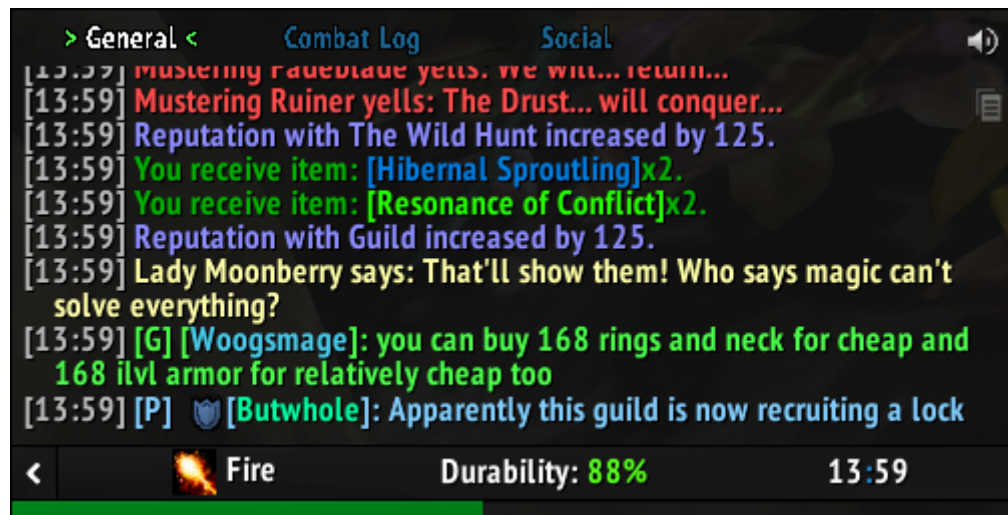

Figure 13: Guild chat, party chat and different information messages sent by the game (23.02.21 screenshot by the author).

General chat is a channel made for communication inside of the zone (a certain in-game location, usually unified by certain subject of theme i.e., city, plains). Anyone inside of the zone can see the sent message, however people from other factions will not be notified of it. This channel is mostly used for seeking help with quests, or some general questions.

Trade chat is accessible to anyone in one of the game's big cities (a special zone) and is shared between them. This channel is used mostly for advertisement of guilds, boosting services and trading (fig. 14). Boosting is a process where a more powerful player helps out less fortunate to clear a raid, dungeon or even getting PvP rating for in-game currency. Real money trading is a bannable offence in the game but is not uncommon. Economy is one of the more studied aspects of *WoW* and MMORPGs in general (Castronova, 2001, 2005)
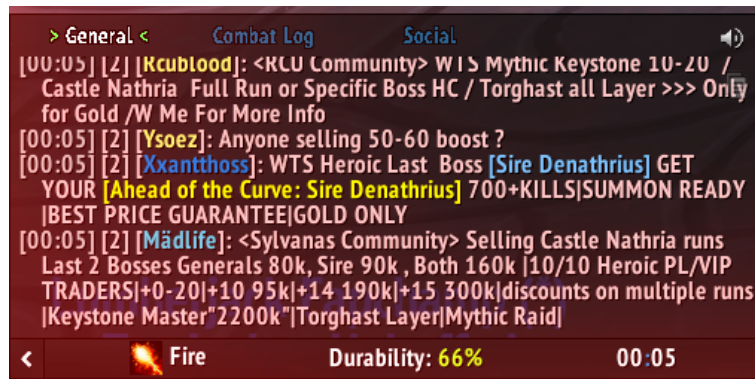
Figure 14: *WoW* chat, number 2 indicates trade channel (25.02.2021 screenshot by the author).

Because the in-game chat is limited by 255 characters per message a lot of abbreviations are used in communication such as LFM—Looking for More, LFG—Looking for Group, LFR—Looking for Raid; WTT—Want to Trade, WTB—Want to Buy; WTS—Want to Sell. The same approach for shortening goes for raids: heroic becomes HC, mythic—M, and dungeons are going by M+ with a number following the level of difficulty.

Be right back—brb, afk—away from keyboard, gtg/g2g—gotta go. Mb—mana break, HP—health points, MP is used for mana points, but people usually just say mana. More common texting abbreviations, same in general culture, are used in games: asap—as soon as possible, estimated time of arrival—eta, see you—cya, nn/gn—night night/good night.

Locations in game, names of the patches and raids—all those things are usually used in an abbreviated state Ice Crown Citadel "ICC", Shadowlands "SL", Court of Stars "CoS". In-game abilities are not usually abbreviated; however, they are often called based on their visual cue. For example, a paladin's Divine Shield becomes a "bubble" as it looks like a bubble in-game (fig. 15). To shorten the time needed for comprehension, a lot of other abilities are similarly renamed, any ability that forces monsters to attack a player's avatar is a "taunt", any ability that prevents casting a spell is a "kick" or "interrupt". Their "official" in-game names are rarely used.

This type of shortening of the words and phrases is also useful while participating in in-game content. This way it became a common part of a gamer's vocabulary. It is not uncommon for people to treat such abbreviations as verbs themselves, examples such as *"I need to brb"* (brb = be right back), meaning *"I need to go away from the computer for a moment"*, being one of the more prominent ones. Another interesting case is IRL–(in) real-life. It is used when people talk about anything related to their offline lives, most commonly for IRL friends or problems.

Figure 15: Divine Shield, known as a bubble (22.11.2016 screenshot by bleukreuz on *WoW*head).

Many of the examples used above are not specific only to the *World of Warcraft* or MMORPG genre, such abbreviations are widely in use on the Internet, in instant messaging apps and different environments where text chatting is an option.

The combination of all said above creates a specific slang that is partially shared between most MMORPGs but it is also dependent on the game and the specific time-frame of it.

It is important to note that each type of chat has a specific type of. There is no physical space in the game, but whispers are looked upon as something rather private and forward, while general and trade chats are alike to yelling in public plaza. Guild chats are much more private, with each guild being a company of similarly minded people.

When it comes to the voice chats, there are two main types of players: active participants who prefer to speak, and "mutes"—the more passive listeners, who prefer to listen. Joining voice chats as an active speaker requires a different state of mind than a listener, however there are people who would never participate in the voice chat, even passively, if they have this option. Communication outside of the game space in private messages on Discord is considered special, where it is either an official guild representative talking to a member in private, or a friendship moving outside of the game. Video calls are something extremely private that only people in close relationships would engage in.

Most of the online spaces, such as forums, Twitter or Reddit can be looked at as sort of digital public spaces where conversation never ceases but only a few people are talking actively, posing themselves as "voices of the masses", usually debating amongst themselves or addressing developers of the game. This sort of activity is not different from political debates one might see in social media online feeds. Guild chat (both in-game and Discord) shows a more private world, only accessible by the guild members. Most active and heated conversations are usually hidden in private voice and text chats. If one is not a part of them, they might never know it is happening, even if they are in the same guild or game-group at the same time. It is by far the biggest challenge of the digital world, where, lacking offline physicality, a lot of social dynamics might escape us unnoticed (Nardi, Bonnie A, 2010). Unlike the physical ethnographic research where a curious researcher might notice people talking privately or exchanging glances during a group conversation, digital researchers might not know what is happening exactly at the time. It is extremely difficult to record and compile data of such events.

3.5 Guilds

As mentioned in part two, a guild is a self-governing community of players within the larger community of a MMORPG (Malone, 2009). Inside *WoW* every player has an ability to create a guild, all one needs is a small fee of in-game currency and nine signatures from other players. The price is insignificant in the current *WoW* economy, and thus the only real challenge in guild formation is finding enough people to sign the chart and join the guild as founding members.

