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Experiences of Playing Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games: A Phenomenological Exploration

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EXPERIENCES OF PLAYING MASSIVELY MULTIPLAYER ONLINE
ROLE-PLAYING GAMES: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION

A Dissertation

Submitted to the McAnulty College and Graduate School
of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

Jacob R. Rusczek, M.A.

August 2015

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ROLE-PLAYING GAMES: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION

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ABSTRACT

EXPERIENCES OF PLAYING MASSIVELY MULTIPLAYER ONLINE
ROLE-PLAYING GAMES: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION

By

Jacob R. Rusczek

August 2015

Dissertation supervised by Eva Simms, Ph. D.

This dissertation presents an interpretative phenomenological analysis of the experience of being engaged in a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG). These games have become increasingly popular over the past decade and have earned the reputation of being highly engrossing or even addicting. In this study, five long-term players were interviewed in person. For a portion of the interviews, the researcher observed the participants playing their games. The interviews were transcribed and subsequently analyzed using interpretive phenomenological analysis, which yielded individual and shared themes. Individual themes are first presented, which provides a rich sense of each participant's particular way of engaging with his or her game. Shared themes across participants are then detailed, with an emphasis on one prominent theme common to all participants: investment. This theme revealed that engagement in an MMORPG is structured upon investing time and effort in order to earn rewards. These findings are consistent with the position that MMORPGs are attractive to players because they offer the opportunity to engage in pursuits congruent with modernist ideologies, such as

capitalism and instrumental rationality. However, my participants also invested in ways that exceeded modernist values, such as forming relationships with other players and engaging with the narrative and thematic dimensions of their games.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs¹) have become increasingly popular since their inception in the late 1990s. These games are based on elements from pen and paper role-playing games, which have been transformed in the matrix of video game and internet technology. Players and onlookers alike have been struck by just how engaging MMORPGs can be. It is common for players to become heavily invested in these games, devoting dozens of hours per week over a course of years. In some cases, other life activities such as work and intimate relationships suffer as a result of extensive play, which has led many experts and laypeople to view MMORPGs as addictive. Highly publicized incidents, such as Shawn Woolley's suicide after playing *EverQuest* for nearly two days straight in 2002, have contributed to the impression that MMORPGs have an uncanny ability to hook their players (Spain & Vega, 2005). In response, psychologists, sociologists, and thinkers from other disciplines are attempting to better understand the appeal of these games. This study is my contribution to this relatively recent and ongoing inquiry.

A Brief History of MMORPGs

Massively multiplayer online role-playing games were born in the late 1990s, and became widely popular over the course of the following decade (Rowlands, 2012). Despite being a relatively new genre, MMORPGs' roots can be traced back to earlier types of games, such as pen and paper role-playing games like *Dungeons and Dragons* (first published in 1974) and text-based online role-playing games, referred to as multi-user dungeons (MUDs), which were

¹ Due to the unwieldy nature of the full acronym, MMORPG is sometimes pronounced "mor-peg" (Castranova, 2005) or shortened to MMO.

popular during the 1980s (Rowlands, 2012). In both MUDs and pen and paper role-playing games, the player is typically in control of a single character who is situated in a virtual world—more often than not a medieval fantasy world—populated by the characters of other players. In both cases, players are usually engaged in defeating enemies for various rewards (currency, equipment, experience, etc.), which typically make the character more powerful.

In pen-and-paper RPGs, a group of roughly three to ten people gather in person to play, sometimes using miniatures to represent the action of the game at certain points. Rulebooks provide the game mechanics (i.e., what can happen in the world and how) and dice are used to determine the outcome of events. Players usually voice-act the speech of their characters. A single participant, called the “dungeon master,” is in charge of controlling all enemies, non-player characters (i.e., characters not being controlled by a player, but rather someone like an inn-keeper or blacksmith that the party of adventurers might encounter in their travels), and the environment. In short, he or she controls all elements of the world that the other players’ characters inhabit.

In MUDs, the rules are programmed into the game, so the need for rulebooks, dice, and a dungeon master is obviated (Bartle, 2004). Players type out the actions of their characters. For example, if a player wants her character named Illuin to say something, she would type “/say how is everyone?” To other players, this would appear as “Illuin says: how is everyone?” If she wanted her character to sit down, she would type something like “/sit” which would appear to other players as “Illuin sits down.” Often different color text is used for actions, vocalizations, and environmental occurrences (“It begins to rain” or “The door is locked”) to make it easy for

players to differentiate between the different kinds of messages that appear in their text windows. Since the game occurs entirely in text, it is up to the players to imagine the action of the game.

As personal computers grew increasingly powerful during the 1990s, it became feasible to visually represent the events of role-playing games via computer graphics. Early efforts such as *Meridian 59* were sometimes referred to as graphical MUDs. The term MMORPG was coined by Richard Garriott to describe his game *Ultima Online*, a fully graphical fantasy role-playing game released in 1997 (Safko & Brake, 2009). The game was a success and followed by two other major releases in 1999: *EverQuest* and *Asheron's Call*. These three titles were the most popular MMORPGs of the late 1990s and were largely responsible for establishing the genre. Despite their positive reception and loyal followings, they still represented a fairly small niche in the video game world—subscription rates for these games peaked in the hundreds of thousands (Geel, 2013).

In late 2004, *World of Warcraft (WoW)* was released and, in the following years, brought the genre to new prominence. Global subscription rates rose steadily from five million within a year of its release to a peak of 12 million in 2009 (Geel, 2013). Currently, there are still seven million subscribers (Karmali, 2015). *WoW* became a household name, a cultural phenomenon, and a subject of much curiosity and concern. *South Park*, famous for having its finger on the pulse of the zeitgeist, released an episode in 2006 about the game titled, “Make Love, Not Warcraft,” which pokes fun at the tedium involved in *WoW* and asks: “What is it all for?” The episode won an Emmy (“*South Park: Awards*,” n.d.). Along with bringing MMORPGs into the mainstream culture, *WoW* has also dominated the MMORPG market, controlling over half of it

for most of the existence of *WoW* (Geel, 2013). Over the course of *WoW*'s ongoing reign, there have been other successful MMORPGs, some of which emulate *WoW*'s successful formula (e.g., *Rift*) and some which deviate considerably from it (e.g., *EVE Online*).

A Brief Description of MMORPGs

In an MMORPG, the player controls a character called an avatar that is situated in the virtual world of the game (Castranova, 2005; Nardi, 2009; Rowlands, 2012). The player progresses through the game by completing quests, killing monsters, and doing other activities, all of which earn the avatar experience points. Most questing takes place in the persistent world of the game, though there are also areas that are set off from the rest of the world, which are referred to as "instances," "dungeons," or "instance dungeons." When a group of players enters a dungeon, an instance of that dungeon is created exclusively for that particular group. Dungeons typically involve a linear progression through an area, dungeon-like or not, that involves fighting enemies along the way. Usually, they culminate with a particularly powerful adversary referred to as a "boss." When the avatar accumulates a certain number of experience points via questing, dungeons, and other activities, he or she "levels up," which earns him or her new abilities and increased "stats" (i.e., the statistics measuring the prowess of the character such as strength, intelligence, dexterity, and so on). Avatars can also become more powerful by accumulating increasingly better "gear," such as weapons and armor. Gear is dropped by slain enemies or otherwise found, bought, or traded for throughout the game. The project of continuously improving one's avatar through leveling up and acquiring gear is central to the design of MMORPGs.

MMORPGs are designated as “massively multiplayer” because the computer-generated world of the game is shared by hundreds of players at once. Players interact with one another in various ways. For instance, two players with no prior contact may realize that they are in the midst of the same solo quest and team up in order to more quickly complete the content by combining their efforts. Most games also have a “looking for group” feature, which helps players find a group for playing content that requires a set number of players, such as dungeons, which typically require five participants. In addition to forming temporary “pick up groups” (PUGs), players establish persistent and organized communities called guilds. Guildmates work together towards common goals, complete group content together, share resources and knowledge about the game, and form lasting social relationships.

Raids—more extensive instances that tend to emphasize the boss fight at the end and require a larger team of players—are typically the most challenging content in MMORPGs. They require a degree of cooperation and organization that can only be achieved by a group of players who have learned how to skillfully coordinate their efforts, much like a sports team. Players who aspire to raid join “hardcore” or “raiding” guilds, which contain one or more raid groups. Raiding guilds usually have a hierarchical rank structure, a formal system for distributing loot, a set schedule of raiding times (often with attendance requirements), and an application process for prospective members. In contrast, “casual” or “social” guilds are often simply a loosely organized group of gamers who want to enjoy the benefits of a social network and a pool of more familiar players to occasionally team up with.

MMORPGs do not have an endpoint, but rather an array of progressively more difficult quests, dungeons, raids, and other endeavors. The vast array of solo and group challenges is always undergoing expansion in an MMORPG that is financially alive and well. Developers typically release small updates every few months and major expansions every one or two years. Unlike most video games, MMORPGs often require that a player pay a subscription fee. A subscription to *WoW*, for example, costs \$15 per month. The constant evolution of these games allows players to continue in the game on an ongoing basis.

Time Commitment of MMORPG Players

Because of the periodic expansions, an MMORPG can potentially be played for years. Additionally, the time-consuming nature of many game activities, such as gathering materials for crafting and leveling up, means that players can spend many hours per week playing. According to one survey-based study, the average number of hours played per week across all MMORPGs is 21.9—about three hours a day. Approximately one in five gamers plays over 30 hours per week, while a small percentage (1.6%) play over sixty hours per week (Yee, 2004). Eighty percent of MMORPG players agree that they have played more than eight hours in one session, which is almost double the rate for non-MMORPG video gamers (Ng & Wiener-Hastings, 2005).

The amount of time people put into MMORPGs has played a role in making them infamous and given them a reputation for being addicting. The term addiction is applied to MMORPGs by mental health professionals, players, and the general population alike. Debates about whether and how the term addiction should be applied to video gaming (Griffiths, 2000, 2005, 2007, 2008; Wood, 2008) and how to distinguish between addiction and benign high

engagement (Charlton & Danforth, 2007) are ongoing. Regardless of whether the construct addiction is applied to MMORPGs, millions of people are spending a great deal of time playing these games. As of 2010, *WoW* players alone had collectively logged 5.93 million *years* of play (McGonigal, 2010)! An informal Google search for “how many hours have you logged playing *WoW*” (the game keeps track) turns up forum posts of players who have logged *hundreds* of *days* of playtime—many people have actually played for several solid years! Although these are outliers, MMORPGs clearly lend themselves to long-term, intensive engagement.

The Goal of this Research

The fact that players spend so much time with MMORPGs provoked my curiosity: What are they up to? What keeps them engaged for such vast amounts of time? What do they find so compelling about the activities in these games? In order to explore these questions, I set out to design a study that would allow me to systematically explore the experiences of players so as to shed light on the ways in which they become and remain engaged in MMORPGs.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

A great deal of the psychological literature on MMORPGs is oriented towards either discerning the features of these games that hook players (Smahel et al., 2008; Choi et al., 2007) or understanding the effects of the games on players (Smyth, 2007; Snodgrass, 2010). Because I am interested in exploring the question of why players spend so much time playing MMORPGs, the former is most relevant to my project. Generally, this body of research is couched in terms of “addiction” from a behavioral perspective or “motivation” (i.e., what are the motivations that MMORPGs satisfy). There are considerable limitations to these approaches, so I have expanded my literature review to include sources outside the field of psychology. Ethnographic, sociological, and other approaches also explore the extensive engagement that these games foster. These investigations often involve more nuance and consideration of the larger cultural context in which MMORPGs and MMORPG players are embedded.

Video Game Addiction Research from a Behavioral Perspective

With the rise of arcades and the introduction of home-gaming consoles in the 1980s, journalists and educators quickly raised the prospect that video games have the potential to foster addiction. Psychologists drew attention to the fact that video games often rely on some of the same behavioral reinforcement mechanisms that can be found in certain casino games, such as slots. Video games typically offer the player a number of different rewards, each of which is meted out concurrently on different reinforcement schedules (King, Delfabbro & Griffiths, 2010; Griffiths, 1991, 1995). For instance, the player may complete a mission assigned by the game, which unlocks more missions, rewarding him or her with new game content; at the very same

moment, the player may also be earning in-game currency, which will allow him or her to purchase new items. One of the principle findings in behavioral research is that the sooner a reward follows a behavior, the more likely that behavior is to be repeated. Video games, much like slot machines, can dispense rewards immediately. Psychologists contend that this may account in part for the “addictive” quality of video games. Similarly, researchers have found that gamblers often interpret “near misses”—situations in which they come very close to winning, but fall short at the last moment—as being nearly identical to successes, which encourage them to continue playing (Griffiths, 1990). Similarly, one can come close in video games to completing a challenge, such as fighting a difficult enemy at the end of a mission, only to die at the last moment. According to this line of thought, the player will not see this as a failure, but as a “near miss,” which motivates him or her to turn around and attempt the mission once again (King et al., 2010).

Although the parallels between video games and casino games provide insight into how a player is reinforced once he or she has become invested in a game, it does not explain how the player got to the point of being invested in the first place. The rewards offered by the game can only be construed as rewards on the assumption that the player has already come to view them as valuable. Under the conditions of a capitalist economy, it is obvious why someone would find that winning \$200 from a slot machine is a reward, since money is a secondary reinforcer. It is less obvious why someone would find that earning 200 virtual gold coins in a video game is a reward—the key question of how it is that the rewards offered by a game become reinforcers in the first place remains unanswered.

Research on Motivations for Play

In another line of inquiry, researchers have attempted to answer the question of why certain people play MMORPGs in terms of their motivations. The supposition is that players, because of their individual dispositions, find certain aspects of the game to be satisfying. Motivation theorists suggest that not all players share the same set of dispositions, and thus different motivations account for their desire to play. The goal of this line of research is to identify the most salient motivations of players.

One of the classic and frequently cited efforts to account for the motivations of players in terms of their dispositions is offered by Bartle (1996), who designed three MUDs in the late 1970s and early 1980s. He indicates that there are four types of people who play MUDs²: achievers (who focus their efforts on achievements such as acquiring expensive or rare items and creating powerful characters), explorers (who enjoy exploring and learning about the world of the game), socializers (who primarily enjoy social interactions with other players), and killers (who take delight in killing the characters of other players). Each type's disposition results in different game activities and priorities. He describes the ways in which the four types interact with one another and suggests that a balance of the types creates a healthy in-game community.

