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World of Warcraft: A Family Therapist's Journey into Scapegoated Culture

Nickolas Jordan
Appalachian State University, jordanna@appstate.edu

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Abstract

Relational (online) video games are lucrative business. The extremely popular Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game, World of Warcraft, boasts over eight million paying users. Video games are also a lightning rod for criticism and contempt by news media, parents and policy makers as the number of mass shootings increases in the United States. There is some research suggesting violent video games increase violent cognition and behavior. There is other research arguing no relationship exist between violent gaming and aggression. The same dichotomy of views exists within the discussion of how relational video games impact intimate partnerships. The purpose of this study is to continue conversation into the possibility of using games like World of Warcraft as interventions in individual, couple and family therapy. This autoethnorgraphic work examines researcher experience in World of Warcraft and its impact on violent thought, behavior and intimate relationships. In addition to researcher self-exploration, extensive interviews were conducted to provide additional context. Throughout the course of this work, three themes of World of Warcraft culture emerged: Work, Nostalgia and Connection. The theme of connection was most pervasive to the researcher and the participants. Video games like World of Warcraft may present supplemental opportunities for clients to practice healthy connection. Concerned parents should monitor their children's online gaming relationships as they would any other. Future research in this area may benefit from an experimental design where video games like World of Warcraft are used in the treatment of PTSD and Social Anxiety Disorder

Keywords

World of Warcraft, Online Video Games, Video Games, Violence, Social Media, Media, Marriage and Family Therapy, Autoethnography, Ethnography

World of Warcraft:
A Family Therapist's Journey into Scapegoated Culture

Nickolas Jordan
Appalachian State University, Boone, North Carolina, USA

Relational (online) video games are lucrative business. The extremely popular Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game, World of Warcraft, boasts over eight million paying users. Video games are also a lightning rod for criticism and contempt by news media, parents and policy makers as the number of mass shootings increases in the United States. There is some research suggesting violent video games increase violent cognition and behavior. There is other research arguing no relationship exist between violent gaming and aggression. The same dichotomy of views exists within the discussion of how relational video games impact intimate partnerships. The purpose of this study is to continue conversation into the possibility of using games like World of Warcraft as interventions in individual, couple and family therapy. This autoethnorgraphic work examines researcher experience in World of Warcraft and its impact on violent thought, behavior and intimate relationships. In addition to researcher self-exploration, extensive interviews were conducted to provide additional context. Throughout the course of this work, three themes of World of Warcraft culture emerged: Work, Nostalgia and Connection. The theme of connection was most pervasive to the researcher and the participants. Video games like World of Warcraft may present supplemental opportunities for clients to practice healthy connection. Concerned parents should monitor their children's online gaming relationships as they would any other. Future research in this area may benefit from an experimental design where video games like World of Warcraft are used in the treatment of PTSD and Social Anxiety Disorder. Keywords: World of Warcraft, Online Video Games, Video Games, Violence, Social Media, Media, Marriage and Family Therapy, Autoethnography, Ethnography

Introduction – The Games We Play

Video games are becoming as ubiquitous as the cell phones people often use to play them. What iPhone owner has not played the free version of *Angry Birds* or *Candy Crush* at least once? Across the globe, across culture one can find a keyboard, Playstation, an Xbox or a Wii remote in the gnarled grip of a gamer desperately trying to figure out how to conquer a level, defeat an enemy soldier or raid a castle for valuable loot (Jordan, 2009; Smyth, 2006; Yee, 2006a).

Contrary to insistent media portrayal, gaming is not just middle class, individual, teenage boys locked away in a basement. Women of all ages play games at an amazing pace (Ferguson & Kilburn, 2009). According to the Entertainment Software Association (ESA), the regulatory body that determines game content ratings, women make up forty five percent of all total gamers. The percentage of female gamers is higher than that of teenage boys age seventeen or younger (19%). Further, women are the fastest growing group of gamers in the world (Entertainment Software Association, 2013).

The men and women who choose video games as a hobby are not just playing by themselves; parents and families are choosing to play games together (Jordan, 2012; Yee, 2006b). Over half of parent surveyed by ESA (2013) say they believe video games to be a positive part of their child's life and fifty-nine percent say video games encourage families to spend time together. While many subscribe to the idea of the lonely teenager playing alone, attitudes about video games have changed a great deal from twenty years ago.

With the change in attitude comes a change in spending. Video games are a billion dollar industry (Cork, 2007). Ubiquitous broadband internet and the onslaught of easy to learn accessories like *Xbox Kinnect* and *Playstation Move* have created more and more revenue for the gaming industry (Entertainment Software Association, 2013). Perhaps the biggest revenue streams for game publishers like Sony, Microsoft, Entertainment Arts (EA), Take-Two Studios and Activision Blizzard are games with relational (online) components like *Call of Duty: Black Ops II* which grossed $1 billion in the first fifteen days of sale (Thier, 2012). The money relational games earn has pushed publishers to invest in their development heavily. *Sony Corporation* is hedging its bet toward social gaming so much so that the new *Playstation 4* controllers will actually have a "Share" button designed to upload gameplay pictures and videos to Facebook or seek out help from the world community with a specific game. It has been eight years or more since *Sony* significantly changed the layout of its input devices. To do so in such a way as to add a "Share" button confirms the significance of relational gaming and their confidence it will be around for decades to come.