Similar to the player grouping we discussed above, guilds are also separated into 1) raiding 2) social 3) PvP 4) mythic dungeons. Mythic dungeons being a more difficult version of regular dungeons. Assigning this kind of qualifier is done by the Guild Master (**GM**) of each guild. It is not a requirement when founding the guild, but it is useful when recruiting more players as it sets a clear goal for the potentially interested parties (see fig. 16 example of such recruitment practices). Guilds in-game are always created for an explicit reason to achieve a shared goal, be it having a good time with similarly minded people, or getting the world first kill of the latest raid boss (Williams et al., 2006). However not all guilds reach their goal or thrive long.
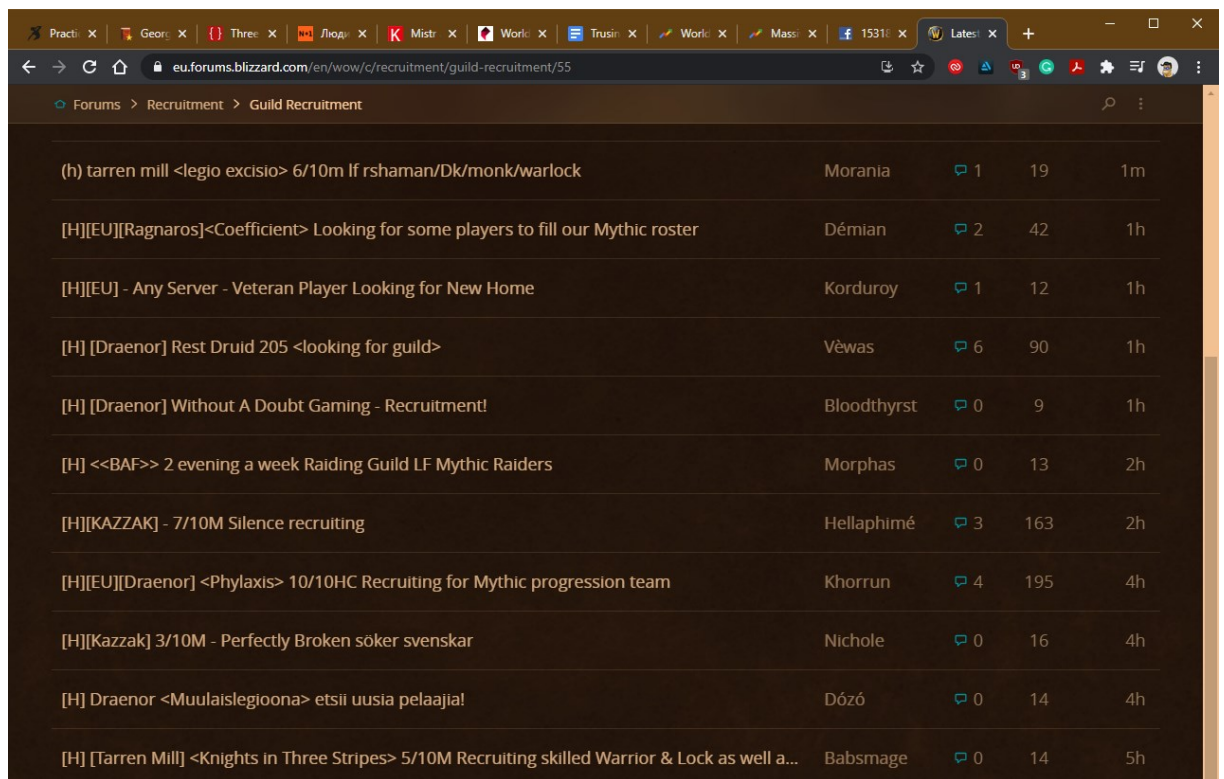

Figure 16: EU *WoW* Recruitment Forum (23.02.2021 screenshot by the author).

When talking about life of the guild in *WoW* I find it useful to talk in terms of update patches to the game that are typically timed with raid releases, referred by various players as a "*8.3*" or "*Ny'alotha* (name of the raid) *patch*". For longer time intervals it is useful talk in terms of expansions, current one being Shadowlands (released in November 2020), or 9.0, with current raid being Castle Nathria, so players would refer to this time as *"Launch of the Shadowlands"*, *"During Nathria raid"*. One expansion usually lives for about 2 years, but neither expansion nor patch times are usually centred around the physical time of the year or certain dates, so to orient in time it is easier to refer to the patch or expansion name. PreachGaming, talking about different raids in *WoW*, notes how he could not complete one of the raids because: *"I think I had one of my children during the Siege of Orgrimmar"* (PreachGaming, 03.03.21, YouTube). This tells us how he does not necessarily associate raids with certain years, if he would have remembered which year it was, he had most likely known which of his children were born then.

Something similar is happening with the way the week period is perceived by the active players. Every week the world is reset in *WoW*, allowing people to clear raids they have already previously cleared. They also receive their weekly rewards for PvP and dungeons at the same time, allowing them to continue progressing in the game. This cycles on the weekly basis. The reset day is Wednesday for Europe and Tuesday for the USA, making those days being the start of the week for many players. This is important because raiding days for the guilds are assigned around reset times to make sure people are ready.

Another thing that needs to be kept in mind while thinking about guilds is that each patch cycle brings certain instability. The developers might change ways a class works, the new raid might be much harder than a previous one, or issue with the game's code might cause game servers instability. This means that apart from the regular social issues any group will encounter, *WoW*'s guilds might suffer greatly from the system they exist in to begin with (Ducheneaut et al., 2007).

While starting a guild only requires 10 people, for the guild to survive for over longer period time fresh players are always needed, as many players lose interest and quit. For raiding guilds because we are focusing on raiding guilds the minimum of 10 people is insufficient. And they are required to continuously recruit more players in large numbers.

The time it takes for each guild to raid various greatly, depending on the ages of the players present and their real-life responsibilities. Typically, 3 hours per a raiding day is expected. The number of raiding days is also dependent on the guild's own composition. Typically, there are at least 2 raiding days a week. The guilds also vary by the player's preparedness, their

knowledge of in-game mechanics, their communication skills and their abilities. All of the above determines how "hardcore" the guild is.

Figure 17: Separate window just for the guild chat and other information in game (26.02.2021 screenshot by the author).

Exacmple of the most hardcore guilds in WoW are "world first guilds" such as Complexity Limit, Echo or Pieces. They are not just guild but also an e-sport organisation, with teams in several other games, sponsors and merchandise. Those guilds allow for day-raiding (meaning raiding for the whole day) during progression, contracts with their players and paychecks, that allow them to maintain such lifestyles. It is hard to say how many guilds in *WoW* have moved past serious hobby to being professionals, but for example the Race to World First became a popular *WoW* event, with several live/streams and many guilds participating with hundreds of thousands of players watching the progress. Such level of organisation is not new to world of online gaming; however, it is more known in games such as League of Legends. The mechanics of this game allows for easily create sport event with million people viewing it both online and offline. League of Legend World cup of 2020 had peak viewership of 3.7 million people, while year before it was 3.9 million, with live crowd appearing in each stage of the tournament as well (Dixon, 2020).
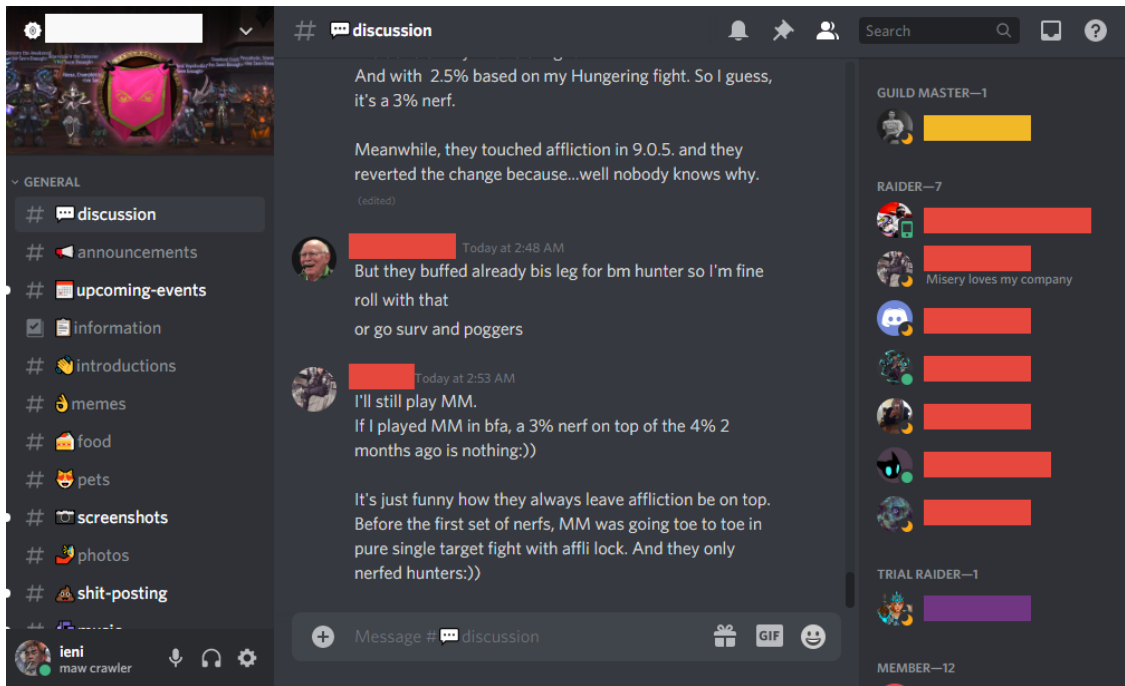
Figure 18: Discord server of a *WoW* guild (26.02.2021 screenshot by the author).