Nick Yee (2007), a researcher who has studied MMORPGs extensively, believes that although a model like Bartle's is on the right track by emphasizing pre-existing player dispositions, he believes that a typology is too rigid to adequately account for the variations of

² Despite this model being about MUD players, the ways of taking up these games discussed by Bartle are all applicable to MMORPGs as well, so his model is cited in MMORPG research.

different players. He offers an empirically-based “components” model instead. Using a factor analysis to statistically examine the results of survey data, Yee found that players of MMORPGs generally had three different motivations:

- **Achievement:** Players who are motivated by achievement are interested in accumulating power and status within the game. They enjoy completing missions and reaping the rewards offered by the game. They often focus on optimizing their avatar’s characteristics and competing with other players.
- **Social:** Players motivated by the social aspects of the game enjoy meeting other players and forming relationships with them. They often work in teams, collaborating with other players in order to complete missions and solve puzzles. Many of these players like to use their in-game relationships as the basis for the formation or continuation of out-of-game relationships.
- **Immersion:** Players who are motivated by immersion like to “lose themselves” in the game. They enjoy exploring new areas, paying attention to the storyline behind the game, and customizing the appearance of their avatar. These players sometimes use the game to distract themselves from “real-life” issues.

Unlike Bartle’s typologies, Yee suggests that achievement, socialization, and immersion should be thought of as three dimensions along which all players vary. Although every player will enjoy achievement to a certain extent, some people will deem it a primary motivation and others will find it to be secondary to other motivations.

Yee and Bartle both contribute frameworks that, in broad terms, help to make sense of what players get out of playing MMORPGs. Problematically however, they “psychologize” these factors by situating them as “internal” features of the player’s mind that exist independently from the game. This conceptual framework does not consider the dynamic exchange taking place

between the gamer and the game, nor does it consider the broader cultural context within which the gamer and the game are situated. No person is invested in creating a level 85 character with top tier gear prior to playing *WoW*—surely the desire for this particular achievement arises out of engagement with the game. And just as surely, the game is a part of our culture. Another issue of contention is that the concrete, day-to-day activities of engagement are deemphasized in such a model. This limitation stems from both the conceptual framework and the methods that are utilized in this line of research.

Approaches from Outside the Field of Psychology

Bonnie Nardi's ethnographic approach. Bonnie Nardi is an ethnographer who studied MMORPGs without any prior exposure to them. As her research tradition dictates, she immersed herself in the “native culture” by playing *WoW* extensively, making the long journey from clueless beginner to fully-fledged raider. The value of Nardi's ethnographic approach is that she has engaged in the daily activities of playing an MMORPG for a prolonged period. Nardi situates her approach in opposition to the empirical methodologies by citing fellow anthropologist Marilyn Strathern:

Ethnography is...the deliberate attempt to generate more data than the researcher is aware of at the time of collection...Rather than devising research protocols that will purify the data in advance of analysis, the anthropologist embarks on a participatory exercise which yields materials for which analytic protocols are often devised after the fact. (2004; as cited in Nardi, 2012, p. 28).

Thus, when Nardi began her fieldwork, she did not start with a narrowly focused question or hypothesis. Her goal was simply to participate in the culture and gather as much data as she

could. In her analysis, she draws extensively on her own play to provide the reader with concrete descriptions of the experience of engagement, such as this excerpt from a description of a typical day of playing *WoW*:

5:30 p.m. Time for a raid. It's early in the evening for me, but many of the people in the guild are East Coast, so we have to get moving before it's too late for them. The raid won't start until 6:00, but "invites" go out 30 minutes in advance. To make sure I get a spot in the raid, I log in promptly.

I still have fifteen minutes before the raid. I fly to Terrokar Forest and locate some good fishing spots. In a few minutes, I have lots of the Golden Darters needed for the Golden Fish Sticks buff. I cook them up and feel prepared for the raid. (p. 9)

She also uses excerpts from chat logs, material from guild websites, and other game-related content to substantiate her observations and analysis.

Nardi begins her analysis with the question "why do players enjoy *WoW* so much?"—similar to the question that drew me to study MMORPGs. She rejects the idea that *WoW* is nothing more than an expertly designed reinforcement system that hooks players. Instead, she draws on John Dewey's concept of active aesthetic experience to account for the compelling experience of play. According to Nardi, Dewey "formulated aesthetic experience as participatory engagement in activity that is organized into distinctive stages and in which a satisfying completion or end point of actions which are themselves pleasurable" (p. 48). Thus, both the means of arriving at a goal and the culmination are experienced as pleasurable. Dewey cites a craftsman practicing his craft as an example of lively engagement with one's surroundings. The satisfaction of the crafting process and the final result are inextricable:

An engraver, painter, or writer is in process at every stage of completing his work. He must at each point retain and sum up what has gone before as a whole and with reference to the whole to come...The series of doings in the rhythm of experience give variety and movement; they save the work from monotony and useless repetitions. (Dewey, as cited in Nardi, p. 49)

Nardi emphasizes the fact that both the “means” and the “ends” are equally important in activity theory. Activities that are taken up only for the pleasure involved in the completion or end result of the activity do not qualify as active aesthetic experience. In such cases, the “end” is not a satisfying “culmination” of engaging activity, but rather a relieving “cessation” of an unsatisfying activity.

Nardi notes that Dewey formulated his model of active aesthetic experience in response to the toil, monotony, and mechanization of modern society. In Dewey’s view, aesthetics have been removed from everyday life and sequestered into fine arts museums only to be passively consumed. Rote industrial labor is a prime example of an activity that is done only for the “ends” such as a wage. In such cases, one would rather acquire the ends without having to endure the means. By contrast, in active aesthetic experience, the means are satisfying and enhance the value of the ends.

According to Dewey’s theory, no activity is inherently aesthetic, but Nardi believes that MMORPGs are well-suited to offering players active aesthetic experiences, which arguably accounts for their popularity. She asserts that MMORPGs are composed of varied and often enjoyable activities that culminate in a satisfying reward. One example she provides is questing in order to increase a character’s level. She argues that quests are varied activities that eventually

culminate in a satisfying endpoint: leveling up. Assuming that a player enjoys the activities of questing, the conditions for active aesthetic engagement have been met.

According to another line of thinking, Nardi considers the engagement involved in *WoW* in terms of both work and play. Nardi draws extensively on Johan Huizinga's (1950) classic treatise on the nature of play, and thus, I will briefly touch on this analysis prior to discussing Nardi's position. Huizinga submits that play is set apart from the demands of "real-life"—a game is not played for any reason that is reducible to anything outside of itself. A child throws a ball against a wall so it will bounce back, hopefully to be caught, not for some purpose that underlies or transcends the play itself. Further, play is voluntary; something that is forced on a person cannot be considered play. However, Huizinga counters any position that would assume that play is not serious. Huizinga notes that often play is taken up with the utmost of seriousness. Gadamer (2004), who also grapples with the nature of play, goes a step further and proposes that play *requires* seriousness—otherwise play falls short of being "wholly play" (p. 103). Through seriousness, one becomes absorbed into the world of play. The boundary between the world of reality and the world of play is referred to as the "magic circle." Playing a game, then, can be thought of as entering a particular ordering set apart from regular life. Order is a critical feature of games. In the world of a game, things are more elegantly conceived than the everyday world, owing to implicit or explicit rules and tasks of the game. This act of stepping aside from one's normal attitude and comportment allows the player to become absorbed in the rhythm of the game world. An element of tension or chanciness is another feature of play and games; striving to end that tension energizes the play. Ending a tension could mean catching a ball, solving a

puzzle, or beating an opponent at a card game. It is in this striving that the player exerts his skill and prowess, hoping to achieve the excellence for which the ordering of the game calls.

While playing *WoW*, Nardi noticed that the concepts of work and play frequently appeared in statements made by guildmates. At some times, players sharply contrasted the unsatisfying drudgery of their regular jobs with their satisfying engagement in *WoW* while at other times, they characterized certain game activities as work. Nardi focuses on farming or grinding, which are repetitive activities undertaken to earn experience, currency, or other valuable items. At first, she was surprised by how readily and uncomplainingly players engaged in such monotonous activities, though eventually came to realize that “from the player’s point of view, farming in *World of Warcraft* was a logical activity undertaken for well-defined ends” (p. 111). Drawing on Huizinga’s characteristics of play, she proposes that farming is not work, and when taken up voluntarily and within the “magic circle” of play, it is a transformation of everyday experiences of work into something more satisfying:

Farming in *World of Warcraft* transformed the pervasive, familiar cultural experience of boredom—which we all undergo, to varying degrees, in school and at work—to one with positive valences. It allowed players to confront anxieties about boredom and recast and reshape them in a context where they were played out and resolved differently than in ordinary life. In the everyday world, boredom is frequently an isolating, frustrating experience. The end result of perseverance in sticking to necessary but boring activities is too often an inadequate paycheck or report card or just another load of laundry. The culmination of farming in *World of Warcraft*, on the other hand, yielded a meaningful, exciting reward. A new piece of gear or an enchantment emerged as the product of the tedium, advancing a player in the game and enabling measurable better performance. (And it might be sparkly, too!) The reward directly addressed a player’s object of

performative excellence and continual striving to “improve yourself,” as Mark [a fellow player] put it. (p. 113)

Nardi’s analysis puts a decidedly positive spin on work-like activities in *WoW*. As we shall see in the following section, not all share her perspective that MMORPGs liberate players from the drudgery of the modern workplace.

Timothy Rowlands’s semiotic approach. Timothy Rowlands, whose work spans sociology, anthropology, communications, cultural studies and new media studies, authored another substantial qualitative work on MMORPGs called *Video Game Worlds: Working at Play in the Culture of EverQuest* (2012). Rowlands played *EverQuest* for several years as a “regular” player and then, after deciding to study it academically, for another two years as a participant observer. His analysis is grounded in his extensive experiences in the game, which he describes in detail. He also draws on informal interviews and other interactions that he had with an in-game friend who was a participant of the hardcore raiding culture of *EverQuest* (a culture which Rowlands never gained fully entry to).

While Nardi’s work leans in the direction of a hermeneutics of faith, Rowlands’ analysis of the culture of *EverQuest* leans towards a hermeneutics of suspicion (Ricoeur, 1970). He utilizes semiotics to “render the underlying logic” of the culture of *EverQuest* visible (p. 8). By studying the way gamers talk and act, and therefore think, he attempts to uncover the taken for granted “natural attitude” that they adhere to and reproduce. He notes that MMORPGs “emerged from a rich genealogy of virtual worlds” which allowed for freeform identity play (cf. Turkle, 1994), yet that is hardly the way they have typically been utilized. Instead, he observed that the activities of gamers in *EverQuest* were “relatively consistent, routine, and surprisingly

homogenous across the population” (p. 21). In short, activities of gamers had become institutionalized. Rowlands wondered why a game that had promised to offer an open space for play had become such a limited one.

At the center of Rowlands’s analysis of the institutionally prescribed approach to *EverQuest* is the “Holy Trinity camp group”—a practice to which he refers as the “dominant strategy.” The holy trinity is a combination of three complementary character roles: healer, tank, and DPS (short for “damage per second,” indicating a character class that has a high DPS and therefore excels at dealing damage to enemies). A group with the right balance of these three roles is optimized for dispatching MOBs³. “Camping” involves staking out a favorable location for repeatedly killing MOBs. The MOBs are “pulled” from the surrounding area to the camp where they are killed by the group. The tanks are responsible for damage mitigation, which usually involves absorbing the brunt of the attacks by MOBs. Healers focus on keeping the members of the group alive, especially the tanks, since they should be the ones who are being attacked. The DPS characters kill the MOBs. This arrangement is optimized for gaining experience and gold in the least amount of time and at the cost of novel experiences and spontaneity. Players often spend hours killing the same few kinds of enemies over and over again on the same patch of virtual ground. Rowlands provides an extended and illuminating description of a session of play using the Holy Trinity camp group strategy that indicates just how repetitive and work-like this activity is. In addition to describing how the dominant strategy works in

³ MOB, short for “mobile,” is a term carried over from MUDs that is used to designate the various enemies that populate the world of the game.

practice, Rowlands examines how veterans train new players to follow it. The result of their indoctrination is that it becomes difficult for new players to even imagine playing any other way.

The significance of the dominant strategy is that its internal logic consists of “a set of beliefs, orientations, and dispositions” that become natural, prereflexive, and commonsense to the gamer (p. 18). Thus, the dominant strategy profoundly affects the way players engage with and experience the game. Rowlands argues that at the core of the dominant strategy is an emphasis on the ends over the means: “players eschew the process, yearning instead of the markers of success (levels, alternative advancement points, and gear)” (p. 51). Within this mode of engagement, “everything in the world [including other players]...simply becomes a means to an end defined in terms of rational, individualistic (market-based), self-interest” (p. 19). For example, enemy monsters are not considered in terms of their appearance, their mythical qualities, or their place within the world and narrative of the game, but instead for how difficult they will be able to kill and the rewards yielded for doing so. This pervasive orientation to MMORPGs is “an instrumental form of gaming in which play has been colonized, become work-like, or it has actually become work” (p. 19).

Finally, Rowlands examines how the underlying logic of the dominant strategy and the game content (including the lore, the narratives embedded in quests, and the programming of the game) reproduces capitalism, rationalism, colonialism, and other aspects of modernity. Thus, rather than functioning as an alternate world where players can experiment with different ways of being within the magic circle of play (as the medieval fantasy theme suggests they might), *EverQuest* serves as a new “corner of the universe into which we seamlessly extend our labor

and with it our instrumentality and emphasis on efficiency, optimization, and technique” (p. 17). Rowlands contends that, “simply put, MMOs are everyday spaces for their users” and that MMOROGs are “characterized by the natural attitude because they become an extension of the working reality” (pp. 84-85). Thus, Rowlands’s analysis contrasts with Nardi’s, which conceptualizes the activities of MMORPGs as playful re-workings of everyday life in the modern world.

Scott Rettberg’s cultural critique. Scott Rettberg (2011), a researcher in the field of digital culture, also used his own experience of playing *WoW* extensively as data to inform his research. Like Nardi and Rowlands, he is struck by the abundance of work-like activities in *WoW* and other MMORPGs, noting that “the majority of the play involved in advancing a *World of Warcraft* character is mindless and repetitive to the extent that it verges on Taylorism. There is an assembly-line mentality to many of the quests, many of which involve killing a staggering number of a certain type of beast or enemy (grinding), over and over again” (p. 30). His analysis attempts to make sense of why players are willing to work so hard at a game. He finds that it is not just that players are willing, but that the work involved is at the heart of what makes playing *WoW* compelling. His analysis attributes the success of *WoW* to its ability to provide a “convincing and detailed simulacrum of the process of becoming successful in capitalist societies....a capitalist fairytale in which anyone who works hard and strives enough can rise through society’s ranks and acquire great wealth” (p. 20). Thus, players are engaging in a game of capitalism—a game suffused with the same ethos, methods, and ways of seeing the world that capitalism entails. He argues that such games provide an excellent education on not only “know how” related to capitalism but also on “how to be” a good capitalist. In addition to the work that

the quests and other activities entail, he points out that some of the game content also contains implicit capitalist messages. For instance, the very first quest for players with orc characters is waking up peons who are sleeping on the job by whacking them with a blackjack! Paradoxically, then, the escape from the demands of regular life that MMORPGs promise is instead “a second professional life, a world of work” (p. 26). Rettberg believes that engaging in work during leisure time appeals to the unconscious Protestant work ethic that says play is evil and work is good. He states that: “When play feels like labor, and one toils to achieve objectives, play does not feel like a waste of time” (p. 32). Thus, MMORPGs offer the experience to players of feeling productive, and therefore virtuous.