Games like *World of Warcraft* (the game specific to this study) have been around for almost a decade and continue to be lucrative ventures for publishers and developers. *World of Warcraft* (WoW) is arguably the cornerstone of the Activision Blizzard gaming portfolio and perhaps their biggest cash cow. This Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMO) boasts almost eight million active players around the world. Its subscriber base is the largest of any game of its type (Kain, 2013). While WoW is not as popular as it was at its height a few years ago (around twelve million active subscribers), it is still considered the most successful MMO created to date and its longevity is unmatched. *World of Warcraft* is often credited as a video game that brought the hobby into the mainstream and popular culture (Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell & Moore, 2006).

World of Warcraft has a huge and dynamic universe where players interact to accomplish in game tasks and "level up" avatars to conquer increasingly difficult scenarios. This shared reality has created and maintained hundreds of thousands of relationships through the computer screen and in the "real world". Intimate partners have found each other as a result of WoW while many friends and family use it as a tool for connection with each other. Adolescents to elderly play together with the same in-game goal: create the best elf or warlock or whatever your character can be. *World of Warcraft*—love it or hate it—is fertile soil for forming, maintaining and sometimes terminating relationships.

The Current Study

With mass shootings becoming far too common in the United States, video games are taking a disproportionate amount of the blame (Ferguson, 2012; Kain, 2012). From an attempted, dispassionate, third person perspective, researchers are spending more and more time investigating how video games may or may not impact violent cognition and behavior as well as intimate relationships.

There is no that takes into account the perspective and position of the researcher as a participant in the culture of gaming. A participant researcher has the responsibility of understanding rather than categorizing; a stance that is very much missing in the current state of video game study. A participant observer has the ability to gain access to a culture with

context. Researchers more removed from the group of individuals they wish to better understand may miss important, indirect information or unspoken social rules. Further, a participant researcher may have more insight into responses given as a result of familiarity with that culture.

World of Warcraft exists as its own living, breathing community with all types of human connection. A systems thinker (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981; Winek, 2010), believes personal relationships are where we learn behaviors and cultivate perspectives. Through relational video games, personal relationships are formed, maintained and terminated, therefore, mental health professionals must know more about gaming culture and how it shows up at home and in the therapy room. This autoethnography will continue that discussion. We owe it to ourselves as researchers and mental health practitioners to spend more time with this medium before scapegoating it for atrocities or dismissing it as child's play.

Review of Relevant Literature

The Way Forward

Video games have become an extremely popular hobby around the world (Anderson & Bushman, 2001; Farrar, Krcmar and Nowak, 2006; Ferguson, 2006; Smyth. 2007). Millions of individuals of all ages and types enjoy this medium daily. Unsurprisingly, researchers, mental health practitioners, politicians and pundits still cannot seem to agree on gaming's effects – positive and negative (Anderson, Shibuya, Ihori, Swing, Bushman, Sakamoto, & Rothstein, 2010; Ferguson & Kilburn, 2009; Ferguson, 2006; Giumetti & Markey, 2007; Pawlikowski & Brand, 2011; Sherry, 2004, 2001). This is especially true about views connected to the Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games *World of Warcraft* (DeMaria, 2007; Sellers, 2006; Smith, 2006; Steinkuehler, 2006; Williams, 2006). This review of literature will highlight works on *World of Warcraft* and other similar MMO's as well as the historical debate over a connection between violent video games and aggression.

Video games and aggression – The Age Old Debate

There is no shortage of support for and against video game content (Bushman & Anderson, 2009; Ferguson, San Miguel, & Hartley 2009). If one asked a particular segment of researchers about the effects of gaming, they would probably conclude that violent video games lead to violent thought *and* behavior (Bushman & Anderson, 2009; Sherry, 2001). Perhaps the most famous argument of all comes from an Anderson (2004) meta-analysis on gaming research where he overtly compared supporters of the gaming industry to that of the tobacco companies defending cigarette use. This analysis found a significant relationship between violent video games and short term increases in aggressive cognition, aggressive behavior, aggressive affect and a decrease in helping behavior (2004). These findings are supported by Gentile and Gentile (2008) where they argue these increases are carried out into the long term. Anderson (2004) and Gentile and Gentile (2008) also support the earlier findings of Anderson and Dill (2000) and Sherry (2001) which argued for the existence of a relationship between all violent media and aggressive behavior.