Not all hardcore guilds are on the level of world first guilds, yet they still spend many hours in and outside of the raid, typically 4 to 5 days a week during progression.

In my research I was following so called "semi-hardcore" guilds—guilds that want to get far progress wise but are unwilling to do some of the typical "hardcore" things such as demanding high in-game time and maintaining several alternative avatars of different classes (**alts**).

"What's considered semi-hardcore has changed a lot over the years. Like in TBC semi-hardcore meant 4-5 nights a week raiding for 4 hours, these days guilds that raid 3 days a week are often included as being semi hardcore, what's changed is probably it's gone from being an indication of how many hours a guild raids to instead be about how much prep the guilds and its members do (MeanBoy).*"*

"There was no place better than us, maybe if you wanted to apply to the Method and that's a real life job (Dudu).*"*

Guilds have hierarchy based on taken ranks. The head and creator of the guild is a guild master/leader. Their second in command are specially assigned officers, people with permissions given by the GM like inviting others into the guild, changing ranks and others. Other common ranks are raiders, trials and socials. Raiders are people officially taken as a part

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of the raiding group; trials are those who aspire to become a stable part of the raiding team. Socials are whoever stay in the guild without the explicit wish to actively raid. Those ranks, apart from the guild master, are not mandatory, their role is mostly symbolic. Even as a guild master the only thing a person can do to another player is to remove them (**kick**) from the guild. Often officers also get to kick people from the guild if their permissions allow. Yet still, moving from trial to raider is celebrated, getting an officer position is also a serious "promotion".

One of the most interesting information about the guild inner working is the loot distribution aspect. Joining a guild to raid seems to be the best way to do raiding—having a stable group of players, with everyone knowing their role, proper schedule and organisation. Raid progression and eventual clear is the goal for any raider, and that is what defines them. Another integral part of raiding is the gear or loot drops. Getting or losing a good piece of gear is such a big event in the life of a raider and the guild that many guilds break over it.

Technical part of gear drop works like this:

- A raid has a number of bosses.
- Each boss has a loot table—a list of possible items it will drop on kill. Game developers decide how many pieces of loot can raid boss drop on kill, and players know about it.
- On kill boss drops x amount of random gear pieces chosen form its loot table.
- The guild decides on who gets the dropped gear based on their own set of rules.

Raid leader (**RL**)—a person who creates the raid and has a special role in it, is the one who usually notifies other raid members of in-raid events and boss mechanics and decides who attends the raid. The raid leader and guild leader can be the same person, but it is not mandatory or expected. Raid leader is also the one who sets the loot rules, or rather, used to set them. Before 2018's Battle for Azeroth expansion *WoW* had several loot options, which decided how loot was distributed on boss kill, allowing guilds to set up their loot the way they wanted. Since 2018 Blizzard forced everyone to use **personal loot**, which took the responsibility from the raid leader, but also took the choice from people, creating a lot of issues in the raiding circles (as an example this reddit thread ptricky17, 2018; Balignon, 2021; recckleon, 2021). Personal loot automatically distributes dropped gear between the raid and in case that game system decides that the new item is better than what the player already has equipped, it makes a new item untradable.

I view gearing as a potlatch system of a sorts. Everyone in the raid works together, leading to the killing of the boss. They contribute their time and effort, and this leads to the loot drops, which is then given to the raid leader to redistribute between players. This redistribution usually worked on the Dragon Kill Points (DKP) system—by participating in guild activities, players

would get points and then could buy the item with the points (this system was set up by the guilds and was outside of the game mechanics). It lost its popularity long before the loot changes (Malone, 2009). More popular was the **loot council** together with a roll system. Once gear was received, players called out their interest in the gear, loot council—officers together with RL, then decided who needed it the most. If more than one person was eligible, they were asked to roll a virtual dice and higher roll would win the item. Another way distributing the loot was for everyone participating to roll, with no decisions from RL or the officers. Personal loot took this power from the RL, thus removing the system based on the status and trust. Currently in Shadowlands expansion guilds are using a 3rd party program (**addon**), that allows people to call out which of the received pieces of gear can be traded with others, and then state which piece they require and for what purposes. Officers, or RL then can decide who gets what, or again, call for rolls.

4 Methodology

4.1 Author's Perspective

This work shows an insider's perspective on the *World of Warcraft* social life. I have been introduced to the world of gaming and fantasy literature at the age of seven, with games by Blizzard Entertainment such as Diablo II, Warcraft III and StarCraft being available for me at home together with a library of fantasy books such as Lord of the Rings by J. R. R. Tolkien, Chronicles of Narnia by C.S. Lewis, Harry Potter by J. K. Rowling and others, including a vast amount of Russian fantasy authors.

Apart from *WoW* I have played several MMORPG, most prominently *Lineage II* (La2), *Ragnarök Online* (RO), and *WildStar* (WS). Due to circumstances around my family immigration to Czech Republic, MMORPG became a way of getting to know more Russian people in a natural way of bumping into one another on the (virtual) streets, or while working on a quest. First three MMOs (*RO*, *La2*, *WoW*) were introduced to me by my friends, whom I have also met online on a Russian forum thread about fantasy books around the year 2005 when I was 11 to 12 years old. Since then, MMORPG has become a prominent hobby, safe haven and place where I have made many memories and met important people, with friendships lasting over 5 years. None of those people live in the same country as I do, yet we visit one another when chance arrives as is typical for such long-distance friendships.

Between years 2019 and 2021 I was actively playing *WoW* with an explicit goal of writing this work. For my own enjoyment of the game, it meant moving from playing for fun, to playing for work. It meant spending a considerable amount of daytime in the game in order to keep my performance good enough to stay raiding and staying in the guild despite personal issues or possible dislike of the game. Participatory observation is the base of any ethnography, and when it comes to MMORPG participation is an absolute key (Nardi, Bonnie A, 2010), no passive observation can give quite the same insight into the guild.

4.2 Digital Ethnography

This research was done almost entirely online. Online ethnography, based on the amount of works I was able to find, was more of a niche in the 1990's, and then rapidly grew as a research field together with the spread of Internet and adoption of new technology (Bakardijeva, 2005; Escobar et al., 1994; Christina Hine, 2005; Christine Hine, 2000; B. Wilson, 2006; S. M. Wilson & Peterson, 2002). In the last thirty years Western society went from only having computers at work and sometimes at home, to every household having at least one personal computer with an Internet connection, to every person having a smartphone with a permanent connection to the Internet, with an ability to receive messages and notifications, and effectively never going offline (Garcia et al., 2009).

Changes in the way people communicate and create meaningful relationships have led to logical changes in the methodology of social research in modern communities. We currently live a majority of our lives online, and the borders between online and offline ethnography are getting thinner. Some say it is impossible, or rather incorrect, to conduct ethnography in modern urban space without implementing digital research methodology as well (Bakardijeva, 2005; Christine Hine, 2000; Pink et al., 2016). Before the days of smartphones and 4G Internet the difference between online and offline communication was much more visible. In the 90's and the beginning of 2000's there was virtually no way to talk to your online friends without sitting next to your computer, connected via a wired Internet connection, while using one of the popular messaging programs (MSNG, ICQ and IRC being the most prominent ones) or chatting in-game. While people in offline relationships could always call one another, text, meet at school or work and hang out together anywhere they wanted to, online communication was rooted to one physical place, and was mostly done through text only with little option for exchange of visual information—in best case scenario people could exchange photos.