David Golumbia’s philosophically-informed critique. David Golumbia (2009) also questions whether video games such as *WoW* (which he played) are, in fact, games that involve play. He reflects that “It seems clear that we call these programs ‘games’ because of the intense feelings of pleasure experienced by players when we engage with them and because they appear on the surface not to be involved in the manipulation of objects with physical-world consequences. On reflection, neither of these facts proves very much” (p. 193). To provide a more sophisticated analysis, Golumbia reviews various philosophical perspectives on the nature of play. Based on these conceptions of play, he concludes that:

It is not clear, on almost any score, why it might be legitimate to call the activity that one undertakes inside of *WoW* and other MMORPGs “play.” It is not loose or unstructured; it is not without consequence; it does not admit of significant breaking of the rules or their suspension for social purposes; and an extensive part of the actual activity one undertakes there is extremely goal-directed and prescribed, in many ways the opposite of what we have heretofore called play. (p. 201).

Although play is possible in these spaces, MMORPGs do little to facilitate it; players are restricted by a “surprisingly rigid, uncompromising, and even authoritarian” (p. 188) range of possible actions (which are mostly violent), activities (which are usually repetitive), and goals (which are mostly economic).

Golumbia continues his analysis by investigating what it is that is pleasurable about MMORPGs and other video games if they do not facilitate play. In a similar vein as Rowlands and Rettberg, he sees MMORPGs as extensions of the modernist view of the world into new spaces. He contends that “If they simulate anything directly,” these “games simulate our own relation to capital and to the people who must be exploited and used up for capital to do its work” (p. 194). Golumbia characterizes the desire that spurs players to do the tasks needed to level up and acquire better gear in terms of Nietzsche’s concept of lust for power. He asserts that “these games turn on an almost pure lust for power: they repetitively enact the accrual of more and more power to a central, perceiving subject, with the rest of the world reduced to objects to be killed or consumed” (p. 189). Golumbia is, of course, referring to the fact that the primary action that players can undertake is to kill enemies and that the main motivator is economic gain, which is a gain in power.

Golumbia also argues that the concrete activities of the game—questing, farming, gathering materials—are similar to the computer-mediated tasks of our present-day workforce. He muses that,

Surely there is little to separate standing in front of a copper vein with a simulated axe picking up pieces of metal ore, or standing in front of a cooking fire with “raw clams,”

and then “cooking” them, from any number of other computer-based activities such as data entry, that we would readily recognize not as play but as work. (p. 191)

He considers how the computerized nature of such work—whether in a MMORPG or in the workplace—offers the worker “distinct and palpable feelings of pleasure” that are “often of a type relating to some kind of algorithmic completeness, a ‘snapping’ sense that one has completed, with digital certainty, a task” (p. 191). MMORPGs offer a potent version of this kind of pleasure to users through tasks that are discreet, well-bounded, attainable, and can be achieved with rational certainty—all features that enhance the experience that Golumbia describes. Thus, “what seems to be ‘entertainment’ in many ways simply replicates and simulates the precise world of employment and movements of capital that do, in fact, define much of the world in which we engage as Western adults” (p. 197).

Summary

All of the research detailed in this chapter seeks to understand the question of why so many players find MMORPGs engaging. This research also, in one way or another, indicates that the systems of reward that are woven into the fabric of these games are central to the answer. However, the question of why these rewards, structured as they are, are so enticing is open to debate. Nardi indicates that *WoW* and other successful MMORPGs are designed in such a way that fosters active aesthetic experience—a rhythm of goal-directed activity that ends with a satisfying culmination. Rowlands, Rettberg, and Golumbia, on the other hand, believe that the activities of MMORPGs are better characterized as work than as play, and that the experience of being successful in an extension of our modernist, capitalist world is the enticing experience that is offered.

Chapter 3: Methodology and Research Procedures

Methodology

In preparation for conducting this research, I spent about 300 hours playing *Rift*, a game that is similar to *WoW*. Though this immersion familiarized me with the ins and outs of an MMORPG, I certainly didn't play for long enough to use my experience as the primary data for this study. Thus, I conducted interviews with a sample of dedicated, long-term players. Gathering data from participants rather than utilizing my own experiences as a participant-observer sets my study apart from, and thereby expands on, the contributions of Nardi (2010), Rowlands (2012), Rettberg (2011), and Golumbia (2009). However, having played an MMORPG provided me with increased access to the experiences of my participants, given my familiarity with MMORPGs.

This project aspires to elucidate the lived experience of playing an MMORPG, so as to understand what it is that players find engaging in these games. Thus, I sought a method of analysis well suited to: (1) identifying and describing salient experiences that illuminate the practice of playing an MMORPG, and (2) exploring the practices, attitudes, and understandings that constitute these experiences. In other words, my method was selected on the grounds that it would serve to reveal both the conscious understandings of explicit experiences deemed important by players, as well as the implicit contexts or "horizons of meaning" that lie outside of, yet constitute, the conscious experiences of play. My rationale for giving credence to both explicit and implicit meanings follows from a presupposition that people are neither entirely self-transparent nor entirely self-obscure (Walsh & Koelsch, 2012).

A phenomenological approach is well-suited to the goals I have outlined. As Finlay (2009) indicates, the general consensus among phenomenological researchers is that phenomenology “aims for fresh, complex, rich description of a phenomenon as it is concretely lived” (p. 1). Edmund Husserl (1962) first developed phenomenology as a method of setting aside presuppositions and theoretical understandings in order to freshly appreciate the phenomena of experience as they appear in consciousness. Martin Heidegger (1962) expanded Husserl’s original project by demonstrating that phenomena appear or reveal themselves through the horizons of meaning that constitute them. According to Heidegger, we are fundamentally embedded in worlds of meanings that extend beyond our own individual consciousnesses.

Finlay’s (2009) systematic consideration of the varying emphases within the wide field of phenomenological methods proved to be a helpful guide in choosing a method that was consistent with my goals. One dimension that was especially pertinent to my study is the normative versus ideographic continuum. On the normative end, approaches like Giorgi’s (1975) Empirical Phenomenological Approach aim to discover “essences” that structure the experience of all participants, and by extension, all members of the population of study. The intended outcome of this method is a description of a general structure of the phenomenon in question. Though normative approaches are valuable, I believe that for my objective of exploring the experiences of play, such an approach would go too far in terms of smoothing over the complexity, impact, and groundedness of individual experiences. In contrast, an ideographic approach would be oriented to developing rich descriptions of unique experiences. Since the goal of my research is to dwell in the particular, I sought a method of analysis that makes ample room for individual experiences to be described on their own terms before moving to a general

account. Jonathan Smith's Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is a method that tends towards the ideographic end of the continuum. Smith et al. (2009) indicate that IPA aims at "offering detailed, nuanced analyses of *particular* instances of lived experience" (p. 37) and that, "In a good IPA study, it should be possible to parse the account for both shared themes, and for the distinctive voices and variations in those themes" (p. 38). These priorities are well-suited to the goals of my research, and consequently I selected IPA as my method of analysis.

IPA also provides a balance between appreciating and describing the conscious accounts of participants and looking beyond them to the constitutive dimensions of the phenomenon in question. Smith et al. use the phrase "double hermeneutic" to indicate that IPA researchers use both the hermeneutic of faith and a hermeneutic of "questioning" to understand the experiences of participants. As such, IPA does not position the participant as entirely aware or entirely unaware of the meanings of his or her experience. Following this logic, I will situate myself as both trying to understand and re-present my participants' own understandings of their play, as well as attempting to trace the implicit, taken-for-granted dimensions of their experience from my vantage point as a researcher, phenomenologist, and psychologist. Thus, my position as an outsider, despite all of the associated limitations that such a position entails, is a condition for new understandings to emerge.

As a qualitative researcher, I will prioritize transparency about the process by which I gathered and analyzed my data, so that readers have a clear view of the evidence for my findings (Walsh, 2012). Therefore, I have presented my work in such a way that maximizes the potential to discern how my experiences and thoughts steered my research in certain directions, thus

situating my findings within the context of my particular approach (Walsh, 1995). Being explicit about my process should also provide readers with an accurate sense of the limitations of my work (Walsh, 2003).

Research Procedures

Preliminary steps. In the service of making my preconceptions of MMORPGs as explicit as possible—to myself and to my readers—I followed Walsh’s (1995) suggestion to write an “acknowledgement of a priori assumptions” (p. 341) as the first step of my research. The process of writing out my preconceptions allowed me to explore them and to bring them into the foreground of my awareness. It also provided me with a record that I could refer to throughout my research process, thereby facilitating reflexivity. Additionally, the inclusion of the preliminary self-analysis in chapter 4 allows readers to appreciate the particular viewpoint that I brought to the research.

Next, I submitted a protocol to Duquesne University’s Institutional Review Board in order to attain approval to conduct research that involved human subjects. This submission documented the way I planned to recruit participants, obtain their informed consent, and protect their anonymity, and it addressed other considerations related to participants’ rights as research subjects. Duquesne University’s IRB approved my proposal on August 8th, 2013.

Participant recruitment. I sought participants through several settings, including online forums, local gaming stores, and a large online community. I posted invitations on online forums dedicated to MMORPGs, which did not yield any participants. I also posted flyers in two local gaming stores; one of my participants responded to one of these flyers. After these methods

failed to generate enough responses, I turned to Reddit, which is a large online community that is divided into “subreddits,” including one for Pittsburgh. Posting on the Pittsburgh subreddit allowed me to easily reach a large number of local people. I recruited four additional participants through this channel. In my printed and online postings, I indicated the following: (1) the purpose of the study is to explore the day-to-day experience of playing an MMORPG, (2) that I would interview the participant where they normally play, (3) that the interview would be audio-recorded, and 4) the interview would last for no more than two and a half hours, one hour of which I would watch them play. I also stipulated that in order to participate, the individual must meet the following criteria: (1) he or she must be 18 years old, (2) he or she must have played a prototypical MMORPG (e.g., *WoW*, *EverQuest*, *Rift*, *Guild Wars 2*) for at least 15 hours a week and for at least one year, and (3) he or she must live in the greater Pittsburgh area. See Appendix 1 and 2 for the full text of the printed and online postings.

Data collection. The goal of each interview was to gather data on each participant’s daily engagement with the game and what he or she finds to be compelling and worthwhile about playing. For the first hour of each interview, I only talked with the participant. During the second hour, I asked him or her to log into the game and play while we continued the conversation. The purpose of this “gaming session” was for me to get as close as possible to the lived, ready-to-hand experience of playing. Each participant determined individually what he or she felt was most important to show me during the gaming session.

To help guide my questions during both phases of the interview, I created a list of content areas that I believed were relevant to the goals of my research. These content areas are as follows:

- Brief history of video game play with a focus on MMORPG play
- Whether MMORPGs are preferred over other video game or other entertainments
- Current game being played, guild affiliation
- Character(s)'s setup, equipment, backstory, etc.
- In-game relationships
- Play schedule, the way that gaming fits in with rest of life
- High points/low points of gaming career
- Routine activities, how game time is spent and why
- Aspirations and hopes, what the activities are allowing player to build towards

By attempting to cover this list of content areas in each interview, I hoped to gather similar sets of data from each participant so that I could consider similarities and differences during the analysis. Of course, I was also interested in the unique nuance of participants' perspectives that may have been outside my preconceived notions of important content areas, so during the interviews I followed their leads whenever possible. Usually, my participants would cover most of these content areas without prompting. They also discussed things I would not have known to ask about and may not have emerged had I used a more structured approach to interviewing.

After each interview, I transcribed the interview from the recording and then emailed a copy of the transcript to the respective interviewee, asking him or her to review it and add anything that came to mind by annotating the text or writing out additional thoughts in an email. This process of having participants review their data and contribute their additional perspectives

is referred to as a member check. Three of the five participants said that they didn't have anything to add to the transcript, while the other two submitted brief commentaries on what they had said during their interviews.

Data analysis. After the member check, I began the process of analyzing the data through IPA. I followed the step-by-step procedure described by Smith et al. (2009), which is summarized in the remainder of this section. Steps one through four are applied to each transcript in turn. Step five accounts for the transition from one transcript to another. Step six involves considering all of the data at once.

The purpose of the first step, "Reading and Re-reading," is to become immersed in the data and focus one's attention on the participant's life-world. Smith et al. recommend repeatedly listening to the interview and reading the transcript. They also suggest annotating initial impressions the first time through and then setting them aside, since initial connections can be overwhelming and make it difficult to dwell with the data in a receptive way.

The second step, "Initial Noting," involves reading through the transcript and recording exploratory notes. Smith et al. recommend first focusing attention on the "participant's explicit meaning," (p. 83) which will involve the things that are important to them and their meanings. From these descriptive comments, it becomes possible to make additional interpretive notes, considering context, language, and patterns in the data. Smith et al. emphasize that this stage is a *process* of engaging the data in detail and "exploring different avenues of meaning" (p. 91). I found that it was easiest to undertake this phase by using the comment feature in Microsoft Word, since it allowed me to link the comments to a particular point in the transcript.

In the third step, “Developing Emergent Themes,” the goal is to gather the initial notes into more concise groupings while maintaining complexity and fidelity: “Whilst initial notes feel very loose, open, and contingent, emergent themes should feel like they have captured and reflect an understanding” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 92). In this phase, I worked closely with my initial notes and the transcript, reflecting on the content and thereby arriving at more focused meanings. There was a significant interpretive dimension to this process, since I was using my own understandings of the data to formulate the emergent themes. I created a column alongside my transcript for the themes, which were usually demarcated by a few words or a brief phrase. This arrangement made it possible for the initial notes, emergent themes, and transcript to be simultaneously visible on my screen and in the same document.

The goal of step four, “Searching for Connections Across Emergent Themes,” entails “drawing together the emergent themes and producing a structure which allows you to point to all of the most interesting and important aspects of your participant’s account” (p. 96). This structure is composed of “final” themes that account for the emerging themes. The authors suggest finding a method that allows the researcher to freely experiment with different possible arrangements of themes. I found that what worked best for me was having all of the emergent themes in one Word document, which allowed me to easily arrange and rearrange them into different clusters by using the copy and paste functions. This process had an organic quality; groupings would split into multiple groupings, be absorbed into one another, disintegrate, and so on. Because I was immersed in the data after arriving at a list of themes, I decided to document the themes for each participant (which I refer to as “individual themes”) before moving on to the

next transcript. The writing process proved to be an extension of my initial efforts to arrive at themes, since I continued to refine them during the time that I recorded individual themes.

The fifth step, “Moving to the Next Case,” involves transitioning from one interview transcript to the next. I prioritized attempting to appreciate the way the analysis of the previous transcript influenced preconceptions, allowing me to be aware of how my mindset influenced the next analysis. Since I wrote up the individual themes for each participant prior to moving onto the next interview, I had a substantial record of how I ended up thinking about the data. When analyzing subsequent interviews, I would sometimes notice that I was gravitating towards similar themes, prompting me to consider the validity of that theme in light of the new data.