The argument against the relationship between aggression and violent video games is just as vehement. The most ardent philosophical opponent of Anderson's work is Christopher Ferguson of Stetson University. He has authored several works which call into question violent gaming's causal relationship with aggressive behavior and cognition (Ferguson &

Kilburn, 2009; Ferguson, 2006). One of Ferguson's most recognizable works came in 2007 where he claimed an existence of a publication bias against video games. Ferguson (2007) questioned dozens of studies' measurement instruments and validity specifically citing Anderson and Dill (2000) use of the Taylor Competitive Reaction Time Test. Ferguson says Anderson and Dill (2000) claim the measure has external validity but could find no study to verify that claim. Ferguson's 2007 work also found that in many cases sample sizes were very large. This produced significant relationships with small effect sizes. A year prior, Ferguson (2006) said that according to many of those same Anderson (2004) cited works, violent gameplay was more associated with improved visual-spatial cognition than with aggressive thought and behavior. Ferguson's assertions were later supported by Appelbaum, Cain, Darling and Mitroff (2013) who also found similar increases (this time in visual sensory memory) in action video game players. The war of words and research between Anderson, Ferguson and their contemporaries has raged on for years (Barlett, Branch, Rodeheffer, & Harris, 2009; Barlett, Harris, & Baldassaro, 2007; Engelhardt, Bartholow, & Saults, 2011; Greitemeyer, Agthe, Turner, & Gschwendtner, 2012; Jansz, 2005; Krcmar & Farrar, 2009; Teng, Chong, Siew, & Skoric, 2011).

The war reached a fever pitch in 2010 in a very public battle over a second meta-analysis (Anderson et al., 2010) which reported similar yet more detailed findings as were in Anderson (2004). This 2010 study said not only is exposure to violent gameplay a risk factor to decreased pro-social and empathetic behavior but that these effects are cross-cultural and did not differ among genders. Again, Ferguson (Ferguson & Kilbourn, 2010) steps up and claims the studies selected for the meta-analysis were sampled with bias from unpublished work and that the aggression cited in those studies did not actually represent violence. In a response to Ferguson and Kilbourn (2010), Bushman (a supporter and frequent co-author of Anderson (Anderson et al., 2010) supported Anderson et al. (2010) arguing the use of unpublished work as standard research practice. Those of us in the gaming research community hoping for fisticuffs between the rivals were saddened by *Psychological Bulletin'*s insistence on keeping the debate civil and productive.

Entering Azeroth

The fight for Right in the debate over the connection between video gaming and violence is one that many concerned parents, spouses, friends, family and mental health professionals are eagerly waiting to see resolved. Unfortunately, there does not appear to be a clear answer. One of the goals of the current study is to add to this discussion by adopting a self-study approach (Anderson, 2006; Creswell, 2007; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Patton, 2002; Wall, 2006). Again, this researcher no published work looking qualitatively at the gamer/researcher's personal experience of *World of Warcraft* and its implications on violent cognition and behavior and intimate relationships.

Relational gaming existed long before Massively Multiplayer Online Video Games like *World of Warcraft*. No one played *Pong* by themselves and how many fights between siblings did parents stop because one wanted to be Mario instead of his easily programmed, green, partner in crime Luigi? Today, instead of sitting on couches or floors across from each other looking at the same screen, gamers sit on the other side of the screen sometimes countries away from fellow players. No matter the distance, the conversation and connection is real (Yee, 2006a).

The developers of *World of Warcraft* have built an entire, living, breathing universe out of that connection. Players of WoW rarely play alone (Griffiths, Davies, & Chappell, 2003). Some players derive positive social support (Jordan, 2012; Longman, O'Connor, & Obst, 2009) sometimes exclusively (Billieux, Van der Linden, Achab, Khazaal,

Paraskevopoulos, Zullino, & Thorens, 2013) from *World of Warcraft*. Some studies report a negative correlation between increased MMO play and health, sleep quality and academic work (Smyth, 2007). Interestingly enough, the Smyth (2007) study of one hundred participants found that the experimental group playing MMO's (like *World of Warcraft*) saw great interference with socialization in the real world while at the same time a sharp increase in new friendships. These friendships were reported as gamed based yet meaningful to the player.

The Cultural and Social Aspects of WoW

World of Warcraft has become so big and so pervasive among all ages and backgrounds (Ducheneaut, et al., 2006; Yee, 2006a; 2006b) an entire digital culture (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008) has developed. This culture group (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002) experiences chronicled, unique, online avatar identity development (Bessiere, Seay, & Kiesler, 2007). This group has its own economy, communication style and factional subgroup dynamics (Nardi, 2010; Yee, 2006a; Yee, 2006b). The written and unwritten rules of Azeroth (The WoW virtual world) are as complex as that of any diverse group of friends (Dickey, 2011; Rusaw, 2011). In the Dickey (2011) study, a class and instructor played *World of Warcraft* together. When someone defied the rules, they were punished and ejected from the group causing distress and dismay in the class and the cast out student. In another example, Jansz and Martens (2005) found the social connections inherent within games are what drive gamers to play. Without social connection, significantly fewer players would engage the medium. What is even more noteworthy is that given the opportunity, gamers would prefer to play with each in person and not just over a computer screen (Jansz & Martens, 2005). This suggests that online games do not necessarily detract from the desire to physically connect in the real world; an idea proposed by some gaming researchers (DeMaria, 2007). The most related study to the current one is Pace, Bardzell and Bardzell (2010). These University of Indiana Professors conducted a study examining intimate connections and experiences of players in *World of Warcraft*. This work surveyed sixty-two participants who played in various virtual worlds (WoW players were singled out from all other participants) and asked them to recall intimate experiences in the game. Using the Close Reading method (Patton, 2002), the authors derived four themes: "Intimacy is often located across real and virtual worlds, and not *in* one or the other; Intimacy often emerges from mundane, rather than extraordinary, experience; Intimacy involves reciprocity; Intimacy is experienced in and articulated with temporal categories and concepts," (p. 235).