Nowadays we can participate in the same activities with our online and offline friends, with the biggest difference being where do we "meet up"—in-game or in a café. With the global pandemic of 2019-2021 forcing everyone to switch to online communication, it is a perfect time to work on exploring digital ethnography as a viable method for mainstream anthropology. This work in particular is one of examples of various online communities that already exist.

Concerning digital ethnography and digital anthropology of MMORPG for this thesis work, the most important resources were the works of Edward Castranova–*Virtual Worlds: A first-Hand Account of Market and Society on the Cyberian Frontier* (2001), *Synthetic Worlds: The*

Business and Culture of Online Games (2005), and Nicholas J. Long's *Utopian Sociality. Online* (2012) allowed for a view of how MMORPGs worked at the beginning of the early stages of the online gaming environment. Christine Hine's *Virtual Ethnography* (2000) and *Virtual Methods* (2005) were used by me as as a practical tool for approaching digital ethnography as a topic, while Bonnie Nardi's *My Life as Night Elf Priestess: An Anthropological Account of World of Warcraft* (2010) and Joffrey Snodgrasson's *Online Virtual Worlds As Anthropological Field Sites: Ethnographic Methods Training Via Collaborative Research Of Internet Gaming Cultures* (2016) were an excellent insight into the experience of non-gamer anthropologists in the field of MMORPG research, where both authors were also teaching professors and theirs works were heavily influenced by their cooperation with students. Works on the real-life simulators such as *Second Life*, while in abundance (Bardzell & Odom, 2008; Bell et al., 2009; Boellstorff, 2008; Firat, 2014), were not as useful for this work due to the difference of genre and thus difference in the ways people spend their time inside of the game-space.

4.3 Research Methods

The main method of this research thesis was participant observation—I was a member of two different guilds during my active research phase in 2019 and 2020. Later on, in 2021, I was also invited to a third guild. My first guild was called Ninja Turtles. I was already a member there before the "official" research started. The second guild was called Legion. I joined it after Ninja Turtles effectively disbanded. There, I had to actively participate in guild activities and become a full member of the guild. The third guild—Unseen—I joined much later in the research and it also became a part of this thesis. Being a part of an active guild sparked my interest in this research anew, as it was a while since I left my previous guild, Legion. I also did not manage to conduct any formal interviews with Legion members, so the Unseen guild gave me more opportunities for analysis material.

The players' interviews were usually conducted through Discord. It is common for *World of Warcraft* guilds to maintain their own Discord servers that the members use to text, audio and video chat, and to coordinate both in and out of the game. This messaging app also includes a history option, where anyone with the correct permissions on the server can view anything ever written on the server, including shared pictures, links and other media. This app was used by me in tandem with the in-game guild chats, to gauge member activity and engagement.

This game no longer exists in the boundaries of its code running on individual computers. Many online forums, bases of knowledges and others were created over the last 15 years, and to achieve the most comprehensive look at the ways players live their online lives related to *WoW* I am required to not focus solely on the in-game world itself but also forums, fan-sites, YouTube, Discord servers, subreddits, Facebook groups and Twitter feeds.

"The difference between the frame of social interaction in MUVEs and other frames of offline interaction, which makes the very definition of virtual reality (VR)/VEs in terms of "being there" so important, is that MUVE frames are entirely technologically mediated. However, while frames should be analyzed in terms of technological mediation, the analysis of interaction within frames proposed here is much like the analysis of real-world interaction—although it is drastically reduced in complexity ... compared with the offline world... Put differently, this framework does not treat MUVEs differently from real-world interaction except in transposing it to the MUVE setting, which allows for comparisons with other forms of computer-mediated communication (CMC) and with face-to-face interaction—as long as we do not forget to embed

online interaction in the larger context of the offline uses of MUVEs and other new media in society (Schroeder, 2011)."

Following players' interactions and interacting with them myself was my main way of gathering data. The other tool that I used in my research was interviewing players. Some of them were conducted in-game, some over text chat in Discord and Twitter, others over voice chats in the same apps. For that I chose several players based on our familiarity and their actual willingness to talk to me. For some general information about player experience with guilds in *WoW* I also asked non-guild members on Discord servers and Twitter to talk to me, but as it usually goes with such calls, barely anyone reacted.

For my semi-structured interviews with players, I was interested in the topic of their guild life, what they think of their guild structure, how they got into the guild and why they left their previous guild. Further on I want to know how much people in the guild communicated with one another, have they done any gearing as a group outside of the raiding, or played any other digital games together. With questions like that I am hoping to understand which qualities make a guild a stable social structure that manages to survive through several patch cycles or even through several game expansions. The first interview was done as a pilot interview, where one of the goals was to see how the questions should be asked and what question order, if any, is required. As a result, I have added several points to my notes and gained confidence when interviewing people, whom I did not know that well. Several of the conducted interviews ended up being not very useful for my main body of research, due to some of the respondents belonging to a different type of players, i.e. non-raiders.

An extremely useful tool freely accessible to anyone was a YouTube show called *"Drama Time"* by PreachGaming (YouTube.com, Preach Gaming). This show gathers stories of different players and their **drama** stories—conflicts between people in the same guild, usually around the loot or raid space. It is a show made to entertain people, so we cannot take everything on face value, both in terms of people telling their stories being unreliable sources and the show host, Mike making the story more entertaining by exaggerating the events. Still, I believe basic social dynamics shown in the stories are extremely useful for an analysis of guild lives in MMO.

Regardless of the players using aliases (different from their real names) online, altered names for both guilds and players will be used for quotations. It is done due to the online nature of this community, where having a somewhat unique in-game character name leads to the ability to easily find mentioned people online.

4.4 In the virtual field

Figure 19: Sitting on the bench in the city, watching other players (05.02.20201 screenshot by the author).

Conducting ethnographic research in an online environment includes specific differences when compared to offline research. Some of them were well described by a team of researchers (Garcia et al., 2009) that collected data from previously published works on computer mediated communication, and this is how they put it:

1. *Because online ethnographers are not physically co-present with their research subjects, they cannot use their interpersonal skills to access and interpret the social worlds they are studying. Instead, ethnographers must develop skills in the analysis of textual and visual data, and in the interactional organization of text-based CMC.*

2. *The process of gaining access to the setting and research subjects is different in online ethnography because of the lack of physical presence and the resulting anonymity provided by the medium. Ethnographers must therefore learn how to manage their identity and presentation of self in visual and textual media and to do impression management via CMC modalities such as e-mail, chat, and instant messaging.*

3. *The blurring of public and private in the online world raises ethical issues around access to data and techniques for the protection of privacy and confidentiality. Ethnographers must learn how to apply standard principles of human subject protection*

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to a research environment which differs in fundamental ways from the face-to-face research contexts for which they were conceived and designed (Garcia et al., 2009).

Especially from an ethical perspective, the lack of physicality was one of the major problems I encountered during this research thesis. As a researcher in an often-changing environment, where a number of people would come and go, I felt responsible to remind people that I am in fact conducting research in this environment. However, at the same time I felt certain social awkwardness approaching new guild recruits with seemingly random messages that, I was afraid, might have turned them away from staying in the guild. My decision was then to be sure to inform the guild master and officers of my role, and then also notify anyone whom I was actively talking to. In this way it was common knowledge between the guild-mates that I was using this environment for my thesis, but it did not end up creating issues for the guild as an organisation, and allowed me to maintain a position as a part of the team and not an outsider. An important part of the process was staying an active player and participating in daily guild activities. However that was not a problem in my case as this was not my first experience with joining a guild or playing *WoW*.

While becoming a part of the community and letting people act naturally is one of the goals in participatory observation, we cannot forget that our physical presence is always felt, and we are seen as an outsider to some point. Digital environment allows people to conceal their presence almost entirely, and only by actively reminding people of one's presence, players obtain some sort of physicality in the social reality. Thus, I had to always have to keep my microphone on, eyes focused on the in-game chat, and trying to get into any conversation that was happening. Joining all and any in-game activities was also part of this routine.