Once I had analyzed each interview, I moved on to step six: “Looking for Patterns Across Cases.” As the name suggests, this is the point where the researcher investigates connections in the themes developed for each interview. In my across-interview analysis, I wanted to account for both convergences and variations. To do so, I compared the individual themes for each participant and developed a new set of shared themes, which generally required creating themes with broader meanings in order to accommodate similar individual themes. I also noted the individual themes that were unique to each participant. To take the analysis to a more interpretive level, I also created a single, super-ordinate theme that tied many subordinate themes together and addressed the orienting question of the research: how do participants engage and remain engaged with playing their MMORPG?

Chapter 4: Preliminary Self-Analysis

Pre-Research Impressions of MMORPGs

I first became aware of the MMORPG genre around the year 2000 when I was 16 years old. At the time, I played PC games regularly (mostly real-time strategy and first-person shooters) and was subscribed to PC Accelerator magazine, which was composed of PC game and hardware reviews. I remember occasionally coming across references to *EverQuest*, which was portrayed as an uncannily addicting game and jokingly referred to as “EverCrack.”⁴ Thus, the association between addiction and MMORPGs was embedded in my first exposure to the genre. I also vaguely recall reading that one had to spend lots of time killing snakes and rats before one’s character was strong enough to fight respectable enemies. Needless to say, I wasn’t enticed by these reports, nor was I drawn to online games in general. I liked the experience of being privately immersed in another world that single-player games provided. I found that the presence of other people in online games diminished this sense of immersion.

It wasn’t until 2006 that I actually saw an MMORPG being played when a friend’s boyfriend showed me *WoW* on his laptop at the college coffee shop, which provided me with a sense of the graphics and interface that is characteristic of these games. After this brief encounter with *WoW*, I would occasionally read things about MMORPGs in the popular media. These reports almost always referenced their addictiveness. Consequently, my impression was further

⁴*World of Warcraft* has likewise been referred to as “World of Warcrack.”

solidified that *EverQuest*, *WoW*, and other MMORPGs were played excessively by hardcore gamers.

My Gaming History

As I look back on my introduction to MMORPGs, I am actually surprised that I wasn't more interested in them since I have always gravitated towards both gaming and the fantasy genre. Since my childhood, I have enjoyed fantasy literature such as *Lord of the Rings*. I have also played many video and non-video games set in fantasy worlds including the popular collectable card game *Magic: The Gathering*, real-time and turn-based strategy PC games, and a host of miniature-based tabletop games published by Games Workshop, most extensively *Warhammer: The Game of Fantasy Battles*.

Even more closely related to MMORPGs, I played a pencil-and-paper role-playing game a few times in middle school and thoroughly enjoyed it. Besides the fun of being with my friends and collectively imagining and playing out the heroic endeavors of our characters, I was excited by the anticipation of my character—a human named Brutus—becoming increasingly powerful. He began as a lowly bodyguard, with nothing but a few skills, a leather jack, and a set of trusty knuckledusters. I remember looking through the various careers in the rulebook and seeing that if Brutus gained enough experience points by completing quests, he could spend them to progress into new careers and gain new skills. He could also acquire improved weapons and armor. I can distinctly remember pondering the various career choices in my mind, building excitement about the possibility of Brutus eventually becoming a freelance knight or a judicial champion. Unfortunately, we weren't able to keep playing for logistical reasons and poor Brutus has

remained a lowly bodyguard forever. Despite having only played a few times, I was left with an understanding of the enthusiasm associated with progressively improving a character.

My Academic Interest in MMORPGs

During my first year in the Ph.D. program at Duquesne University, I was required to choose a research topic for the “Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods” class. At the time, I was enthusiastically involved in my own hobby: *Warhammer*, which involves collecting and painting an army of fantasy miniatures and then pitting it against an opponent’s army in a strategic battle. It was clear to me that there were some superficial similarities between my own hobby and MMORPG gaming. Both share the fantasy setting and are strategy-oriented games. Both tend to involve a degree of ongoing involvement and dedication. Both require painstakingly cultivating something: in *Warhammer*, one’s army of miniatures; in MMORPGs, one’s avatar.

My awareness that my own hobby shared some features with MMORPGs was difficult to reconcile with the lack of appeal these games held for me. In fact, I looked down on MMORPGs in a manner that reflected the usual negative stereotypes. I couldn’t understand what was compelling about them. The combination of failing to grasp the appeal of MMORPGs while being engaged with my own, apparently similar, hobby stoked my curiosity about these games. Just as I did not consider spending hundreds of hours to paint an army of miniatures to be a waste of time, surely the legions of MMORPG players felt the same way about their time-consuming pursuits. Just as I could describe the many reasons I found *Warhammer* to be an engaging and worthwhile way to spend my time, undoubtedly MMORPG players had their own reasons for playing their games. And just as I could go on and on about the complexities and

nuances of my hobby, I am sure they could do the same for theirs. Thus, tabletop gaming with *Warhammer* provided an empathic bridge that made me want to learn more about the world of MMORPGs rather than continue to base my judgments on stereotypes. Thus, I chose the experience of playing MMORPGs as my research topic for the “Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods” class and have continued researching it since.

Experiences in the World of *Rift*

In a subsequent research class, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork on MMORPGs, which primarily consisted of playing one myself. In line with the purposes of my research, I wanted to play an MMORPG that was representative of the genre. However, I also wanted to take my own preferences into account, since a native player would do the same. On account of its long-standing popularity, *WoW* was an obvious candidate, but its cartoonish graphics were unappealing to me. *Rift*, a new fantasy MMORPG, was the next game I seriously considered. Reviews indicated that *Rift* was not an innovative game, but rather one that effectively combined the tried-and-true features of its predecessors, especially *WoW*. Additionally, it had realistic graphics and a darker theme, both of which appealed to my aesthetic predilections. Thus, *Rift* suited my research requirements and personal preferences, so I purchased a subscription and downloaded the game!

The next step was creating an avatar. In *Rift*, one’s avatar could belong to one of two factions, each comprised of three races each. There were also four broad classes: warrior, mage, rogue, and cleric. Each class consists of eight subclasses or “souls” (a term related to the metaphysics of the fantasy world of *Rift*), but these are not selected during character creation and

can be changed throughout the game. The faction, race, and class cannot be changed, however, so I would be stuck with whatever choice I made unless I wanted to start over with a new character. In addition to these functional choices, the game also includes the ability to adjust many elements of the avatar's appearance, such as height, build, hairstyle, makeup, tattoos, and facial features. I experimented with several possibilities and eventually decided on a human warrior who looked like a rugged version of Matthew McConaughey. Lastly, I had to name my character. After some failed attempts at making something up myself, I pulled out my copy of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Silmarillion*, looked through the name index, and settled on "Galdor."

Once I had finished the character creation process, Galdor took to the screen for the first time with nothing but a short sword and a shield. The game began in a large stone sanctuary populated by angelic figures that corresponded to each "soul" or subclass. By talking to them, I was able to select the three souls that I wanted Galdor to embody. I chose Champion (heroic slayers who wield massive weapons), Paragon (deft martial artists who fight with a weapon in each hand), and Riftblade (warriors who infuse their attacks with magic). Functionally speaking, each soul had its own pool of abilities from which Galdor could choose his upgrades. My intention was to focus primarily on the Champion skill set since I imagined Galdor as wielding a large two-handed weapon and having a brute force-oriented approach to fighting.

After making my selections, it was time to step out of the sanctuary and into the fray! There was an ongoing battle in which NPC (non-player characters) soldiers, along with a few other new players like me, were facing off against skeletal fighters against a backdrop of dreary skies and gnarled trees. It wasn't long before I was assigned my first handful of quests, all of

which involved killing a certain number of this or that variety of the undead enemies on the battlefield. I had only two attack abilities, so dispatching my enemies was just a matter of selecting them with my mouse and then clicking one of my two ability buttons several times. These particular MOBs weren't strong enough to put Galdor in danger of dying, so killing them to gain experience points was straightforward and without risk. After repeatedly killing enemies for about 20 minutes, I leveled up for the first time. This resulted in the increase of my basic statistics (strength, constitution, and so on) and the acquisition of a skill point, which could be spent on one of my three skill trees. I used it to gain the ability "Bull Rush," which let Galdor charge over a great distance to make an initial strike on an enemy. In addition to accumulating experience points, I was also looting gold and items from my slain enemies. Not long after leveling up, I acquired a hefty, ancient-looking two-handed sword, which I equipped in place of my short sword and shield. Once I had finished all of my quests, I decided it was time to move on to the next area by following the only available road.

Once I crossed the threshold into the new area, everything the environment changed dramatically, including the scenery, the color of the sky, and the music. In contrast to the stark, war-torn landscape of the starting area, the new zone was a lush forest called Silverwood. I savored walking down the road and taking everything in—it did feel like I was in a "world." Eventually, I happened upon a cluster of NPCs who assigned me a new set of quests, purchased my excess gear, and sold me a few basic items such as healing potions.

As I continued playing, I found that quests almost always involved either killing MOBs or gathering items. In the latter instance, the items would either be carried by MOBs (meaning

the MOBs would have to be killed in order to acquire the item) or essentially sitting on the ground in a given area. Another less common variant is a delivery quest, where an item would need to be brought from one NPC to another. Quests were almost always assigned by NPCs; a NPC who had a quest to assign was indicated by an exclamation point over his or her head. Clicking on a NPC with a quest to offer resulted in a window popping up with various pieces of information related to the quest. To illustrate an instance of how the information is delivered, I will use the quest “Beckoning of the Blessing” as an example. First, there would be the dialogue from the NPC—essentially the communication from the NPC to my character in the game, which in this case was: “The Aelfwar have turned from the gods. In their fervor, they have allowed a seed of disease to sprout within them, staining all they touch. My shrines have become corrupted, and as Hylas’s power grows, my light in these woods dwindles.” Accompanying the dialogue would be a short description that summed up the quest in terms of concrete objectives: “Prove your resolve to the Spirit Guide by killing Mirror Defilers and Conspirators in the Mirror of Ages.” Additionally, there would be a bulleted list of the objectives provided in even more concrete terms:

OBJECTIVES

- Kill Mirror Defilers and Conspirators 0/10
- Return to the Spirit Guide in Mirror of Ages

The rewards for completing the quest were also listed, which included the amount of gold, experience, reputation, and sometimes items that would be bestowed upon completion. Often, the

completion of a quest results in the immediate assignment of a new one (e.g., you successfully have collected the plant samples, now go deliver them to the professor who needs them).

Conveniently, all the quests I had been assigned were all automatically added to a sortable list. When a given quest was selected from the list, the area on the map relevant to the quest was indicated on the in-game map. Thus, questing involved consulting the list of quests, choosing a quest to complete (or possibly a few to tackle at the same time, since completing a few quests in the same area is more efficient), traveling to the appropriate location, and then completing the objectives. Once I was done with the quests I had set out to do, I would return to the designated NPCs, collect my rewards, sell extraneous items, and replenish my stock of healing potions.

Questing inevitably involved a lot of combat. Even if the quest objective was to gather items that were not possessed by MOBs, there would still be MOBs populating the area, so they would have to be dispatched anyway. Since fighting MOBs was such a ubiquitous aspect of questing, I will say more about MOBs and combat. MOBs in *Rift* included all manner of beasts, humanoids, humans, and undead creatures. Almost invariably, MOBs were evenly spaced out across a given area and usually meandering around without a clear purpose. The fact that they were spread out allowed me to choose the number of enemies Galdor fought at once, which was important because I could usually only handle one enemy at a time. If I accidentally engaged too many MOBs, Galdor would be easily overwhelmed and die (running away is rarely possible). The basic procedure for questing usually took the form of engaging a single MOB in combat,

killing it, looting it, healing myself if necessary, and then moving on to the next one, usually a short distance away.

Combat consisted of using Galdor's various attacks and other abilities to reduce hostile MOBs to zero health. Since he was a warrior, most of his abilities dealt close-range, physical damage to his targets. The effects of abilities play off one another in various ways, which meant that it was possible for me to sequence them strategically for optimal performance. In order to deal as much damage as I could, I followed the common practice of establishing a standard "rotation," which was essentially a pre-determined sequence in which I would use my abilities. Thus, once combat began, I would start going through my rotation of abilities while the MOB used its abilities on Galdor. When things went well, the MOB's health bar would decrease faster than Galdor's and before long the creature would be dead. I found that it was more efficient to quest in areas where Galdor was significantly more powerful than the MOBs, because I could kill them more quickly and the risk of dying was minimal. Questing in locations where the resident MOBs were much more challenging for Galdor was inefficient, since killing them took a great deal longer, more time was spent between fights healing, and I would die much more frequently.

While there was no permanent penalty for dying, it was an inconvenience. I had to run a ghost-like version of Galdor from a designated starting point all the way back to where he had died, which took about two minutes on average. Though this wasn't much of a burden every now and again, it quickly became frustrating when several deaths occurred in short succession.

Over the course of about 300 hours, I gradually leveled Galdor all the way up to the maximum level of 50, mostly by earning experience through solo questing. However, I also partook in some multiplayer content. In addition to traditional quests, *Rift* featured “world events,” which were periodic invasions of MOBs that players can team up to defeat. I would take the opportunity to join up with a group of other players to participate in these events whenever one started. I found that fairly minimal communication and cooperation was required—for the most part, players just formed a loose group that collectively attacked enemies. Consequently I still felt as if I were playing alongside, rather than with, other players.

After reaching level 50, it occurred to me that I had neglected to develop my three professions, which were mining, armor-smithing, and blacksmithing. Leveling any profession requires one to progressively pay a master in that discipline for training. Mining involved finding ore deposits (which was the time-consuming part) and then “mining” them, which amounted to Galdor hammering at the deposit for about 20 seconds while I watched the progress bar fill up. Blacksmithing and armor-smithing involved purchasing recipes, either buying or gathering raw materials, and then using the recipes and raw materials to craft items at the forge. After making approximately 10 or 20 of a given item, Galdor would level up, granting him access to new training that allowed him to purchase new recipes. Early in my game play I was more focused on leveling Galdor, so I ignored my professions altogether.

Once I had finished leveling Galdor however, I decided to fully level at least one profession. I did some research online and decided to switch one of my existing professions to rune-crafting, since I needed runes (which could be added to gear for bonuses) more than I

needed any of the weapons or armor that I would be able to craft. There also seemed to be fewer materials required to craft runes, which would make it less costly to quickly level the profession. As it turned out, I was able to progress from a level 1 to a level 50 rune-crafter over the course of a few gaming sessions. I had to use a considerable amount of gold to buy all the materials that I needed from the auction house (where other players sell items that they have gathered themselves), but purchasing them saved me the time-consuming process of gathering. Thus, leveling rune-crafting consisted of going to the rune-crafting master to buy training and recipes, going to the auction house to buy materials, and then going to the forge to craft runes, which is where I would gain the experience points. Once I gained enough experience points to level up, the process began again with a new recipe. After much running back and forth, I worked my way through all of the trainings and recipes and reached the maximum level. By this point, Galdor's gear was fully upgraded with runes. This satisfied me since it made him that much more powerful, though the process of becoming a master rune-crafter was profoundly boring.