Pace et al. (2010) argues *World of Warcraft* as software encourages unresolved tension. This virtual world experience offers up opportunities for ambiguous and nuanced intimate experiences. *World of Warcraft* software allows users to "shape sophisticated emotional relationships by appropriating system features into private expressive languages," (p. 241).

Bringing it Home

The current study seeks to expand upon the work of Pace and colleagues (2010) by looking at the researcher's own experience as the *World of Warcraft* software user. Through a systemic (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981; Winek, 2010), constructivist (Kegan, 1994; Lincoln, 2005; Lincoln & Guba, 1986), authoethnographic (Hayano, 1979) lens, the current study will look specifically at emotions connected to aggression and violence before, during and after gameplay as well as intimate relationship effects from the researcher's personal experience of *World of Warcraft*.

Methodology

Purpose of This Research

My place as a Black male, father, researcher, student and systemic, family therapist drives a desire to understand and critique societal concerns over the impact of gaming on public health and relationships. My perspective is clear: I am avid lover and player of video games. If *Sony*, *Microsoft* or *Rockstar Games* were to approach me with an offer of free games for life in exchange for favorable results in this autoethnography—the answer of course being, "No"—I would still take a moment to consider. I balance my love for and interest in video games with my role as a father. My daughter is impetus for this work. If she is to ever engage this medium I love so much, I want to better understand how it may impact my relationship with her or the woman she will eventually become. Further, I believe relational gaming provides opportunities for healing in relationships and families.

Setting the Stage

Anthropologist David Hayano (1979) is widely credited with developing the term *Autoethnography* to describe a methodology of studying the researcher as the subject and member of a specific culture sharing group. This autoethnography will use self-examination (Creswell, 2009; Creswell, 2007; Ellis & Bochner, 2000) to attempt to describe *World of Warcraft* as a culture. Beyond a cultural description, this study will also attempt to gain insight into the impact of the *World of Warcraft* on my own intimate relationship and aggressive thoughts and behavior. Autoethnography demands the exploration of self to better understand other.

Theoretical Orientation

As a family therapist and researcher, I see the world through the lens of Attachment Theory (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1969) and the Social Construction and Constructivist criteria set down by Lincoln and Guba (1986). Of all the post-modern ideas, I believe in the value of acknowledged subjectivity. While there is occasion for attempted objectivity, I do not believe it helpful when endeavoring to gain better understanding of self. Attachment Theory posits that primary relationships with family and friends are where we learn to navigate the world (Johnson, 2004). These relationships help us better understand ourselves and other. A "not knowing" stance and a mindset that values relationships in all their forms makes autoethnographic inquiry of *World of Warcraft* culture a natural fit for use in this study.

The Social Construction and Constructivist orientation also provides structure to the autoethnographic method of qualitative inquiry. Lincoln and Guba (2000) outline several areas of focus for quality in qualitative research. Specifically, this autoethnography will focus on validity criteria of Acknowledged Subjectivity; Trustworthiness; Triangulation; Authenticity; Reflexivity and Praxis (Patton, 2002).

Acknowledgement of subjectivity is the cornerstone of post-modernistic thinking. It is also a process started in previous sections and engaged in throughout this work. Trustworthiness in this study is addressed by peer debriefing. Triangulation is addressed through convenience sampling of known *World of Warcraft* players willing to share their perspectives on the culture sharing group. As member of an entire culture of about eight million, I recognize I cannot experience every facet of it on my own. These interviews help to

bridge an experience gap I as researcher cannot fill alone. Reflexivity and Praxis are acknowledged and explored in journals through continuous self-examination and self-dialogue around how my person as a researcher, father, gamer, systemic family therapist, etc. shape the research focus, interactions in and outside of Azeroth and the importance I place on understanding relationships. Completing all of these steps and being transparent in my beliefs and emotions connected to this medium will address the construct of Authenticity (Anderson, 2006; Creswell, 2009; Lincoln & Guba, 1986; Patton, 2002; Tillman, 2009; Wall, 2006).

Research Questions

The primary research questions going into this investigation are:

1. What is the quality and longevity of relationships within *World of Warcraft* space?
2. Does *World of Warcraft* encourage me and others to be violent or aggressive?
3. What impact does *World of Warcraft have* on my intimate relationships?