5 Analysis

5.1 Roles and Hierarchy

To analyze the everyday social practices of the guilds I decided to look at the hierarchy of the guilds based on their social roles, status and prestige. Prestige is a concept borrowed from human behavior studies, it describes one of the ways in which people achieve higher status in the society. An opposing concept to prestige is the concept of dominance. Prestige is based on the knowledge and skill useful to the community, while dominance by contrast is based on fear and strength (Williams et al., 2006) Strength-base dominance might play a role in virtual life, with some raid leaders being known for displaying aggression, yelling at people and stressing them out in order to perform better. I argue that it is skill and knowledge that play the main role in achieving high status in the gaming world. This reason together with the fact that the role of leader is always taken by one of the players, the guild master, led me to the idea of looking at the role of the social aspects of power, loyalty and respect. Concepts of social and cultural capitals introduced by Pierre Bourdieu, although not being directly pointed at in this work, was also one of the key concepts I was working with. The social capital is the most important in recruitment, where certain knowledge of the social in-game rules is expected from players. Social ties and knowledge thus allows people to move further, getting into more prestigious circles (Bourdieu, 1986; Siisiäinen, 2005)

With base hierarchy being introduced by the game system itself (by the means of mandatory guild ranks like guild master, officer, member), further structuration and share of responsibilities and perks is not unexpected in case of such organization (Ducheneaut et al., 2007). Guild masters need to find people they can trust with power, people who would be respected enough by the rest of the players in the guild not only on the basis of prescribed title, but also their in-game performance, knowledge and social skills: their prestige.

The main goal of a raiding guild is to clear a raid. In our case we are looking at mythic raiding guilds specifically, mythic being the highest difficulty and the only case where a maximum of 20 people is allowed inside of the raid group by the rules of the game. The reward that the game gives to people for completing raids is the best possible gear in the game, that increases raw power of one's player avatar and makes other fights much easier, while also proving to other

players that the player holding such gear must be a highly skilled individual. There are also in-game achievements that can be viewed by any player and cosmetic rewards such as mounts and titles that some mythic bosses award on kill. All those things are the most physical manifestation of the player's skill and game knowledge, being highly sought after and instantly recognized by other players as something unique. For example, a title of Famed Slayer, that is displayed above the avatar's head next to the name, is one given to the first 100 guilds to defeat the last boss on mythic difficulty. Those guilds are also recognized on Blizzard's official *WoW* web, in the Hall of Fame (worldofwarcraft.com). *"Linking the achievement"* for killing one of the harder bosses, or a mythic end boss, would open a player a way into any PvE group, and high-end guilds only accept people with such experience.

Figure 20: Guild Ranks (25.03.2020 screenshot by nathangamer on WoWhead).

Thus, we can see certain status mythic raiders have in the eyes of players of *WoW* generally. To gain such status a player needs to join a raiding guild that would have a spot for them. Power that GM and RL, together with other officers, hold over the guild members is the raid spot and with it the way to get gear and status. Collecting and maintaining a group of 20+ people is no easy task, requiring good management skills and time investment (Chen et al., 2008; Ducheneaut et al., 2007; Prax, 2010; Williams et al., 2006) Most of the players perhaps would not mind the status that comes with being a leader of a successful guild, however as one of my respondents, who is a GM and RL himself said: *"Most of the people in the game don't want to deal with that kind of shit. Most of the people don't want to be an officer, they just want to play the game, get the loot and be the best* (Perry).*"*

The guild's inner structure can vary greatly, a great metaphor I find fitting is comparing them to "tree houses" and "military barracks" (Williams et al., 2006) More hardcore guilds, those who are aiming for the monetary gain or place in the Hall of Fame tend to go for more organized structures counting on a large number of newcomers and having to control their social and raiding performance to ensure the best possible raid progression. Guilds like that are easily

imaginable as sort of a military company, with strict hierarchy and a code of conduct. At the same time, more easy-going guilds and guilds that are based on pre-existing groups of friends can have their ranking systems be more symbolic. There are leaders and goals, but they are more concerned with keeping the good mood and good relationship in the group than winning the game. This said, the two types of guilds overlap frequently, and the social life inside of the guild does not always correspond with the expected raid performance.

"Well, it was very different between the guilds. So, in Infinity everybody was just a member, no trials or anything, just a few friends raiding together. Nothing serious. TC, I think they had a trial, raider, core and then officers. It was a bit more serious, like trials couldn't bid on items raiders could wanted. So there was a bit of hierarchy with the items distribution. But core and raider was just like... I guess if you were in the guid for five years you would be made a core member. It was just there. In the guild I was in after I think it was pretty similar to TC. In EV the GM had big plans of democratic elected positions and shit, it was really weird. But then I got one of the officer spots because of a dare. There was a fan forum and there was a dare to post some pic on it and I did it and I had it for months after that. It was very strange. I don't remember how it worked in BH, I think I passed the trial at some point but that's about it. In Perseverance it was really not a thing. I remember we would have people joined as trials and be like that for four months because no one would remember. And in Gargoyles I'd do the same, until someone would point it out like "hey I've been here for three months but I'm still a trial (MeanBoy)."

It is not rare for players to experiment with the guild rules and types of leadership inside of the community, as the inner guild structure has no rules enforced by the in-game mechanics. MeanBoy prefers guilds focused on friendly, but determined approach to the game, i.e. semi-hardcore guilds. His interest lies in the mechanics and the social part of the game. He frequently stays with similarly minded people, which then naturally creates communities around him based on trust and having fun, the "tree houses" of raiding guilds.

"We were really keen on not giving roles arbitrarily. If someone wanted to be an officer, say, or raider or whatever, it was because they would really want to do that. Because it would be really easy to develop problems in the guilds where they just arbitrarily throw around titles to people that don't actually have any responsibilities attached to those titles. It can become more of an ego stroke, than a system of government. So, there was never an extended list. We were

always keen on bringing socials to the guild. Because they were the one making the guild seem lively and inviting, they were on at 3 in the morning, chatting. So, when you recruit people, it is almost like the social activity in the guild that makes them want to stay active. Whereas you know, raiders are probably done and are only logging for the raid nights.

Recruitment officer didn't have a tag, because it wasn't something you really dealt with inside of the guild. It was more of something you had to go out to the forums to do. And then of course GM. But she never really dealt with anyone. If you were being kicked it wouldn't be Scarp, it would be your role officer. She was very separate from the guild. All of her input happened privately with them (Dudu).*"*

Dudu is a player who spent almost all of his *WoW* career in the same guild. This guild was a true military barrack style of space with a strong sense of community and determination. After joining a more laid back guild—Ninja Turtles—he tried to repeat the success of his previous guild. However, Ninja Turtles was a guild very different in structure to his previous one. Despite having knowledge of how things worked before and how a successful guild was thus managed, he was in no position to repeat the success—he had neither the respect of the guild members, nor the team of officers as his support. He was merely one of the officers invited to the guild by the GM; and the GM himself did not wish to intervene too much. Interestingly enough, the GM—a man named Ash,—was also a previous member of Dudu's original guild. However, Ash was not one of the officer members there; he might have thought that their GM also never intervened in the guild life, which was untrue. Therefore, this attempt to imitate their previous guild was unsuccessful, as both of them didn't have enough information about the internal structure of their old guild.

"When there are no officers, just one GM, people feel this dominating force that they always have to try to appease. There is not much management going on. So, in this guild I have, I would call him my main officer, Benu, who has been here from the start. He helps with many things. He is very good at writing, so I get him to write the news posts, announcements and things like that. He is very good with dealing with issues and dealing with people, he does that for a job. Generally, he is the social officer. In the end we work together... It is a team effort. So, if there is a problem officers come to me, like there is this social issue, this is how I'm dealing with it. And I would probably get involved with it as well. Cos two heads are generally better than one. My other officer... He, for me, is what I call the antagonist. So, he sorta rubs up people the wrong way, but in the game, especially in the gaming, you need to know how to deal with the

guy that annoys you without blowing up. So, what I found out in the past is that he has annoyed people and they've reacted, and then there are other people who just said "you are a twat, shut up". And he was ok with it. And I get a good idea about their mentality for him. Also, people forget that he is an officer, because he is not running around doing lot of officery shit (Perry).*"*

Perry is a guild master of the Unseen guild. At the moment of writing this paragraph, the guild has been effectively disbanded due to a number of issues, of which the main one, judging by the number of guild member's responses, is the GM himself. During raid times Perry was often upset, yelling at people for underperforming and not listening to his commands. He had a few officers in the guild but would not give them any actual power and would often loudly complain about officers uselessness to the other guild members—disregarding any idea of respect people might have had about the officers.