Around the time that I reached level 50 and leveled my rune-crafting profession, I received an unexpected invitation to join the guild "Scarlet Shields." I hadn't been selected for any particular reason—Scarlet Shields was a new guild and they were apparently inviting anyone they came across who didn't already have a guild affiliation. The guild turned out to be a loosely organized community of players who were only in the early phases of establishing dungeon and raid groups. The main thing that guild membership added to my experience was the guild chat channel. Most of the chat involved members either being welcomed when they logged on or congratulated when they leveled up. There were also guild-related announcements and people saying things like "I'm going to try to sneak in a few more hours of play—hope my wife doesn't

wake up and notice I'm not there!" Despite this fairly limited amount of contact, I did feel like I was much more a part of a community than I had before.

Because the guild hadn't yet organized groups for raiding or dungeons, I decided that I should use the "searching for a group" feature if I wanted to experience that content. This feature automatically teams you up with other players that have enlisted to do the same content. Although dungeons weren't significantly more complicated than normal questing, I initially found that keeping up with other group members was challenging. I hadn't realized before that point that dungeons provided the fastest way to level up characters. This meant that most players had repeatedly completed the same dungeons for experience points, so they would rush through as quickly as they could. As a DPS character, my role was straightforward—I just had to attack whatever MOBs the group encountered. Sometimes the process would become slightly more complex, such as when we needed to attack bosses in a certain order. Usually, the group leader would issue instructions over the text chat to keep everyone on the same page during the encounter.

Dungeons were indeed profitable, but I didn't find them to be enjoyable or aesthetically appealing. When I picture a group of heroes descending into a dungeon, I like to imagine them avoiding traps, using specialized skills like lock-picking, making difficult decisions, and fighting skirmishes with a handful of foes here and there. In *Rift*, dungeoneering was more of a headlong rush through scores of enemies. The tank would "pull" all of the enemies into a close bunch around him- or herself. Meanwhile, the DPS characters unleash a barrage of attacks against them. This was a strange sight indeed—there would be a huge mob of enemies all pulsating

around a tank that was peppered with flashes and other animations from the barrage of attacks. It didn't look remotely like real combat.

I completed about a dozen dungeon runs, and this was the most difficult content that I endeavored. In order to raid, I would have needed to continue to improve Galdor's gear to the point where I could gain membership in a guild that had a raiding group. As things turned out, my interest in the game sputtered out before I started down that road. At an unremarkable point, I found that I had become tired of going through the same motions again and again. The rewards, which had previously motivated me, ceased to be worth the time and trouble it took to obtain them. I didn't decide definitively at any particular moment to stop playing, but instead noticed that I hadn't logged on for several days and had lost the desire to do so.

All told, I had played *Rift* for about 400 hours over the course of about a year with one break that lasted several months. My typical session took place on a weeknight and lasted for one to two hours. In an average week, I probably played between eight and 10 hours. Occasionally, when I was particularly motivated, I would play longer sessions that lasted up to four hours. Since stopping the game, I have rarely felt an interest in reopening my account.

Impressions of *Rift*

Overall, I felt “into” and engaged with *Rift* during most of the time I was playing, even though certain activities or even whole sessions could feel dull. The primary motivation to play was the satisfaction of leveling up or improving Galdor in some way. Learning new abilities was the most engaging aspect of leveling up, since a new ability presented new possibilities in the rotation. Thus, at these points I was prompted to rethink my rotation—a problem-solving

challenge that I found interesting. This process would often involve guesswork and experimentation to decide the optimal way to cycle through abilities. Experimenting with new combinations added some welcome novelty to the repeated slaying of MOBs. Furthermore, it was also one of the few challenges that I encountered during the leveling process that felt truly strategic to me.

As mentioned previously, level-ups occur when a certain amount of experience points have been gained since the previous level up, as tracked on a progress bar. It probably took me an average of six hours to level up once. Progress during this time could be uneven. When I was absorbed in the game and the bar was filling up quickly, I had the sense that I was making progress quickly and that felt satisfying. At other times, it felt like the progress bar was barely moving and that I wasn't accomplishing much, which felt frustrating.

While leveling up was rewarding, I especially relished acquiring new gear. New gear not only improved Galdor's performance as a fighter, but I also got to see his appearance change when I swapped out an old piece for a new one. In this regard, he served as a digital version of a paper doll! As Galdor progressed through the game, his gear looked increasingly impressive. Early on, he wore a mismatched collection of armor pieces and wielded a war hammer that resembled a croquet mallet—an awkward phase for Galdor. At around level 25, he had a set of armor that made him look like a gothic gladiator, including a horned helmet, skull knee-pads, a leather skirt, pauldrons, and a huge, two-handed sword. At level 50, he wore a suit of full plate armor trimmed in gold.

Perhaps what struck me most about my experience was that although the gameplay itself wasn't particularly fun or intrinsically rewarding, I *did* feel motivated to quest in order to obtain the rewards that would improve my character. The times I remember enjoying *Rift* the most were when I would log on during a weeknight and play for an hour or two while I wound down with a beer. After a long day, going through the familiar motions of questing was often relaxing rather than boring. However, in addition to the relaxation, I also had the feeling that I was accomplishing something. Thus, the game provided an uncommon combination of relaxation and productivity.

Chapter 5: Results

In this chapter I present the results of my analysis, which was carried out according to the steps of the IPA method described in Chapter 3. First, I immerse myself in the experience of each participant individually. Before presenting the findings, I provide a description of the participant and the interview itself. I also include a summary of the participant's gaming career. Subsequently, I describe the individual themes that emerged using the first four steps of the IPA method. After presenting my findings for each participant, I proceed to step six of the IPA method and detail the results of the cross-interview analysis.

Ben

Ben was a 22-year-old single white male who grew up near Pittsburgh. He responded with enthusiastic interest to my posting on Reddit inviting participants to my study, indicating that he could show me the competitive side of *WoW* gaming. When he contacted me, he was weeks away from completing his bachelor's degree in engineering and would soon thereafter start his new job as an engineer for a large manufacturing company. We managed to schedule the interview during the few weeks between the end of his schooling and the beginning of his job, during which time he was living with his parents.

Description of the interview. When I drove up to his parents' house for the interview, Ben emerged to greet me. He was over six feet tall and broad-shouldered, and had a mop of brown hair and a good-natured, youthful face. He wore jeans and a *WoW* hoodie. Before I arrived, Ben had warned me that his parents' house was a "disaster" because both he and his sister were preparing to move out in the next couple days. On top of that, a family member had

recently passed away, so many of his belongings were being stored there temporarily. Ben guided me into what I suspected was the dining room. It was difficult to tell because, as promised, it was filled with boxes and sundry items. Ben's large gaming laptop, monitor, keyboard, and gaming mouse (that he would later show me had twelve thumb buttons) were temporarily set up on a round table that had been pushed up against a wall. *WoW* was already open on his screen when we got situated for the interview. He sat facing his computer while I sat off to the side, facing him yet also able to see the screen at an angle. He immediately put on a pair of black wrist braces and made a quip about his hobby being bad for him. During the interview, he frequently leaned way back in his chair, giving his physical presence a dynamism not usually associated with sitting at a computer.

Throughout the time that the interview lasted, Ben was energized and in good humor. He joked and laughed often, both with me and with his guild mates over voice chat. Ben made my job as an interviewer easy, as he seemed to have a clear sense of what he felt was important to share and presented it efficiently. To augment his descriptions, he often pulled up information on websites and addons⁵ and provided apt examples from his experience. He would also occasionally simulate a stream of consciousness so I could get a sense of what goes through his head while he is playing. We covered a tremendous amount of ground in what turned out to be almost three hours, though when I drew the interview to a close I had the feeling that he could have gone on for another hour or two!

⁵ Addons are programs that add features to the software of the game. For instance, a player might use an addon that tracks and displays the amount of damage his or her character does throughout a fight.

Throughout the interview, the presences of his mother, father, and sister—whom I greeted at various points—were apparent in the background. They would occasionally pass through the room, talk in the background, or say something to Ben. Several cats also made their way in and out of the room as the interview progressed. Also present were his companions in *WoW*. For the first hour or so of the interview, he wasn't actively playing but did have *WoW* running and would occasionally receive text messages from guild mates and quickly type out responses. As things drew closer to the end of the first hour of the interview, a raid group was in the final stages of forming. Somewhere around this point, he turned up the volume on his speakers so he could hear the other members of the group on voice chat and occasionally contribute by speaking into his microphone.

Once the raid began, he continued the interview, rarely needing to stop in order to focus on the game. I found this capacity to multi-task impressive. Sometimes he would describe what was happening on-screen or explain what his guildmates were saying over chat (which I could hear but not always understand). At other points, he would be talking about something unrelated to what was going on in the game, apparently not having any difficulty talking about one thing while doing another.

Ben's gaming career. Ben had played *WoW* for the past five years, with occasional breaks for school that lasted several months. He estimated that he had spent between nine and 24 hours raiding per week at different points in his career, often with hours of preparation before the raiding began. Ben said that the amount of time he played weekly had varied considerably over the past five years, though in general he had played extensively. At one point he claimed, "I've

played an absolutely insane amount of time, you know, a quarter of my life, when I have *WoW* available to me I spend about a quarter of my life playing it.” When he first contacted me, Ben indicated that he has logged 9,500 hours—over a year—of playtime. During the interview, he explained that he had taken a long break in order to focus on school and that this break had ended a few months ago. After the break had ended, he joined a new guild and was still in the process of getting his character’s gear back up to speed. He stated that although he was enthusiastic about playing again, he didn’t want to get as caught up in the game as he had in the past.

Individual themes. Below are the individual themes that I found during my analysis of Ben’s interview transcript.

Being invested. One important theme that emerged in my interview with Ben was about how he became invested and has remained invested (or even addicted) to *WoW*. Prior to playing *WoW*, Ben was already playing other online games, such as *Starcraft* and *Warcraft III* (both real-time strategy games published by the same developer) “obsessively,” so when he heard about how popular *WoW* was, he decided to steer clear to avoid getting hooked. As fate would have it, a girlfriend bought him the game as a gift. He felt like it would be rude to return the game, though instead of opening it right away, he took the more cautious step of downloading the free trial version and playing that first.

Initially, Ben was not particularly impressed by *WoW*. He explained that early on, your character only has a few unimpressive abilities that you use to fight equally unimpressive enemies on boring, chore-like quests. After playing for a week or two, his character’s abilities

became “flashier” and he got more into the game. However, he hit the level cap of the trial version, which meant that he was stuck at level 20. He wasn’t aware of the cap, however, and was frustrated by his stalled progress. Eventually, he realized that all he had to do was enter the code from his copy of *WoW* and he could continue leveling up.

Ben believed that the point in which he became fully invested in *WoW* was occurred with his decision to open his physical copy of *WoW*:

That was the point where it became important enough to me to get stronger that I was willing to just go ahead and okay, yes, I will do this quest, I will do this, I will kill this boar, I will run to this town, and I just wanted to get stronger. I didn’t want to be weak, I didn’t want to be watching stronger guys run around, I didn’t want to have to run away from this animal and it just, I don’t know, it something about the game, at that instance saying “hey, you can’t get stronger until you do this” and I did it and I was just like alright, now, now I’m invested in it, now I have money in it, now I’m just going to get something out of this game, I’m going to get stronger, I’m going to be something.

From this point onward, he didn’t look back. Over the next few months he completed all the quests in the game and fully leveled his character and all of his professions.

Of course, Ben’s engagement with *WoW* did not end with fully leveling his first character. He explained that once his character hit the maximum level, raiding became his new focus, which dramatically shaped and fueled his engagement with the game:

Once you start raiding, you’ll all a sudden find, like, not only are you getting ready for raid, but you’re also on four hours before raid doing dailies, doing this, doing that, doing EVERYTHING for no reason other than, heh, um, that, you know, you’re now invested in the game again, and you just get stuck in that.

Progressing through a raid is the process of the raid group gradually defeating increasingly difficult bosses. Since raiding requires the full roster of players, raid groups play on a schedule, which provides a fixed point around which other in-game activities revolve. Ben noted that he typically logged on hours before the raid group meets in order to complete various tasks to get his character ready for the action.

Ben flatly stated that he considered the intensity of his investment in *WoW* to be nothing short of addiction. Since withdrawal is usually considered a feature of addiction, I asked him what it's like when he has to take an extended break for school. In response, he simulated the thoughts that go through his head:

Ahhh, I should be doing my dailies to get my tokens, I should be raiding right now, I'm gonna fall behind on my gear, I don't want to fall behind on my gear, cause then it's a pain to get caught up, I don't want to fall behind on players, I don't want to fall behind on boss strategies, like uhhhh god it's going to be so hard to get caught up again.

After this description, he explained that getting caught up and staying caught up are the most powerful motivators to keep playing:

It's about keeping up. Like I said, you fall behind so quickly. So as soon as you are caught up, so as soon as you are caught up, you have that desire not only to stay caught up but get to the very bleeding edge.

Since MMORPGs are designed so that new content is periodically released, the standard is always rising. Patches and expansions feature increasingly powerful enemies who drop increasingly powerful gear. Thus, the power level of enemies and avatars increases reciprocally so that the enemies are challenging but still beatable. The most proficient guilds progress through

new content the fastest—they are on the “bleeding edge” that Ben refers to. Naturally, anyone who takes a break from playing while this upward trend of power continues will be quickly left behind.

Striving to be a skilled player. Striving to be a skilled player was at the heart of Ben’s engagement with *WoW*. Much of what he conveyed during the interview was centered on striving towards improved performance. I learned that there are two basic factors that play into performance in *WoW*: the power of one’s avatar and the skill of the player. The power of the avatar is determined by the avatar’s level (which is, by definition, the maximum possible level during the endgame⁶) and the avatar’s gear. These two main factors determine the potential for what the avatar can do in the game, such as how much damage it does per attack. The other factor is the skill of the player, which is the focus of this theme. Being a skilled player is essentially determined by how well the player makes use of the avatar’s potential. In considering an analogy between a racecar and driver, the avatar would be the car and the player would be the driver. Even the best driver can’t win a race in a slow car, whereas an unskilled driver will make poor use of a fast car. At the time of our interview, Ben characterized himself as a skilled player using an “undergeared” character, which indicates that his character was not particularly powerful due to having outdated gear.

Of course, Ben didn’t start out as a highly skilled player. For the first year or so that he played, he was what is referred to as a “casual.” He was a member of a casual guild, and he, along with his guildmates, would enjoy leveling, doing old and no longer “relevant” content,

⁶ The “endgame” begins once a character has reached the maximum level. Up to this point, the player is oriented towards fully leveling his or her character. Once this is achieved, the game provides a new set of possibilities to pursue, which are collectively referred to as the endgame.

chatting, and even playing hide-and-seek. However, things began to shift when Ben and a few of his guildmates started doing dungeons with a much more skilled player from a different guild.