Data Generation, Collection and Analysis

Data collection consisted of two hundred and fifty-one hours playing *World of Warcraft* across four different avatars. Different avatars with different abilities were selected in order to expose me to as many elements and individuals of the game as possible. Each avatar (Mage, Warrior, Hunter and Priest) existed in a different realm of *World of Warcraft.* Realms are duplicated worlds of *World of Warcraft.* These realms exist to prevent overcrowding of one world and ease the strain on servers allowing more people to play the game at any given time. Realms are also localized. This means certain regions of the "real world" have a specific realm in WoW. For example, German players may wish to play with individuals more likely to speak their language, so they may choose a realm tied to a European, German Sub-Group Region like *Thrall.* I chose the realm *Velen* because I knew other players in the United States region who played there. To maximize my experience of English speaking players, I also played in three additional realms. The data collected through my experience in these realms consisted of notes within a journal. I wrote in this journal after ever game session.

Because of the depth and breadth of experience in *World of Warcraft,* I decided to interview other players to add to my experience of the game. Eleven interviews were conducted over a period of ninety days. Interviews lasted approximately thirty minutes. Participants were convenience selected through electronic mailing in addition to directly asking friends and colleagues I know that play *World of Warcraft.* Identities of participants were kept anonymous save for three demographic questions:

- Age
- Race
- Gender

Coding was done through a procedure outlined by Madison (2005). Interviews were read for meaningful segments (ideas, and thoughts). Each segment was assigned a name then placed with other similar segments. These segments then became larger categories. Categories were then combined into final groupings designated "themes" (2005).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical concerns like researcher presentation, participant and cultural exploitation and informed consent are especially important in autoethnography (Patton, 2002). Ethical violations can happen in a seemingly innocuous fashion. To guard against such violations I did not use the words or reported experience of any person's avatar I spoke with in-game aside from those I interviewed directly. Those I interviewed directly signed an informed consent approved by a university, human subject regulatory board.

Individuals I met in-game that were not interviewed did not sign an informed consent, however, any communication I had with them outside of technical help, I identified who I was and the purpose I had in playing *World of Warcraft*. For example, I did not identify myself as a researcher if I asked a question like, "Do you know where the Auction House is?" I did identified myself clearly through private message in Dungeons where working and communicating together was essential.

Results

A Time for Reflection – The nature of Autoethnography

While I do not believe any study represents "Truth," I do believe in the journey of its search (Kegan, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1986). I cannot say this or any study will ever definitively answer the primary research questions, and, I can say this autoethnography contributes to the discussion. I invite other researchers, concerned family members, friends and family therapists to view these words not in terms of "what" I believe *World of Warcraft* is, instead, think of them as a respectful take on "how" I see the culture and my experience with the richness within.

Culture "Description"

Describing an entire culture is ridiculously impossible. Attempting to describe an entire culture is more than a little arrogant. At best, as a researcher, I can describe a snapshot of my experience with and in a culture during a specific stretch of time. That said, I humbly submit this snapshot with great respect for a community that accepts me as one if its own. Months of playing *World of Warcraft* can be boiled down into single visual image: I imagine being eleven years old and showing up to a birthday party to find I am three hours late. The house I am in is a mess; red solo cups of leftover soda are overturned. Half eaten hotdogs are scavenged by an old, crotchety, golden retriever suffering from hip dysplasia. There are some balloons still inflated in the air while others are on the mustard stained carpet leaking helium. There were presents at some point. I know this because crinkled wrapping paper is strewn about. The yellow cake with white frosting and decorative sprinkles is half eaten and the sparklers have long since burned out. This was obviously one hell of a party. Fighting an overwhelming sense of disappointment, I search for the knife to cut myself a piece of cake. I can hear voices and laughter in the back yard. I'm not alone! There are still some children playing Ultimate Frisbee out back. Wait, frisbee? Even as an eleven year old, I know I am in danger of losing my Black Card if I go out and play Ultimate Frisbee.

I see the adults staring at the remaining children disapprovingly. I think these are the leftover kids waiting for their parents to come pick them up. Fortunately, the four children left look to still be having fun, though their eyes are a little tired. Maybe this isn't as fun for them as it was a few hours ago. They look just as ready to be picked up as the adults are.

I see what looks like animal poop on the ground; was there a petting zoo?! Oh my god, I think I missed a petting zoo! Either there were cool animals to see at some point or it is discarded brownies. God, I hope it is discarded brownie. More disappointment. I guess I should eat my cake…do I even know how to throw a frisbee?

The New WoW

World of Warcraft is not what it used to be. At its height, WoW membership stood at twelve million. Since 2010, the population has decreased to just under eight million (Kain, 2013). Competition from other Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (*League of Legends, Roblox*) and WoW fatigue seem to have slowed the game's popularity considerably. I often wondered how my experience of the game and the relationships with other players would have been different if I started this study in 2009. It may still be a vibrant community of die-hards but the sense of wonder and curiosity of the new comer to *World of Warcraft* is missing. It seems as though the culture is no longer meant to welcome the new, instead it seems to want to recreate the old; reconnect with players that have not entered the world in years. The world seems to offer nothing new for its players, just variation on old themes. I often wondered how the increasingly steep learning curve for new players may hinder opportunities for meaningful, positive connection.