My experience with guilds demonstrates that different guilds use their own distinct systems, with differing numbers of officers, ranks and various rules regarding rank changes. All of those guilds have similar structure in how they name their ranks; all have Officer rank, Raider, Trial and Social, in addition to the GM and RL. My second guild, Legion, was a long running community of people, who have been together for ten years. They had several officers (about 7 people), an active GM and RL, with several people being able to perform a role of raid leader if needed.

Ninja Turtles as a guild went through a big change when its GM and RL (being the same person) left the game at the same time with many other members due to their dissatisfaction with the game-play. Those who stayed had to recover and choose new people for the roles, which proved problematic as no one wanted to take the burden upon themselves. In the end the most socially active player, experienced in-game and motivated enough picked up the role of the GM. He contacted his friends from the former guild he was a part of and re-established the Ninja Turtles with them. A big number of new players had to be invited, while most of the people who stayed from the previous group started leaving shortly after. New leadership could not fulfil the roles that the previous officers had, leading to frustration among the "veterans". Newcomers could see that experienced people were leaving the guild and disregarding what they were asked to do in the raid, which also led to many people leaving again. This was a result of a disconnect between new leadership and old members and a lack of an agreed-on identity, with everyone seemingly having different ideas about what the guild's focus was and what kind of players they wanted in their guild.

After a month or two the situation has stabilized, but the GM never assumed an actual leadership role. Most of the decisions were taken by the RL and the tank officer who was there from the previous incarnation of the guild. However, both had seemingly the same status, and neither of them had the last word in any of the guild decisions. The healing officer (Lab) was also a part of the "old guard", having very strong opinions on how things should work in the raid, as he was also an officer before. The GM was keeping a very symbolic role, rarely participating or commenting on anything. His raid performance was also very bad, so he held almost no prestige between officers or guild members, his decisions were, however, accepted, as he was technically the guild master.

Even more problems with the leadership appeared after the healer officer left his position, as he was unhappy with how things were done. He did not leave the guild, and a new person was selected to help with the control over the healing team. The new healing officer, Jay, was much younger (about 18 years old) than the rest of the guild (average being 25+). He was also relatively fresh to the game, with the previous healing officer, Lab, having to teach him everything about the in-game mechanics. Their relationship didn't change, even though their ranks shifted significantly. This way, Jay was expected to perform a role that is usually given to experienced players, while also being much younger than the rest of the guild. This situation led to even more issues, tension in the group rose and after a few months he almost stopped playing, only "raid logging"—coming online only for the raid.

"I think it was in Wrath of the Lich King when he got to the point when he didn't get a mount that dropped, he assumed he would just get it, but we just rolled for it and the person who rolled the highest got the mount. He moved to the different channel and we chased after him and he was literally sobbing about not getting the mount… So, a few of us started talking, there was a free server transfer coming up and we just decided we would make a new guild and move to a different server for free (Perry)*."*

The raid lead (Max) of the current world first guild is known for saying that most raid leaders are only such in name, and they do not not actually perform all the things he imagines a raid leader could actually be doing, thus not fulfilling the role of a raid leader (Limit Maximum, 2021). To reiterate, many guilds in *WoW* seem to be structured based on a previously developed hardcore guild's system that they are fruitlessly trying to recreate without the necessary experience. It does not always lead to issues inside of a guild. Commonly, it is people trying to perform a role that they clearly lack the prestige or the experience for that causes problems.

This said, a guild striving to be a military barrack, needs experienced generals and tacticians to convince their members to act like soldiers. A military barrack can grow from a tree house, but it would require growth and change of attitude in all members. Without an experienced and charismatic leadership and a well thought out guild structure, the easy-going players of the guild would leave without even trying to adjust their attitude (Ducheneaut et al., 2007; Kolo & Baur, 2004; Williams et al., 2006).

5.2 Communication and Goals

"Gordian Knot is a 20-man semi-hardcore raiding guild that consists of experienced raiders with some of them having raiding experience as far back as Vanilla.

Recruiting for BFA Raiding:

High Demand:
Priest: Holy
Medium Demand:
None at the moment
Low Demand:
None at the moment

Also, in order to be able to join our main team straight away, you need to meet the requirements for our current progress.

We are also open to discuss a possible merge and get a smaller group or guild that is struggling to get their raids goins, or that they want to advance to the next level. Most of us are versatile people and we can possibly reroll to achieve a good compasition after a merge.

Any social and friendly person who wants to join us for kicks and giggles is welcome. Just poke any of our officers online and you will get an invite for a social spot (no raiding spot).

We are a friendly group who enjoys World of Warcraft and loves raiding. We have fun and joke around but when bosses need to go down then all is serious! We wish for all our members to enjoy the game as much as we do and we expect raiders to maintain a 80% attendance per month.

We also enjoy a variety of other activities such as running a lot of Mythic+ dungeons doing alt-runs, achievement runs etc.

There are a few things we hold in high value but above else we value friendliness and politeness towards guildies and other players and skillfulness when it comes to the more serious parts of the game.

If you wish to know more about our Guild please check are awesome webpage!
https://gordian-knot.eu/

If you wish to apply you can do so here https://gordian-knot.eu/apply/

And if you have any questions feel free to add us or drop by our Discord for a chat!

(Example of recruitment message of a guild on the website Guilds of WoW)."

A strong sense of goal and understanding of how to get to this goal is extremely important for a guild to survive. The roles of the RL and the GM are to resolve any issues that arise within the raid, and that includes helping and motivating underperforming members as well as preventing the higher performing members of the group from becoming dissatisfied or agitated. I talked earlier about the hardcore, semi-hardcore and casual raiding guilds. This separation is important for players so that they know what kind of a guild they are joining and how much effort they are expected to provide. More than that it tells them what they can expect from the rest of the players in the raid, and if they will join similar minded players, or if they will have to be one of the few **carries** surrounded by players who do not have enough time or dedication to spend hours learning how to play. Carries, or carrying is a term used for players who are performing much better than the rest of the group, metaphorically carrying the team on their back. It is used in a variety of online gaming genres, not just in MMORPG. Depending on the attitude and difference in performance between the carry and the median of the group (which is often measured in pure DPS, in opposition to mechanical prowess, raid help and DPS combined) different situations might arise in the raid group.

Sometimes to ensure group survival one needs to get rid of the people who perform the worst out of the group and that is something that many will understand. The bigger issue comes with people who perform much better compared to the other players. Depending on this persons' attitude, and connected to their prestige inside of the group, this might lead to serious inner issues and guild's disbandment. Those issues are something guild leadership is supposed to deal

with, and why I insist communication is one of the key tools for ensuring group's survival. Setting and maintaining a single goal as a GM allows creation of a message that will be broadcasted to every member and recruit. Guilds with strong organization and communication between members and leadership allow for the best reaction to any sort of incoming issues. Such things require a lot of time investment and good management skills, but their only reward is the in-game prestige, which is why I assume so many guilds struggle to survive.