This player did vastly more damage than Ben and his friends, which bewildered and irked them.

They decided to investigate how to improve their damage output:

Now we start paying attention to the damage meters, now we start paying attention to what abilities we are using, whether or not we were optimizing our rotations, which, I don't know if anyone's covered that with you, is basically what order of skill usage will do the most damage, started paying attention to that, started paying attention to whether we had the right stats on our gear, like "Agility's good but strength is better, okay, so I need to make sure I have as much strength as possible on this guy," started paying attention to that. And that is when it went from logging on every day to have fun with my friends and ... be better, but only, I only had to be good enough to do what they were doing, which wasn't really anything serious, um, to now, "Okay, I gotta make sure this gear's right, I gotta make sure my rotation's right, I gotta make sure damage is up, why is my damage low? What can I do to make it better?" Um, Googling online, you know: "Hey, how do I warrior DPS? What am I doing wrong? How is, you know, I see, okay I was doing this and I should be doing this.

Since this shift in attitude, the pursuit of excellence had consistently been a driving factor in the way Ben played *WoW*. Throughout the interview, he made reference to the capabilities skilled players possess, which I have accounted for later in the analysis.

One point that Ben emphasized was how quickly players must make decisions during combat. The "global cooldown," which is the length of time before one ability can be used after another, is between 1–1.5 seconds. Thus, a player makes a decision about what ability button to press next on a second by second basis. In order to make the most of their avatars' capacities by

making an optimal choice, multiple variables must be taken into account, including situational factors and various game mechanics. To deal with these stringent demands, players establish a “rotation,” which is an optimal sequence in which to use their avatar’s abilities. In their simplest incarnations, a rotation may be just that: abilities that are used in a set rotation. However, when a player becomes more sophisticated and takes more variables into account, a rotation becomes a complex decision tree. Having the capacity to design a rotation and follow it is a significant aspect of being a skilled player. Ben explained that his character, an undead warrior, had around 50 abilities that may be useful at any given moment and Ben’s standard rotation involved 38 of them. In the following excerpt he discusses his rotation and simulates his decision making process during a fight:

Ben: It’s depending on the situation, it’s depending on whether this has proc’d⁷, its depending on whether I have this buff⁸ or not, I have to do this, I have to do this, there’s 38 different situations I could be in hahahaha.

Jake: Yeah, so you’re keeping track of—

Ben: Yeah, I have to keep track of them. And the global cooldown⁹ is, you know, say a second long, it’s actually a second and a half but with haste it’ll decrease the global cooldown down to a minimum of a second, so if you have a lot of haste, you have to analyze the situation, read your buffs, read your debuffs, read what you’re doing, and then use the right ability every second. Once a second.

Jake: So once a second you are making a decision.

⁷ If something has “proc’d” it means that a “process” has been activated. For example, a sword might have a 10% chance of reducing an enemies armor by 25%—when this ability becomes activated in a fight, it has proc’d.

⁸ A buff is a spell or other ability that improves the character’s capacities in some way. The opposite is referred to as a debuff.

⁹ The global cooldown is the amount of time a player has to wait after using an ability to use a new ability. All abilities have their own particular cooldown time as well. For instance, an attack might have a two minute cooldown, meaning that it can only be used once every two minutes.

Ben: Yeah. Okay, so I'm reading it, alright I got this buff up, I got, you know a Raging Blow proc, and I have Colossal Smash debuff on the boss. Raging Blow just came off cooldown, okay, this oh, and I'm rolling, I have three buffs up that are increasing my strength, so I really, this is a great time, I'm going to use Raging Blow, it's a hard hitting ability, I'm going to use it right now. K, Raging Blow, good, okay, but that used one of my buffs, and now two of my debuffs are running out, should I use, I have, should I use Raging Blow again because I still have one more proc of it, or should I wait until I can get Colossal Smash back up and use Blood Thirst to build my rage so that I can use Raging Blow, because Raging Blow takes 10 rage to use. So should I pool my resources and wait until I have a better time that's going to do more damage, or should I just go ahead and dump it all into this next attack and then hope that before I have full resources I can get another Raging Blow proc and use it again. So basically is it best to use it right now, is the situation optimal? The first Raging Blow proc situation was optimal, absolutely, very clear I needed to use it. Second one I can use it, the situation is not optimal. So the question is whether I wait for an optimal situation, or I use it and hope that it comes back up before the next optimal situation hahahahaha.

Jake: And you make that decision in a second.

Ben: And I have one second to make that decision across eight abilities. Every single one of those abilities I have to decide whether that's the right one to use for that situation or not, and I only have a second to do that decision in total haha.

Jake: Uh huh, so you're just making decision after decision.

Ben: Yeah, decision, decision for 16 minutes¹⁰. Once a second for 16 minutes.¹¹

Skilled players like Ben are able to quickly make optimal or near-optimal decisions consistently throughout the fight.

¹⁰Sixteen minutes is the approximate length of a raid fight.

¹¹In total, that's 960 decisions in 16 minutes!

Later on in the interview, I was able to observe Ben participate in two raid-boss fights. After being staggered by his description of how much information is processed on a second by second basis, I expected that Ben would need to focus intently on the game during combat. Instead, he continued the interview with me, rarely missing a beat. He explained that being able to keep track of one's rotation is like "studying for a test, if you study a lot it's not, you don't find the test difficult." Navigating his 38-step list was something he could flow through effortlessly because of how much he had played. I was genuinely impressed by Ben's skill, and even more so after I found out that he actually did more damage points than a player who had significantly better gear. Ben was able to do more with less—all while being interviewed!

Possessing finely-tuned situational awareness is also vital to skillful performance, since there is so much to keep track of during a raid fight. Being aware of what the boss is doing and how it is affecting the party is critical. It is often also necessary to position one's avatar strategically, usually in order to avoid or mitigate the damage of certain abilities. Awareness of what is happening to other party members and intervening when possible can also make or break a fight. Ben provided the example of a potentially catastrophic situation of too many debuffs building up on both tanks. He explained that a paladin is the character class that possesses the ability to solve this problem, but the one playing a paladin would need to be aware of the situation in order to take action:

Because a great paladin, a really good paladin is going to notice that, Hand of Protection, right away and fix the problem before it becomes a problem and then you go on your merry way. An okay paladin, you'll have to ask him to do that.

This kind of awareness takes factors into consideration that are pertinent to more than raw damage output. For example, during one of the fights that took place during the interview, Ben explained the following scenario:

So what I did was come out here to deal with this Dark Shaman, or I mean Archweaver, so he's casting spells, so I'm going to use abilities that can stop him from casting his spells. Same thing I just did there, I saw that he was casting, even though I wasn't close to him I had the wherewithal—and this is, again, something a lesser player wouldn't do—to charge over to him and interrupt him before he can do anything.

Ben explained that cultivating this degree of awareness is difficult to teach another player and is not something “you can just learn from a guide.”

Skilled players, Ben clarified, are knowledgeable about all elements of the game because they do relevant research. Any adept player will know how to optimize his or her character's performance with regards to gear, rotation, and spec¹². Additionally, a hardcore raider is expected to know all of a boss's abilities and how to respond effectively by studying online resources. Ben emphasized the importance of research:

If you're doing a raid, a hardcore raid especially, um, you're going to research fights, strategies, you're going to research your gear, you're going to—I know—not right now, but right before I quit I knew every single upgrade I wanted for my paladin, I knew where it dropped from, I know what its drop chance was, I knew everything about the gear that I needed I knew everything about the bosses, I looked up the bosses, I watched videos on the bosses, I watched other people fight the bosses, I did everything that I could possibly do so that when I got there, it was less strenuous. I talk about learning the fights, and you

¹² “Spec” is short for specialization, which refers to the set of upgrades that a player chooses in order to make his or her avatar suited for a particular function in the game. For instance, a player might choose a healing spec instead of a damage spec on a particular character class.

do have to learn, there's a little bit to learn as far as just being there, but as far as actually becoming familiar with the strategy, that's something a high level of raiding that you're expected to know before the fight, before you even get there.

Ben went on to point out that this degree of preparation outside of the game is something that only a higher level player would do.

Gear. The skill of a player is independent from the avatar he or she is using, yet playing with an underpowered character will limit what even the most adept player can accomplish. For example, before Ben's raid began, someone asked if he would be willing to play as one of the party's tanks. Ben declined and subsequently explained to me, "There's no way. Regardless of skill, I *do not* have a gear level that will make me capable of tanking this content. The boss will hit me *way too hard*." Ben is essentially saying that the amount of damage the boss would have been dealing to Ben's character is simply more than he could absorb due to inadequate defensive attributes provided by his gear. This is true regardless of how well Ben performed.

Because gear is such an important contributor to overall performance, acquiring first-class gear for one's character is a major focus of endgame play. The best gear is acquired from vanquished raid bosses who drop "loot," which includes gear, other items, and currency. Ben had an add-on that displayed the various pieces of gear that each boss had the potential to drop along with the odds of the gear being dropped. Each time a boss is defeated, a few pieces of gear drop, which must then be distributed amongst the party members, often by the raid leader. Since each character has 16 available slots for various pieces of gear (e.g., there is a slot for headgear, a chest piece, a cloak, bracers, gloves, rings, etc.), players have to play through a raid many times before everyone is equipped with gear from that raid.

Ben's group killed two bosses during the interview, so I had the chance to observe loot distribution after each victory. This process involved lots of excitement and impassioned discussion over the voice chat. The raid leader had the final say in to whom each piece of gear was given, though others participated in the decision-making process. For the most part, it seemed that gear was given to the player who had the greatest need for each piece, though the degree to which the player contributed to the guild was also a factor. Much of the discussion involved players making a case for why they needed a given piece. The second boss dropped a belt that Ben needed. He explained how much better it was than his current belt. While he waited impatiently for the leadership to investigate the claim of another player, he turned to me and hissed "just give it to me!" and laughed.

I observed that the players were quite ardent about acquiring new gear, which led me to wonder just how much of a difference having the latest gear makes. During one of the fights, Ben compared his character's damage output to a character with up-to-date gear to demonstrate the difference for me:

Ben: And you can see, you'll see actually on the DPS meter, which I have right up, right over here, that, this is me right here, this character, um, the effects of having poor gear. It's really, it's really hard to explain to someone who hasn't played it how *bad* it is having poor gear. I'm, I have gear which is actually on, up to date with this patch, it's just not up to date, I just don't have any gear from this patch, so I have gear from the last patch, up to date, so far, and still, you can see this guy is doing um an enorm—he's doing five times my damage because he has gear from this patch.

Jake: So as soon as you drop behind the curve a little bit you're not even close to—

Ben: Not even remotely close to being able to keep up.

Thus, every time a new patch is released, there is a new set of improved gear to acquire and a new group of bosses that players will need that gear to defeat. As I have mentioned, taking even a short break from gaming inevitably results in falling behind the curve, which is exactly what happened to Ben and why acquiring new gear for his character was a top priority.

In addition to its function of boosting an avatar's performance, gear is an obvious marker of success in *WoW* because it indicates how powerful a character is on account of the gear's attributes, and the content that has been completed with that character in order to earn that particular gear. Thus, judging another player's achievement level by their gear is fairly reliable. To top it off, better gear is more impressive-looking. Ben described the experience of assessing other players' gear:

Ben: And you could look at a character and say oh he's wearing tier five shoulders, so he's only—you know, if the current tier, if the newest tier is tier seven and he only is wearing tier five, which—I should have mention it builds up, so like the current tier I think is tier 15 so, um, tier seven, if I'm wearing tier seven and he's wearing tier five, therefore, I'm a better player and it was obvious because anyone who played the game, you knew what you were fighting for, you knew what gear you were in you knew that right at that point in time you'd only been able to kill up to a tier five boss and you were wearing tier five gear but you kinda dream, you had that vision in your mind of your character all beefy and at tier seven so when you see someone run by with tier seven, you're like "oh man!"

Jake: It's that goal right in front of you.

Ben: Yeah, you're like "look at that guy, he's killed, you know, he's killed Arthas, he's killed, you know, any number of bosses," and it's, you're like, "Ugh! Look how cool he looks! Alright, I gotta, you know," *mimes playing hard*

I left the interview with the impression that acquiring increasingly powerful gear is integral to endgame play.

Social comparison and self-image. Becoming a skilled player and acquiring powerful gear are pursuits that play out in a social context in which others attempting to do the same. As several of the previous excerpts indicate, concern about how Ben stacked up against other players was a salient part of his experience of playing *WoW*. The game lends itself to comparisons between players, since the attributes, gear, and accomplishments of their avatars can be readily examined within the game or on the *WoW* website.

Ben often cited striving to be as good as or better than others as motivation to improve his skills as a player and acquire better gear. For example, early on in the interview, he said:

You want to be someone that people look at and say “hey, wow, that’s like ... you know, look at that guy’s gear, oh my god, he must be really good, you know, look at this, look at that. Oh my god he killed that boss, that’s incredible, you know. I can’t do that.” I didn’t want to be the person who said “I can’t do that.” I wanted to be the person people were looking at like “holy crap how did he do that?”

In this case, Ben comparing himself to other players was motivating. At another point, however, Ben recounted a different example that had a more negative tone:

Ben: A few people I had ended up kicking out of the guild for bad attitudes had went on to higher ranking guilds than Goof Troop and succeeded when I’m like, “Hey, I know I’m a better player than them” I know I’m so much of a better player than them I kicked them out. *laughs*

Jake: Right, right. *laughs*

Ben: So, now I see them in the city, and they're wearing better gear than I am.

Jake: Right, so what impact did that have?

Ben: Yeah, it was frustrating, it was very frustrating, because I knew they were not a nice person and not a good player. *both laugh*

Jake: And they had better gear.

Ben: And they had better gear than I did.

Jake: Yeah.

Ben: So a stranger walking around, they're going to look at him and be envious of, more envious of him than of me, and I mean it was just like, it was grating.

Words like “frustrating,” “grating,” and “envious” indicate the degree to which Ben’s esteem can be wounded.

In addition to Ben’s retrospective descriptions in which he compared himself to other players, Ben also drew comparisons between himself and other players while he raided. For instance, at one point a player was dropped from the group instead of Ben. He delighted in this opportunity to compare himself favorably with another player:

Ben: I don't know who we dropped, we dropped the other paladin. Oh heck yeah, okay, I didn't get dropped, because there was a guy doing even lower DPS than me. If it's set on damage done, set it to DPS, see the Sideway guy? That's the guy who got dropped. That's a ret paladin¹³, oh yeah that's definitely a ret paladin. So, now, because I want to stroke my ego, I want to see what kind of, what kind of gear he was in *both laugh* to see if—

¹³ A “ret,” short for “retribution,” paladin is a particular spec of paladin that is a DPS and thus could be directly compared to Ben’s character, who was also a DPS.

Jake: To see if he had better gear but was doing worse?

Ben: Yeah hahaha.