Gamers play mindlessly or even consider it a chore to be online. Level grinding (increasing an avatar's abilities), responsibility to respective player groups, profession development, pressure from other players to play "correctly" or face the ridicule of fellow dungeon mates recreated for the feeling of middle school. Eighth grade; when everything was important and *nothing* was important. We were all so serious back then. That is how WoW is today: everyone and everything is so serious. The fun can be hard to find at times. With that, comes a difficulty creating relationships.

While there is trepidation and difficulty in creating relationships, when it happens, it is powerful. I experienced feelings of respect, appreciation, anxiety, connection, disgust, admiration, envy and frustration during my time with WoW. I met players I believe I could someday describe as "Yeah, we're cool" and others I would describe as fond acquaintances. I grew closer to fellow players I knew outside the game and reconnected with faces from years before. While the actual game *World of Warcraft* may have lost some luster over its decade of existence, the relationships it has created and sustained still shine. For this researcher, these relationships make the game worth playing.

Three Cultural Themes and Self Reflection

During my time with *World of Warcraft* I came to know players I had never met in the "real" world and grew closer to those I had previous relationships with. The interviews produced three major themes. While intensive interviews are not traditionally part of autoethnography (Jones, Adams, & Ellis, 2013), a postmodern, constructivist orientation calls for multiple perspectives and understanding (Lincoln, 2005; Paul, Graffam, & Fowler, 2005). *World of Warcraft* is an incredibly vast world offering a wide array of gameplay experiences that evolve with updates, patches and expansions. This constant evolution of play is then engaged by different guilds and parties of all contexts and backgrounds. It is critical to present as much and as varied an experience of *World of Warcraft* as possible.

Theme #1 – Work

The first theme revolves around the idea that *World of Warcraft* is work. There are a lot of task oriented experiences. Each task seemed optimized to keep me interested and playing; offering just enough incentive and reward to continue working cooperatively with other players, developing professions, increasing avatar levels, auctioning and farming items. Doing each of these tasks takes hours and patience. Participants and other players I met in game described this process with phrases like, "It reaches a stage where it starts to feel like a responsibility. People are counting on you to be online every day at certain times. You need to be earning money or XP. Other users pressure me to do other things. It started to feel like a job."

Theme #2 – Nostalgia

The second theme that arose was a nostalgic recounting of *World of Warcraft*'s former glory. This came in the form of fond memories about gameplay dynamics that were changed or times played before (usually before the player took an extended leave of absence and then returned). *World of Warcraft* veterans have experienced a great deal of change since its release in 2004. Most of the change people mentioned is positive. "Back when I used to play before, this realm had more players. Now it's dead," is just one of the examples of how the game has changed. Others recount the change of relationships in the game and self that make the game less fun or different than it was: "I used to be in this guild and they helped me out a lot; they repaired equipment and shared loot. We dungeoned together and they helped me develop my Mage." Many of the players I came across in game and several of the participants described existing in a sort of WoW recovery program. "I play early in the morning now before my girlfriend wakes up. That's my 'me' time. I used to play a lot more…I survived on Red Bull and hot pockets." Users play now but are intentional about not spending as much time and energy playing as in the past. I often wonder if this would be my fate moving forward. Will I reach a tipping point in my gaming where I am forced to choose between continuing the game and real world relationships and activities?

Theme #3 – Connection

The final and most pronounced theme is one of connection. Connection is described by some players and participants as "Heavy role play…I had characters that got married, had children and were involved in intimate relationships." Others described it as "I use *World of Warcraft* as a way of staying in touch with friends…when we play, we hardly ever talk about the game. We talk about our lives." *World of Warcraft* functions at its best with a vibrant, connected community. Camaraderie and collaboration is the premise of the entire game. Players must enter different dungeons and raids in groups with assigned roles. These players have to work together to accomplish the objectives of the dungeon and like the real world, there may be social consequences for those the group collectively feels is not performing their role appropriately. For example, "I try not to treat other players like shit when they mess up or cause me to die…but sometimes I have to let them know that we can't get through whatever we are doing without them playing right." The experience can be frustrating or very rewarding—often both. There are so many things to do, see and experience; it is overwhelming at times. I sought help from players I did not know and from those I did. *World of Warcraft* forced me to seek relationships and to cooperate for mutual gain.

Playing World of Warcraft turned out to be a process of self-reflection and self-confirmation. When I play *World of Warcraft,* I mimic and act out many of my real world behaviors and beliefs. For example, I work hard to challenge oppressive language like racial and homophobic slurs. In the real world, when I hear that kind of language, I speak out

against it in the moment. I found myself doing the same thing in *World of Warcraft*. On seven separate occasions, I spoke out and reported the players to game administrators. Unfortunately, my behavior in *World of Warcraft* also imitated some less desirable personality traits. I am humble to the point of self-deprecation. I seek to be a follower, not a leader. These attributes encouraged me to stay away from leadership roles in the game (being a Tank or a Healer in dungeon scenarios). This is somewhat similar to other findings which suggest that individuals engage in computer mediated communication as they would in the real world (Ward & Tracey, 2004). This did raise the interesting question of whether or not I could pick up on any symptoms of anxiety and depression in other players gaming habits. *World of Warcraft* did not offer me an opportunity to try on different identities (Besseire et al., 2007), rather, WoW allowed me to find new ways of being who I already believe myself to be.