"Well, I will have to put Fallout into two sorts of categories. Fallout before Warlords and Fallout after. Sort of after Scarp really. So in the post Scarp Fallout we did encounter those kind of typical dramas, where someone would cause troubles or whatever and it won't be dealt with and that would cause a mass exodus and blow a hole for us in the raid. So that kind of thing was present post-Scarp. But before nothing like that ever used to happen. I guess it is because how well known we became on the server and the process of actually getting into Fallout didn't allow for someone who wasn't really really into it to actually make it through the process. So for the longest time we were in the position where people would be coming and sitting on out bench for three weeks straight. They were logged in for four hours a night, three hours a week and they were happy to be there, because that meant they were getting DKP, that they would be rotated in and they were part of Fallout. So, there was none of this "Five people left last night" or any of that. Because people were loyal, guild inspired this level of loyalty. If you made it into Fallout you wouldn't leave after getting the curve, because why? There was no place better than us (Dudu).*"*

Good players who are also socially adept and are generally friendly and active in the guild might lead to an overall rise of morale and better progress. It is possible for ex-hardcore players who no longer have ability or wish to invest their time into the game to find themselves a raid that is not at the same level as they are used to. It depends on if the said player is prepared to lower their standards of raid progression. On the other hand, there are "elitist" players, people who might be very good in-game, but for one reason or another had to join a guild of weaker players. This creates conflicts in the guild, as those are people who often speak over the RL and tell other players how they are supposed to play regardless of whether they were asked to do so. The worst situation that arises from such a player joining a guild is those people forming a "clique" with similarly minded players from the raiding team and then leaving the guild or leaving the raid without a number of experienced players mid-progression.

Cliques, as described by the *Encyclopedia of Educational Psychology,* is a term for groups of people who interact with one another more frequently than they do with others (Davis, 2008). This term is also popular in MMORPG settings, where it is used for the people who despite being in the guild are only playing together as a group, rarely if at all inviting other guild members to their dungeons and other activities. Such formations often create issues in the guilds but are viewed by some as inescapable due to the nature of the MMORPG (ArchivedUser, 2017; Trapped, 2016).

Subjective terms like "good" and "bad" players are used to evaluate someone's performance in-game and might be one of the key subjective perceptions that hold guilds together. An idea of what a "good player" is exists in *WoW* community and it seems to be based on the information shared by the very best players from world first guilds and other number ones from various point-based systems players create for themselves to maintain a sense of competition (raider.io, logs). What is hard to quantify is the social aspects of each player, how good they are with others or what other roles might they perform that are not seen on the damage meters. Other things, such as how well one sounds, and their general attitude are also important in their position in the guild. In my observations it seemed as if one's status came from a combination of all qualities mentioned above, with each variable's weight depending on the type of the guild in question.

On the side of more direct communication that is happening inside of the raid it is interesting to follow how people talk to one another. Generally, the idea of "clear comms" exists, when during a fight with the boss everyone but the shout-callers are supposed to be quiet, to let people focus.

"I wouldn't say silence, but especially before we've killed it once or twice already, you wouldn't find that people would be just chiming in. Like, the only time people would really speak, other than RL or role Officer, would be say like if a big add would spawn early and you are the destro lock, but you have no burning embers, you'd say I have no resources. And other warlock you take it. But that would be the only thing anyone would say.

The planning of the raid was done all before, so that's why when I arrived into gargoyles I had this very specific idea how things should go, but it didn't translate to the type of guild... There be no discussion what people thought was the best thing to do, because the plan was already there. We just had to do it (Dudu).*"*

Dudu's guild is the most structured of the ones I got to talk to, with communication being heavily controlled when it was necessary for the group to focus, but rather friendly in less stressful situations. Following how much people speak up or keep quiet during the raid is an interesting process that can tell a lot about the guild's structure and health without having any access to the rest of the information. In many cases the more chittering and different voices one hears during progression, the less structured and stable a guild is. It is perhaps because the higher level of raiding requires a high level of focus and synergy. This also leads to the understanding that talking over one another creates noise and wastes people's time. It heavily depends on the mood, as videos of World First Castle Nathria by Complexity Limit show that they keep up light banter and joking almost all of the time, yet players from this guild generally seems to know when to stop and give all of the attention to what their RL is calling for (thlock, 2020). Therefore raiding brings some sort of an etiquette with it, with RL and other officers upholding it. When someone breaks it without having the "right" to do so and then does not face any consequences, others also might feel like breaking rank, and which also sometimes leads to inter-guild conflicts.

Thus, the guild needs to consist of people with a shared goal in-game, the players have to understand how to act during a raid, and RL and other officers have to be an authority in the eyes of the group. Things such as suggestions to change strategy coming from the guild newcomers, especially in voice chat in opposition to a private message to the leader, is rarely taken on well.

"Partially because that sort of attitude was really not accepted and partially if between Scarp and officers a tactic was brought to the raid it was probably one of the best tactics you could ever use. Like I said, we weren't just arriving to the raid the day it came out and then trying to see how is it going, we would already probably killed it 5-6 times on the PTR [Public Test Realm]. We would have been having sort of little group chats with the other guilds on the server, discussing what we'd done on the PTR and what we thought. There was quite an even inner guild community back then, where I could message a guild I knew, asking what did you do on Galakras [boss], between the two towers, how did you deal with that. Saw few videos, run some PTR. There was definitely a good atmosphere. And again, because our RL was one of the best at least in top 10 raid leaders on Tarren Mill, there was no need for people to chime in (Dudu)*."*

"Yeah, there was this complete silence during the pulls. Even on stuff we had already on the farm. I definitely think we didn't speak much. Difference between BH and Perse was in the

amount of shit talk and joking, it was huge. Amount of jokes went through the roof with the Perse, with people like Shivo. In Infinity we didn't use voice comms. It was super laid back, we did easy raids, so we didn't really use it. I think we did at some point, maybe just to communicate during Zul'aman, it had a timed event so we had to communicate. But before that not at all. In TC we used Ventrilo [VoIP program]. That was probably the only guild that fucked around more than Perseverance that I ever been in. It was ridiculous, like 24 comedians. And we raided so much, five nights a week over three hours. Funnily enough, as I said the other day, they weren't a hardcore guild, they were semi-hardcore. It was just a lot of joking around, their share of drama too, but it was just a very fun guild to be in (MeanBoy)."

The guild voice chat is the closest people get to live conversation. It also shows how closely intra-connected the guild is. Guilds that only have their voice channels active during the raid hours imply the player's disinclination to spend time together, which makes for a rather unstable group. People that have no social ties in the guild have no reason to stay there if anything goes wrong, which almost always does—be it misunderstanding between players, issues with progression on a particularly difficult boss, or several people leaving for a holiday and being unable to attend the raid for several weeks. Similar to a group of students that are attending classes together, experience of doing so might enable them to become a community, but only by actively engaging with one another between and after classes do they create actual social ties. In an online environment this only becomes more complicated due to the lack of non-verbal visual communication.

5.3 Gearing and Working together

Getting good gear is one of the main goals for players in *WoW*. Gear, along with such cosmetic items as mounts and titles are the physical representation of players' skill and status in the game. One of the issues that separates gear from the rest of the items one can acquire in the game is that it is only viable for a certain amount of time—each new patch introducing new raid also introduces stronger gear, both from the raid itself but also by increasing the strength of items that are dropping from dungeons. This system makes it so each raid group is interested in obtaining the best gear early after the patch releases to ensure best possible progression through the raid. A month after patch releases is generally the time of highest player activity in the game, speed in which activity of players falls down depends on how well the patch is received by the community—people look at forum posts, YouTube videos and Reddit threads.

This cyclical nature of content creates natural flow of players that are leaving and joining the game again. Depending on how well the guild did in the previous patch, most of the people will probably return for the new raid. One of the ways to ensure that people, even when cancelling the subscription to the *World of Warcraft*, are staying as a part of the guild as an online community is to ensure people know one another and enjoy doing things together. Gearing through dungeons and PvP is probably one of the best ways guild members can maintain and strengthen their bonds. For raiders dungeons and PvP are not the main way through which they achieve highest status, thus people get to relax much more while socializing. Dungeons in *WoW* are content for no more than 5 people in a group and this does not change through the expansions, so the coordination in dungeons is also much easier. If raiding is considered work, dungeons and quests are a break time for the raiders.

As I explained before an issue that is always present is an imbalance of roles required for raiding versus the dungeon content. If we separate a raid of twenty people into four groups of five, we need two additional tanks and most likely at least one healer. Certainly, to function properly raids often have more than twenty people and it is possible that some of those people are willing to play the less popular roles such as a tank or a healer, but experience shows that the vast majority of players are only willing to play the damage dealer role. This, together with the more general "issue" of some people preferring to play with certain people creates another potential issue for the guild stability. Especially at the start of the patch, where good gear is important for smooth progression, being left out might cause people to leave the raid and the guild. This works as a natural filtration of sorts, as if someone is not good enough, too passive

in social life of the guild, or has a personality that does not match with anyone in particular, it seems only logical that those people will leave the group. Some guild masters are feeling like organizing such an event from the top, which is usually not very popular, because again, gearing outside of the raid is viewed as more of a relaxing way of spending time and being forced into it is not ideal.