Jake: Well if nothing else you know he wasn't in the middle of an interview.

Ben: Oh yeah! He's got way better gear, he's 531 ... So he had 20 more item-level¹⁴ than me, so he should have been doing somewhere in the neighborhood, given his gear he should have been doing about 200,000 DPS and he was only doing 83. *So *both laugh** he is a worse player than I am.

This exchange indicates that Ben is not shy about his competitive attitude. He explained that he views the desire to be skilled at something as universal and that *WoW* provides him with a way to fulfill it:

Um, you know, like nowadays I am a desired quantity as far as being a stronger player because I'd been gone for the last three months and the first thing I see when I log in is "Dude where were you we need you?" hahahaha like, like "*Are you available Wednesday, because we need you...now,*" hahaha, yeah. Um, yeah and I think the desire to be part of a group and the desire to be good at something is, I think that's fairly universal. It just happened that be that this thing was something that was in a game.

Unlike single-player games, which tend to be played in private, the massively multiplayer format of *WoW* introduces a layer of competitiveness and social comparison that significantly factored into Ben's experience.

Rankings. Rankings came up early and often in the course of Ben's interview. In fact, before we even began discussing *WoW*, he mentioned that he attended one of the "top three engineering schools" and was at the "top of [his] class." As Ben described his *WoW* career, the

¹⁴ Item-level is a number indicating how powerful a piece of gear is. Here, Ben is referring to the character's average item-level.

rank of players, guilds, and even servers proved to be an integral part of the story. Ben explained that the game itself does not have a ranking system, though it does keep track of many statistics. The rankings that he referenced are actually compiled by various independent websites that pull data from the game. Ben also explained that high ranking guilds submit what are essentially portfolios of their achievements to these sites. During the following passage, he was showing me WoWProgress.com—the most popular ranking site—and discussing the rankings of his current and past guilds and servers:

So these are all different servers. Um, the server that I used to play on, it has been coming up on rankings, 77, but when I played on it, this was my first server, when I played on it was like 200 something in ranking, yeah, so it was bad. There were not good players on there, it did not have a good reputation, so we all server transferred to a new server that had a good reputation, good players, good guilds, and we were one of the top, um, so Magtheridon is 22nd ranked, and see even right now, the guild I'm in right now, even without me they're still sixth ranked on the server, so they're sixth ranked on a 22nd ranked server, honestly that pretty much means they're probably, they're about top two percent but when I was with that guild of players in Cataclysm, which included the three players that left for Silver Slayers with me, all three of them were with that 10-man that sectioned off we were top two or three on the server and we were, basically we had, not only, we had credit, we didn't have to recruit, we had people, like if we needed one spot, like a guy had to quit for school or something, we would have people come to us, people would come to our—and also all these high ranking guilds also have websites, um even Ecstatic Strike has a website. Um, so they would come to us, they would email us, they'd say “hey, I'm looking to transfer—I will transfer servers, I will pay \$25 for the right to be with your guild and kill bosses with you” hahaha. Um, cause we were high ranking, and, but we were friends too.

In addition to talking about the rankings as compiled by these websites, Ben also made reference to the informal ranking of players within guilds with statements like the following:

I got with this group, which is Ecstatic Strike, and I quickly, I was healing actually, on my paladin for that, and I quickly became one of their high ranking people, and there are people who are in this guild who are better than me. Honestly, uh, two or three of the top ranking players in this guild are uh world-first quality players.

The above quotes along with the various other times that Ben mentioned rankings reminded me of athletes being ranked, traded, and moved up to the big leagues.

Ranking seems to serve as both the quantification of skill and as the recognition of that skill. In a game without built-in high scores or a way to beat the game, the player-created ranking system serves the function of accounting for who is “winning,” who is the best, or who is closest to the “bleeding edge” that Ben mentioned earlier. Thus, rankings make it possible for competitive players like Ben to measure themselves against one another. The frequency that Ben mentioned rankings suggests that they are integral to his competitive, performance-oriented way of engaging with the game—he used the word “rank” and its derivatives 68 times during our interview. Across my other four interviews, there were only two other times rankings were mentioned.

Big numbers. Numbers are ubiquitous in *WoW*. During fights, for instance, numbers pop up to display the damage done by every attack, which results in a cloud of numbers that can be thick enough to partially obscure avatars and MOBs. While I was watching Ben play, there was a moment when he scored a “big crit”—a critical hit, which is an attack that hits for double its normal damage. He announced it excitedly and pointed out that he had an add-on that

prominently displayed the amount of damage done by his critical hits. Exclaiming “Big crit!” reminded him of a video that he wanted to show me. A few moments and another critical hit later:

Big crit! I just hit that guy for a million damage. Big crits, big crits! Um, big numbers, that is actually what reminded me of the video, is me thinking “big numbers,” um because big numbers make me happy, they make everyone happy. Big numbers—the bigger your gear, the better your gear gets, the bigger your numbers are, and the happier you are because your numbers are huge.

At the end of the interview, Ben played the video for me. It showed the screen of the narrator while he played in a PvP¹⁵ match. The ostensible point of the video was to make the case that an unpopular spec (fury) has merit in PvP, though the tone is comic rather than serious—the narrator isn’t really attempting to make a coherent argument so much as clown around and make people laugh. The following is an excerpt relevant to Ben’s reason for showing me the video:

Look at the—Boom! You can’t deny those numbers, you cannot deny those numbers, you cannot deny the fact that numbers fly around when you play the game....with fury. That’s the satirical fuckin’ addiction that we’re all addicted to with fury....Buh Bam, fuckin’ numbers! You can’t believe it! Numbers make me fuckin’ want to play *WoW*!

Ben explained that the video captures the excitement and the satisfaction of seeing your character’s attacks do large quantities of damage. It’s worth considering that it’s the numbers, rather than the animations, that really stand out—the animations don’t change based on how

¹⁵ PvP stands for player-versus-player, which involves individuals or teams of players fighting one another. Some servers are designated as PvP servers, in which it is possible to attack other players at any time. Additionally, players on any server can participate in organized PvP matches.

powerful the attack is, but the numbers do and thus become a focal point. The fact that Ben, and many others, choose to have an addon that displays the amount of damage of their critical hits is telling: There's nothing like basking in the glory of a big crit!

The seemingly fundamental desire to increase the size of numbers and the resulting satisfaction was a theme that ran consistently throughout Ben's interview. In these excerpts, Ben is explicitly talking about the numbers that correspond to damage dealt, but numbers pervade the game: Characters have levels, gear has levels, professions have levels, and characters have various other statistics.

Despite the importance of numbers in *WoW*, there were instances where Ben indicated that "big numbers" is *not* what it's all about. For example, he said that sometimes things with a particular raid group are simply "not be working" even though all the numbers look right. He continued that "you could do it again with different people, and all of the numbers will look the same, but for some reason this time it worked hahahah." He also mentioned that bosses that were difficult simply because they hit for a lot of damage and couldn't take a lot of damage are boring, whereas bosses that were difficult because they required a lot of fine-tuned coordination provided an enjoyable challenge. Additionally, skilled players don't only focus on their DPS, but consider other factors in the fight that are also crucial to success.

Socializing. Ben explained that during difficult content (which is, for the most part, fighting raid bosses), it is best to stay "straight-faced" and focus on the task at hand. However, there is a lot of downtime between bosses that is spent waiting for people, getting prepared for the next boss, and fighting the easily dispatched "trash MOBs" which precede each boss. During

all of this downtime, players often joke around and chat¹⁶ with one another. For example, at several points during the interview party members teased Ben about him being an incompetent player even though they knew he was underperforming because of his gear. At another point a player text chatted “Be right back, pouring Coke” and someone else responded “Be right back, snorting coke.” This led to an outburst of jokes over the voice chat about players not being allowed to raid high. Ben confirmed that joking around and bantering during easy content is commonplace and an enjoyable part of playing *WoW*.

During the gaming session, I also got a sense of how Ben and the rest of his party enjoyed the content of the game as a group. At one point, I heard a buildup and then a crescendo of yelling over the speakers. Ben explained that everyone in the group had died but the boss had been down to one percent health! In the following passage, Ben describes an even more dramatic experience of shared pathos:

I remember that I got very badly yelled at by one of my neighbors when we killed the final boss in the expansion, because we killed the final boss in the expansion, because it was like two in the morning and we had been working on it for like two months, and, actually, I might, I have a picture of it, I think it's on facebook actually, maybe not though, but there's a picture of us on the internet having killed that boss, we did a group

¹⁶To understand communication in most MMORPGs, it is necessary to distinguish between text based chat and voice chat. Text-based chat is built into the game, and involves typing out messages to other players. Voice chat is hosted on external servers and allows players to talk as a group as if they were on a conference call. Ben would normally listen to his voice chat through his headset, but for my benefit he put it over the speakers so I could hear what his guild mates were saying. Ben explained that being able to talk is necessary for coordination during difficult content, though it also facilitates socializing. In both cases, the key allowance that voice chat makes (that typing out messages doesn't) is that it doesn't interfere with gameplay, which requires the player's hands to be occupied with the mouse and keyboard.

picture, we were like “Hey, group up, let’s get around this body, of this dead boss and take a picture,” and we were so happy, it was like, it was really fun.

Witnessing the fun of sharing the experience of such a near miss and imaging the sense of shared accomplishment gave me an appreciation for the appeal of group play over solitary play.

In addition to joking around and commenting on in-game events, Ben indicated that conversations over voice chat would sometimes drift towards life outside the game. In the following passage, Ben describes socializing with guild mates during his early days of leveling, questing, and dungeoneering with his friends:

Jake: So you guys were just chatting all along while you were doing things?

Ben: Yeah, just talking, chatting, doing things, laughing, having fun. Um, normally the more relaxed you are with the content, the more the topic strays towards real-life, it strays towards actual, you know, you might as well picture a group of people sitting in a room just, you know, having a couple beers, chatting, because that’s really what it is. In fact, some of them were having a couple beers hahaha.

He explained that through talking with one another regularly they actually knew a great deal about each other’s lives and that discussing personal problems and providing support to one another was typical. Through this kind of intimate contact, Ben has formed several long-term friendships in *WoW* that have lasted for years and continue to this day.

Sometimes his friendships with *WoW* friends crossed over the boundary into real-life in one way or another. The most dramatic instance of this was having a long-term romantic relationship with a woman in his guild named Beth about two years ago. He first met her in person when he travelled to Texas to meet up with her and other guild members. Their

relationship began sometime later on and she ended up moving to the Pittsburgh area, partially to be closer to Ben. I expected that the transition from being “just” guildmates to in person romantic partners would have been a dramatic one. Ben’s portrayal surprised me:

Jake: Okay, so what was it like shifting relationships, like going from being in-game friends to meeting her in real-life?

Ben: Absolutely no effort.

Jake: So just transitioned really—

Ben: Cause we played together, raided together for three years, knew each other, talked, knew of each other’s personal problems, blah blah blah, and that was kind of how we started progressing from just friends to more than friends was that she had just broken up with her boyfriend and for like two months, and I kind of like helped her right after that and then after that we talked more personally for like a month and a half, but as far as knowing each other, knowing our personal lives, we’d known that for like, you know same thing as any friend you might know, but that was when it transitioned from being friends to being more than friends was because we were already friends, we were helping each other out with problems in our lives and getting closer, but it was super effortless, there was no effort, I mean I met her and that was the first time I had seen her in real-life, but as far as talking to her it was, just picking up, it was just another day, it just happened to be that we saw each other in person this time so.

Jake: That’s interesting.

Ben: There’s was no, I mean, I think we ... yeah. She pulled up, cause she actually gave me a ride from the one guy’s house that I had been staying with that was the guild leader and literally the first thing I think I did was make fun of her after I saw her. But it was cool, because we were friends, like I think I made some joke about her being a typical Cali girl because she pulled up in this bright yellow car and these huge sunglasses and was fiddling around with her iPod and I’m like, with you know her blonde hair, and was

like ... just making fun of her, but because we felt so comfortable with each other you know. I think the first thing she said to me in real-life was “Oh shut the fuck up” heh hahaha now that I think about it heh heh heh.

Ben’s account challenges the idea that there is something meaningfully different between an online relationship and one in real-life. It also speaks to the degree of familiarity and intimacy that he has cultivated with his *WoW* friends.

Instrumental interactions. Of course, most *WoW* players don’t group up just to chat and joke with one another or even to form friendships. Ben explained that since the advanced content in *WoW*—raids—can only be completed with groups, players rely on one another to play. Raiding guilds are comprised of players who share the desire to raid and group up explicitly for that purpose. Because these groups have a definite purpose—successfully progressing through raids—many of their interactions are instrumental in the sense that they are related to that purpose. These instrumental interactions play out in various elements of the game, such as guild membership, raid participation, loot distribution, and the strategizing and coordination that occurs during the raids themselves.

The reason for gathering players together into raiding guilds is ultimately to defeat raid bosses. This undertaking is something that requires a significant degree of planning and coordination. Each boss has its own set of abilities that present the raiders with unique challenges. The group must formulate tailored strategies for each boss and then carry out their plan in the frenzied environment of simulated combat. The raid leader is the one in charge of orchestrating the group’s strategy, though all players are expected to know the ins and outs of

each fight. Ben's strategic overview of the raid boss Morchok, a giant golem, provides a sense of the strategies involved in boss fights:

He's got a stomp, um, he puts a debuff on the tank that basically makes the tank take more damage, so you have to swap tanks because the debuff is specific to him, he's gonna do, after like three stacks¹⁷ you're taking 30% more damage, the healers have to work 30% harder, so you switch and the debuff might have a 24 second timer, so after 24 seconds it falls off, yeah, the other guy probably has three stacks at this point so you switch back. Not too hard to deal with, all it requires is a taunt¹⁸, which is to change the boss's attention from one tank to the other. Uh, Resonating Crystal, so he drops a crystal on the ground, um that explodes after 12 seconds doing massive shadow damage, and it's split between three random players, but if there's no players there, it hits everyone, so what you do is you'll put three players in there and put a shield on them, and they'll tank¹⁹ that damage, it'll hit them hard but it won't kill them. Meanwhile, like say if those three players weren't there, it might kill everyone hahaha so you specify, "you three people go over here, you three people go over here, grab these crystals" all good. Um, Furious, just at 20% remaining health he gets stronger and uh he does like an earthquake thing every 25 seconds, which you have to run away from him because he's going to stomp on the ground and do big earthquake damage. That's normal mode. Heroic mode, after, at 90% health, so after you've done 10% of his health in damage, he splits into two which do exactly the same thing as normal mode, so now you have to do the normal mode fight twice at the same time which requires the tanks switching with each other without getting them too close, because if they got too close, they would do a large amount of additional damage because they were close together so you had to spread each other out so far that the healers could barely heal both groups, so you had to split the

¹⁷ Stacks refer to debuffs that accumulate or "stack up" each time the ability is applied, thereby making a character progressively weaker.

¹⁸ An ability that will cause the targeted MOB to attack that character rather than other characters.