Discussion

An Interpretation

Playing *World of Warcraft* was a powerful experience because of the relationships that formed and the others that were strengthened. *World of Warcraft* is not the sole reason for these connections, however, it was a significant contributing factor. Participants of this study spoke of how important the relationships they engaged in through *World of Warcraft* are to them. One spoke very fondly of the friendships he'd created, "They understand me and want the same things I want from the game. We play together as friends." Another gave a surprising critique of the nature of communication through the medium of relational video games, "I think [World of Warcraft] kinda strips everything down to basic communication. You have to be able to present yourself. It's not like I like him or her because they look good. It's kind of a double blind. You get to know people though their actions. Someone goes through a lot of trouble to help me out, that shows a lot about a person." I was taken aback when I heard a commentary suggesting something other than a downgrade of quality during computer mediated communication. I was once situated solely in the camp of people that complained of diminishing quality of communication through electronic means, however, I resonated with this WoW player's experience. The shroud of anonymity offers many players an outlet to be mean and hateful. Many players take that opportunity. The many more who do not add value to the relationships they create and maintain in the online space.

I found meaningful connection in *World of Warcraft.* I grew up in a household where I was taught I should never have more friends than fingers. I am not anti-social, however, I do believe the word "friend" is thrown around lightly. Through playing this game, I earned a friend. This friendship has morphed into more than playing video games together. We talk about family, intimate relationships and spirituality; our families spend time together regularly. One day, he will move away or I will move away and the only communication we have will be through relational video games. For us, that will be enough.

Using the *World of Warcraft* community as an exclusive support network of relationships is not sustainable; however, it offers a significant supplement to healthy engagement. One player noted, "I think you can definitely make connections and friends… I would recommend anyone who plays should start playing with someone they know rather than just by themselves. Like any other social circle." At the very least, the *World of Warcraft* community is comparable to supports as church communities, book clubs, food groups or even pets. If an individual or couple is in need of a support network, the *World of Warcraft* community may be a reasonable, safe option.

"Answering" the Research Questions

At the beginning of this work I set out to investigate three questions:

1. What is the quality and longevity of relationships within *World of Warcraft* space?
2. Does *World of Warcraft* encourage me and others to be violent or aggressive?
3. What impact does *World of Warcraft have* on my intimate relationships?

I cannot know the quality of all relationships in *World of Warcraft*. The relationships I and the participants of this study have in *World of Warcraft* seemed to be exactly what was needed. I found support in some places and challenge in others. Participants reported having deep, intimate connections at times whereas others described WoW as one of several mediums used to stay connected to geographically distant friends. I may not have made new attachment connections (Johnson, 2004) as some others reported, however, I found value and appreciation for each person I encountered. One participant did have a warning to players looking to supplement real world relationships with WoW: "People should be careful with the relationships they create and what they perceive about those relationships. Those relationships are commonly end when one person stops playing." Some researchers have argued that there is an aspect of disposability in relationships created through relational video games that physical proximity does not necessarily have (Anderson, 2004). I contend this disposability is an aspect of any long distance relationship. Economics dictate our ability to use the phone or write a letter in the same way it dictates our capacity to use a computer, the Internet or pay *World of Warcraft's* monthly fee. Online connections are no more or less risky than other long distance relationships.

All except one of the participants believe that *World of Warcraft* does not encourage aggression or violent behavior. This particular respondent seemed on the fence about WoW's encouragement of violence specifically but did offer a critique on other violent video games, "I think that it does encourage violence in similar ways to video games on other platforms. They sometimes encourage people to participate in acting out violent experiences without inviting reflection. Yeah I think to some extent it is irresponsible and exacerbating violent tendencies. I don't think it encourages anything that is out of sync with anything else in our culture. For the most part, WoW is really cartoonish."

All other participants in this study, including myself, did not believe *World of Warcraft* created any violent or aggressive feelings. When asked whether or not *World of Warcraft* self or other to violent, one participant responded, "I think there are some formative years where if you were exposed to some of the content of violent video games you may have some lines blurred. But I think it's more about the way players interact than the content of the game itself. A person cussing out other people, in my opinion, is no way for a kid to act or to treat others. The interactions can be a negative experience. That has an impact on development. People teaching people violent and not game teaching people violence." Another response came from a gamer who I believe felt somewhat insulted by the question, "I grew up in the age of bugs bunny. I know the difference between what's real and what's not. I think it's funny when they try to limit cartoons from kids. No, I think environment encourages violence. I don't see how WoW could do that; maybe [*Grand Theft Auto*], but even then. If you don't know the difference between game and reality you're pretty much lost." Another similar response was, "It's just a game. No, I don't think they encourage violence. I actually think that they are a good tool because it kinda lets you work something out in a safe space without anything bad happening. You can kill someone over and over in

game and it's not going to have any lasting ramifications." This study's collection of respondents really focused in on understanding the difference between video game violence and real world violence.