"You only got two tanks in the main raid, maybe you got backup, so that is 3. They only would want to do so many dungeons every week anyway. And classically in the past we had people trying to find mythic plus key and they can't find a tank or a healer, there is always more DPS that want to go. In the past I thought of trying to have a m+ officer organize those groups. In the end it didn't really work out. The way I see it, if people are struggling to get into dungeons because they lack a tank there is a very clear thing they can do to accommodate for that which is to have an off-spec or make an alt and go tank. So that is what I always tell people, if you are going to level up an alt make sure it is one of the other roles... Which is a good stuff, but a lot of people don't want to do that, they just want to play DPS and then they will complain they can't get into groups.

The biggest thing I have is that people complain, and we have it in this guild actually, "Oh I come online and I ask to do a key and no one responds to me". And I say to them, all right, who did you whisper? Did you go on Discord and ask? Did you link your key? Or said you got a key, let's go and do it? Most of the time people just expecting other people to kinda run after them and appear when in reality, in my experience I will log on, I wanna do a key. I don't want to do my key because it is a bit of crap. I'll type !keys into the guild and I will see a lot of keys pop up and I will whisper the guy with the key I want and say "hey, do you want to do your key?" and they might say not today, but they will be on tomorrow. And that guys a DPS, so i need 2 more DPS, ok let's look in the guild. Oh, this guy is a tank and he is in the raid, let me whisper him "Hey are you around for a key tomorrow? I was gonna do this key with this guy". You have to organize your group, there is no one that is gonna do it for you. Just by linking key or asking people in the guild chat it won't mean that someone else will organize it for you. Some people out there just pug. Like they have people in the guild they could do key with, but instead they will just gonna go and find a group on the listings. Those are people with higher ios [player ratings from 3rd party]*, because they went and put an effort in. And the people who complain and not get dungeons done tend to be those who don't put required effort into making groups. It is like people just expect these things to happen. It is just like raid, there is an expectation*

that it just happens and people don't realize the organization that goes on behind and the
management (Perry)."

Again, prestige plays a big role in the group formation. Players who are actively creating groups with different people from the guild, those who are playing the tank role in particular are generally the most popular people in the guild. Similar to the damage dealers who are willing to carry members with worse gearm, and healers that can maintain even the weakest parties alive. Even people who are not necessarily that "good" game-play wise but are active and friendly are considered an important part of the guild, because it is often them who are making those groups and starting conversations that keep people engaged.

"We were always keen on bringing socials to the guild. Because they were the one making guild seem lively and inviting, they were on at 3 in the morning, chatting. So, when you recruit people, it is almost like the social activity in the guild that makes them want to stay active. Whereas you know, raiders are probably done and are only logging for the raid nights (Dudu)."

Figure 21: Rolling for an item in chat (19.8.2014 screenshot by killerpet1986).

Gearing inside of the raid is however an even bigger topic that has been evolving together with the game across the years. Ever since personal loot has been introduced (more on the topic in chapter 3.5), RLs have lost most of the control over the reward distribution. What used to be an agreed-on form of reciprocity, now became a personal but random reward for each member of the raid independent of their performance. The only thing that is being redistributed and controlled by the raid leader is who will be attending the raid, thus getting a chance to get the loot. There is a chance that a player, whom the game gave a piece of gear, actually got a better piece already and then the game allows them to trade such a piece. In this case it is usually given up for the raid leader to decide who gets it, or which people can roll the dice for a chance of winning the piece.

This system might have had a big influence on the way in-game communities function. If we take the notion that redistribution of items is one of the ways people in power maintain power and prestige in human communities (Patterson, 2005; Sahlins, 1975), in *WoW* this tool was taken away from the guild's leadership, which in turn influenced the stability of such groupings. The turbulent state of such MMORPG as *WoW*, with its patch cycles and constant changes, together with a big time investment required from the players, is constantly at war with the fact that all of the rewards one gets from the game are almost purely constrained in the virtual world of this game. Thing that transcends virtuality is the social ties people are creating while trying to get to the whatever goal they choose to pursue and it is those social ties that in the end have the highest influence on the successful run of the guild.

6 Conclusion

World of Warcraft and the MMORPG genre in general offer a broad field for social research, both qualitative and quantitative. Despite a seeming lack of physicality or even realism in such environments, human relationships translate well online, repeating already existing social practices and mechanisms from the offline world. In this work, by explaining how the hierarchy, communication and the cooperation looks like in the setting of the virtual communities of *WoW*, I attempted to show that there is little difference from any other social groupings.

Online gaming communities can be looked at as any of the other hobby clubs or, sometimes, as a small corporate entity, depending on their ultimate goals and inner structure. The ultimate difference that stands between offline and online hobbies and achievements lays on the cultural and symbolic sphere. Whether someone is a bowling enthusiast, or a hardcore raider, unless they are talking to someone from the same circle, their hobby stays as a curiosity for the outsiders. Bowling is however a physical activity that is culturally accepted as a hobby, while computer gaming is still seemingly associated with asocial behavior and being perceived as pointless, for there is no "real" physical reward achieved at the end of it. However, as in the case of any social activity, raiding requires teamwork, the ability to communicate required tasks and some level of organization. Players might not be navigating inside of the physical space, but social ties they create, knowledge and skills they acquire inside of the game are useful both in other games and in the offline environment—similar to other real-life hobbies.

In an attempt to describe the world of MMORPGs holistically, in this thesis I went into more details on the introduction part. My intention was to give a comprehensive description of the social reality of the gaming environment without getting into too many details on the concepts that might be only of interest for the people who are already focusing on a certain part of it. Giving this much attention to the introduction of the reader to the gaming space I was hoping to achieve the sense of ethnographic exploration of early anthropological works, when readers could only learn of overseas communities through such texts. It might be in sense "ethnography at home", looking at the lives of people who are socio-economically well enough to be able to afford a monthly subscription, an Internet connection, time to spare for the game, and have a computer that is equipped well enough for such a game. However, with growing numbers of people engaging with computer games and time spent online in particular, it is important for anthropology to keep in touch with this side of contemporary society.

Further ethnographic research on the topic of online computer communities can and should be conducted. In terms of various types of games MMORPG are best suited for such research because they, in a sense, repeat the physicality of the offline world. People are spending time together in the same environment at the same time, they experience the same changes to the same world. Games allow for formation of different kinds of groups with various goals and interests, language groups or any other indicators. At the same time all of those people have at least one thing in common—their interest in this particular game. Groups are encouraged to stay together and bonding comes in naturally through a number of tasks people perform together. In a similar way as MMORPGs, emergence of services like Discord allows for the formation of meaningful relationships online around a variety of games that might have not had the "massiveness" in their original design. Streaming platforms such as Twitch.tv are also an intriguing case of communication and cooperation, while at the same time they prove to be a new source of income for people from various backgrounds.

Virtual public spaces of online games and forums allow for people from various socio-economical, ethnic and national backgrounds to work together on easily understandable tasks. To survive through positive achievements and stagnation in achieving the given task, guilds need to be lucky enough to have a charismatic guild leader with some managerial skills, good understanding of the goal and swift decision-making when it comes to the biggest guild killers—fights inside of the community.

For contemporary anthropology, researching such communities can prove useful due to growing digitalization of everyday lives, transparency of social ties and cultural exchange in diverse communities. *World of Warcraft* players do not form a different kind of culture, unique to them only, but it is a big chapter in the world of digital culture, especially in the West. Changes to the trends of popular online games, ways people choose to play their games and with whom, can be an important indicator of trends in current society. Besides that working with and further developing methods of online ethnography in MMORPGs and other online multiplayer games can prove a useful tool for ethnographic practice for students with wide varieties of topics such as gender, racial inequality, linguistics, folklore and a range of other topics important for social sciences.

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7.2 Illustrations