I, too, felt in no way more or less aggressive through my gameplay. I echoed most respondent's feelings about their experience of *World of Warcraft*: It is just a game—a stupid game of elves and orcs. I spent plenty of time being frustrated I did not understand something or irritated at another player's attitude and at no point did I ever feel an anger driving me to hurt myself or someone else. *World of Warcraft* did offer me the ability defeat and conquer real world opponents and in many ways I took pleasure in that. That pleasure did not translate into turning off the game, standing up from my computer, walking to the next room and punching a partner, friend or colleague. Video games are not real, however, they may satisfy an innate, human desire to be aggressive (Hardy & Laszoloffy, 2006).

Finally, *World of Warcraft* did not appear to impact my partner relationship. When I first spoke to her about starting this autoethnography, she was concerned. She researched websites and online support groups devoted to spouses who "lost" their partners to *World of Warcraft*. Fortunately, she never felt as though she needed that kind of support. During *data collection* (where I play WoW for hours at a time) she often joked to me and our friends, "If you weren't playing this, it would be something else." I engage video games in a moderation and balance appropriate to my life and relationships

Two participants reported having difficulty with this balance: "For a few years, [*World of Warcraft*] contributed negatively to my relationships with friends and family. I became reclusive. I was channeling all my emotional energy to people in the game. That probably characterizes it for the most part. I would say now my gameplay doesn't really impact my relationships outside the game." One reported, "It definitely takes time away from actual, real, physical relationships. That's one of the reason I quit playing it. You're almost creating this second life; this virtual person. It's just natural that it takes away from the real context, the physical context of friends and family."

For the other participants of this study, *World of Warcraft* did not pose a significant threat to their intimate relationships. One participant stated, "I've been able to not let the game affect any of my relationships," while another said, "No way. Except [my kids] laugh a whole lot about it. 'Are you playing *World of Warcraft* mom?!'…Used to feel a lot of pressure from guild members to play at certain times. There is always going to be the addictive personality that gets overinvolved. There have been times where I've been very interested and times where I have not been. I guess it's a balance in life." One stated very clearly, "It's a game. It has never impacted my personal relationships." It is the person that cannot find balance less so than the game itself that creates tension in a relationship. And like most activities, relational video games can and are abused by those that play (Lee & Peng 2006; DeMaria, 2007).

Limitations, Questions Raised and Future Directions

The most glaring limitation of this study is that it is written from the point of view of a single researcher. While attempts were made to mitigate this research design decision through interviews and a gathering of multiple perspectives, the study may not have adequately captured the cultural experience of *World of Warcraft* players.

Two questions continue to rise to the surface: How much do video games contribute to the violence – specifically mass shootings like Newtown Connecticut and Virginia Tech? Are Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games viable tools for counselors looking to help clients (re)connect with the world? While this study certainly adds to the conversation about the impact of violent video game content and its connection to violent cognition and

behavior, there are no definitive answers. For this researcher, there is comfort in not knowing. My hope is that uncertainty will create vigilance. It is up to mental health professionals, family, friends, parents and policy makers to monitor online relationships as they would any other. *World of Warcraft* is approaching a decade old and the technology that spawned it continues to grow. For mental health professionals, ignoring the medium is no longer an option.

To that end, future research investigating the impact of violent images in *World of Warcraft* on violent cognition and behavior might be well served to ask questions about specific types of content. For example, does casting arcane magic conjure violent imagery or a desire to engage in violent behavior? Researchers may also consider using an experimental design to test the impact of WoW content on persons suffering from attachment trauma (Greenberg & Johnson, 1988). Does engaging in relationships through *World of Warcraft* have an effect on overall relationship satisfaction for persons suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder or acute social anxiety? Can *World of Warcraft* positively impact problematic interactional patterns in relationships? Research investigating these questions could be a natural extension of the work done by this autoethnography.

Takeaways for the Concerned

The importance of studies like these is apparent to mental health professionals, concerned families, friends and policy makers. Online video games and other similar Social Media offer an opportunity to connect to the outside world in ways that were impossible before (Abe & Jordan, 2013; Jordan, Russell, Afousi, Chemel, McVicker, Robertson, & Winek, *In Press*). Further, monitored and appropriate use of this technology may provide opportunities for relational healing. Mental health professionals would do well to consider their usefulness in therapy room. In the unapologetically biased spirit I have presented this study, I encourage policy makers to continue learning what the research says about online video games before condemning and rejecting them outright.

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Author Note

Dr. Nickolas Jordan is an Assistant Professor of Marriage and Family Therapy in the Department of Human Development and Psychological Counseling at Appalachian State University. He is a licensed marriage and family therapist, clinical member of the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy and an AAMFT Approved Supervisor. Dr. Jordan's clinical interests include low socio-economic status individuals, couples and families of color. His professional interests include relationships created through online video games and other Social Media, as well as African American male experiences in athletics. He can be contacted by email at jordanna@appstate.edu

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