¹⁹ Though "tank" is usually used as a noun to designate a particular role, it can also be used as a verb that means absorbing damage efficiently. In this instance, characters with a shield cast on them can endure the damage of the exploding crystal.

healers too and then, so you'd have five men on this guy, five men on this guy, and then they would have to switch, which you could imagine would cause some problems.

Each member of the raid must know what each of Morchok's abilities do and how he or she is supposed to respond. At various points, multiple members have to carry out a sequence of actions in unison, such as three appointed raiders running over to a Resonating Crystal while another casts a shield on them. Of course, players must perform their usual role-related duties such as tank or healer in addition to carrying out these fight-specific sequences.

When the group fails to beat the boss, they regroup, assess what went wrong, and adjust their strategy for next time. During the interview, I had the opportunity to listen in on this process after the group wiped. Ben summarized the upshot of the conversation for me:

Ben: Basically, it's, I guess there was a tank issue, and he dropped an Ashen Wall, which, the, one of the bosses will drop an Ashen Wall, it's a wall of elemental guys that do an enormous amount of damage if you get near them apparently, so, here's you tank, and your boss is facing the tank, he'll drop the wall parallel, well, perpendicular, to him across a line where the tank is standing, so they're saying that the tank um, dropped that wall in a bad spot, and, so, assuming, say that's the raid over there doing damage, so if he faces it this way there's no issue, but if he for some reason turns—

Jake: Yeah. He'll split up the group.

Ben: The wall will run right through the group and it can kill them in one or two shots, so that was the issue that they're talking about.

After a failed attempt on a different boss, Ben took a more active role in figuring out what went wrong by analyzing the combat logs to determine how the first group member had died and then

shared his findings with the group. The group then prepared to give it another try, now with more awareness of what to avoid.

The way Ben was being “carried” by his guild—that is, included in the raid group despite his sub-par gear—provides another example of an instrumental interaction. The purpose of this arrangement was to make Ben, and by extension the group as a whole, more powerful. By carrying Ben through content for which his character was undergeared, the group was helping him catch up much more rapidly than he could have without their help. This was a good investment on the group’s part because the sooner his character was geared appropriately the sooner they would fully benefit from his contributions. As the raiding party progressed through increasingly difficult bosses, however, there would come a point where they would have to drop him from the group because they would no longer be able to compensate for his character’s compromised performance. During the downtime between fights, I could hear the leadership discussing who to drop and who to keep onboard. It seems that their decision-making process was based on a variety of factors, such as players’ performance, the other available players from the guild, and maintenance of the right balance of character classes.

So far I have discussed instrumental interactions that occur within an already established group. Another category of instrumental interactions that factored prominently into Ben’s account was related to players moving from one guild to another. Guilds want to recruit the best players that they can, while players want to be in the best guild possible. As a result, guilds have websites that showcase their achievements and advertise open positions, while player submit

applications and undergo trials to gain entry. For example, Ben described being tested out by the first competitive guild that he joined:

I joined the guild, and like two minutes later, they're like, "Hey, look, we're going to test you out, put on your gear, we're going into Icy Sea," which was, at the point, the current raid tier, like *smacks hands together for emphasis* that was the current thing, that was the hardest, that was what everyone good was doing, and they *threw* me in there to a boss I had never done and then they made me tank, so I was on the front line, and I was *completely confused*, I had no idea what I was doing, but we killed the boss in one shot, and they gave me gear, and I was like "Well I guess I'm here now." Hahahaha. They were like "No, you did alright for your gear, so here, take these bracers, we're going to get you geared up, we'll see how you do."

The instrumental function of giving a potential new member a tryout is to ensure that only players who will perform adequately gain entry into the guild.

Ben has switched guilds several times throughout his career. In each case, he made the move because he felt he had outgrown his current guild's level of performance. Ben explained that it is important for him to have the sense that there are better players than him in the guild:

I kind of figured out after playing that when you're the absolute top in your guild, that's, when you're top one or two, that's when the pressure to move up a step really starts to show, cause you feel like you're kinda carrying people through things, you're like "Ugh, look at these guys, they're doing terrible, like, oh my god, I wish I was with players that could keep up with me." And eventually that grates on you enough that you bounce, and you go with players that can keep up with you.

Ben's goal was to be a skilled player doing the most challenging content possible, and this required that he was with a group of players that were on his level. When he had reached points

in his career where he felt that he could no longer improve as a player in the context of his current group, he moved up.

Dispelling stereotypes. At many points throughout the interview, Ben made reference to negative stereotypes about MMORPG players and how these generalizations frustrated him because he didn't think they were accurate. At one point I joked, "You're just breaking all the misconceptions tonight" to which he replied, "I'm trying. But that's because I, I, that's why I hate them so much, because they're not true of everyone." The primary stereotype that Ben is referring to in this example is of a socially inept and unskilled individual who thrives in a world where he or she can hide behind a computer and compensate for a lackluster existence in real-life through in-game success. The implication is that people who play MMORPGs are unable or unmotivated to do worthwhile activities and are instead wasting their time on a pointless one. It is also implied that *WoW* is easy enough for anyone to succeed at.

Although Ben didn't deny the existence of players who fit the negative stereotype, he insisted that at its most difficult levels, *WoW* is extremely challenging and the players who are able to play at these levels are highly competent individuals in real-life. His most complete statement on the topic is as follows:

I think the biggest misconception is that a lot of people who play *WoW* are the nerds that are hiding in their closet, and there are a ton of people who fit that description that play *WoW*, but as far as your high ranking players go. *dad walks through* What's up dad? *dad says hello* As far as your high ranking players go, you'll find they're not those people. The most successful group I was ever with had two doctors—like medical doctors—three engineers, a dentist, um, a war vet who was an engineer in the military. You know, these are intelligent people because in order to figure out these strategies and

to execute them repeatedly, you're not going to find your 12-year-old kids—they're not going to be able to do it. Your highest ranking guilds are extremely intelligent people who are skilled in real-life and out, and they have careers that, you know they make good money, this happens to be their hobby ha and they're very good at it.

As the above passage indicates, Ben made a parallel between in game and real-life skill and success, thereby legitimizing skilled *WoW* players as worthy of admiration rather than derision; if you respect doctors, engineers, and other professionals for the skills they possess, then it is only logical that you respect top-notch *WoW* players for their skills as well.

Ben also discussed women and dating in *WoW*. Though he didn't say this explicitly, the stereotype he seemed to be challenging was that people who date in *WoW* are undesirables who wouldn't be able to find a partner in real-life. He made an effort to disprove this characterization with regards to his relationship with Beth. Not long after mentioning her for the first time, he pulled up a picture of her on Facebook specifically to dispel the notion that female *WoW* players are all unattractive. He also made the point that their relationship was in no way inferior to non-*WoW*-initiated relationships:

It was actually by far the best relationship I've ever been in which is, um, odd to say maybe, because I've been in five relationships that all lasted more than a year, so I'm not unfamiliar with relationships, it's not like I latched onto the first person that I met. No, like I've been in relationships before that, I've been in relationships after that, easily the best relationship I've ever been with was the girl who I met on *WoW* hahaha.

When Ben referenced negative stereotypes, I had the sense that it was important to him to disprove them to me and, through my research, to a greater audience. He occasionally made

statements indicating that he was invested in the outcome of my research and was concerned about the way my other participants had represented MMORPG players. It's hardly a stretch to say that being a *WoW* player is an important part of Ben's identity and I think that on some level he was making a case for himself and others like him: intelligent, successful individuals who have chosen *WoW* as their hobby because it provides a worthy challenge.

Immersion. This theme is comprised of a somewhat loosely related series of experiences that Ben described in his interview that are usually considered immersive.

Ben indicated that he hadn't fashioned life stories or personalities for his characters like one would in a role-playing context. However, he did have a sense that each character was unique because each provided a different experience:

I just, you kind of, I think you play a little differently depending on who you're, what character you're on, just because, um, maybe something about how you as a person developed while you were playing that character, I'm not really sure, but I'd say I do play all my characters a little differently, I might be a little more snarky on this character or something haha but, um, it's kind of hard to put a finger on exactly why.

It seems that although Ben did not explicitly role-play, he still had a vague sense of inhabiting his characters.

Ben also described experiencing the action of the game viscerally. The nature of the experience varied depending on what character class he was playing. For example, I asked him what it was like to play his current character, a warrior:

Um, it's intense, it's my, I mean warriors are always melee, they're always up in the fight, so it's, I think I probably get the most intense, as far as really pumped up playing this

character, because warriors, um, they have abilities called charge, so you literally charge across the battlefield really quickly, and all their abilities are physical, they have no magical abilities, so I just, I kinda get this feeling/image that when you're in a fight, when you're doing a boss, when you're doing really well. And for some reason knowing that you're not doing a lot of damage kind of nullifies that, like I don't really feel very I don't feel it as strongly. But when I'm top DPS and I'm banging things out and I'm, you know, I'm on top of my game, and, you know, a new add spawns and I'll turn and charge, and hit a Raging Blow, and it crits, and it completely destroys his health and you just get really, really into it, and you feel really, you know, an intense kind of satisfaction and it's very visceral.

Ben contrasted this intense, visceral, pumped up feeling that he gets when playing a damage-dealing class to what it feels like when he plays a healer: “As a healer, it's almost more panicked, kind of, like oh my god, like holy crap, I have to save this guy, what is going on with my life.” He explained that as a healer, you have to constantly be monitoring everyone's health which means that you are more focused on looking at health bars than the action on the screen. You carry a lot of responsibility, because if you fail to allocate your limited resources effectively, someone will die and the raid will likely start to fall apart. Thus, when playing a healer Ben feels anxious and frantic instead of invigorated.

Ben also mentioned during the interview the experience of being intensely focused during boss fights:

It's really intense, because these fights—that's another thing—these fights, the longest ones with go 15–16 minutes and you're a *hundred percent* concentrated for those 15–16 minutes, you *cannot* think of anything other than spell, spell, spell, do this, do this, do that, oh god this is happening, okay next part of the fight, now I've gotta go over here,

um, absolutely insane having to focus on everything that you're doing, making sure you're using the right spells for the right situation.

Though the vast majority of Ben's time spent in *WoW* is fairly low-key and relaxed, this description indicates the intensity of engagement and focus during a boss fight.

Closing thoughts. My most significant take-away from the interview with Ben was a greater appreciation for the skill involved in playing an MMORPG. Prior to the interview, I thought that the highest achieving players were simply the ones who had created the most powerful avatars by sinking the most time into relatively straightforward content. Accordingly, I thought success was mostly a function of time spent playing the game rather than skillfulness. Ben explained and demonstrated that, although improving one's avatar is part of the equation for success, the best players possess a skill-set that is independent of their avatar's power level.

Jeff

Jeff was a 28-year-old white male who lived with his fiancée, Sara, in Pittsburgh. He grew up and attended college in the mid-west, where he majored in video production. After graduating, Jeff did video editing work in New York City for five years. One year prior to the interview, he moved to Pittsburgh to be closer to family and for the lower cost of living. He continued to work as a video editor at the time of the interview.

Description of the interview. Jeff responded to my post on Reddit. We scheduled the interview on one of the two nights that he normally raids. When I arrived, Jeff and his fiancée greeted me warmly. Jeff was tall and broad-shouldered with short brown hair and a full beard. He wore a flannel shirt and jeans. He offered me a drink and, only half-jokingly, mentioned that he

had a fresh batch of home-brewed beer. He guided me to a room in the back of his spacious apartment where his computer was located. Jeff had a large, clutter-free desk that housed a huge desktop computer, dual monitors, and high end speakers (he explained that he needs a robust setup for the video-editing work he does). The room seemed to double as a storage area on account of the shelves and other items (including brewing equipment) that lined the walls.

During the first half of the interview, Jeff sat turned towards me in his plush office chair. He spoke about his engagement with *WoW* in a straightforward, non-sensational way. He portrayed it as something that he had enjoyed doing for a long time and continued to fit into his life, but not something he saw as an inherently valuable activity. He answered questions readily, but looked to me to guide the conversation. As a result, the interview assumed a question-and-answer pattern of interchange.

When he began playing, he turned away from me and I watched his screen over his shoulder. For the first 10 minutes or so, he travelled around killing MOBs with the hopes of turning up a Lesser Charm of Good Fortune—he needed one more to buy a War-Forged Seal, which would provide him with a better chance of getting valuable gear during the upcoming raid. After he had acquired one, he joined up with his party, which was gathered around the raid boss they would be facing. The raid boss appeared to be a towering elemental creature composed of water. Though they had defeated this boss before, they reviewed their strategy before the fight began. Once the action was underway, Jeff often had to stop talking to me in order to focus on the game, though he would sometimes give brief descriptions of what was happening. Chat between group members was also fairly sparse during the fight; the raid leader was the most

vocal, periodically relaying instructions to the rest of the party. They beat the boss on their second try and made a failed attempt on the next boss, who they had yet to defeat. At that point they were an hour into their raiding session and took a break, during which Jeff and I wrapped up the interview.

Jeff's gaming career. Jeff didn't consider himself someone who characteristically played video games, though when he did get invested in a game, he tended to stick with it. The first game he played extensively was a MUD based on *The Lord of the Rings* called *The Two Towers*, which he characterized as "pretty much the nerdiest thing you could ever do." He played with a group of friends during middle school, often in the context of a sleepover or hangout. After a long hiatus, he picked up the game again during college. He also tried *WoW* for the first time during his college years. Many of his friends were playing it, but he found that he didn't have much enthusiasm for the game and so didn't play for long. It wasn't until about four years ago that he started playing *WoW* regularly, largely because the rest of his life was able to accommodate his gameplay. Over the past four years, he had played for varying amounts, sometimes as much as 30 hours per week. At the time of the interview, he was playing on a limited and fixed schedule: raiding with his group for three hours every Tuesday and Thursday.

Individual themes. Below are the individual themes that I found during my analysis of Jeff's interview transcript.

Harmony with real-life. Jeff emphasized that he began playing *WoW* regularly not on account of a powerful draw to the game, but rather because at a certain point, it fit into the rest of his life harmoniously. He explained that when he and Sara moved into a new apartment about

four years prior to the interview, their TV and his computer were situated in the same room. Because of this arrangement, it was possible for Jeff to play *WoW* while Sara watched TV—a felicitous solution to their longstanding difficulty with finding something that they both wanted to watch. Jeff explained that while Sara watched TV, he could play *WoW*:

I was able to be at the computer and still be engaged, you know, in talking to her and half-watching this show, and she would be like “Oh my god can you believe that just happened?” and I can, you know, I know what’s going on in these shows, but at the same time I’m not really watching them.

They both enjoyed this arrangement, which they referred to as “separate but together time.” *WoW* was well-suited for this purpose, since questing doesn’t demand constant attention, thereby making it possible for Jeff to unproblematically shift his attention between the game and the TV show. This arrangement made playing *WoW* more tolerable as well: Being with Sara and having a TV show playing in the background took the edge off the repetitive, boring quality of questing. Jeff characterized quests as “stupid errand[s]” that are not sufficiently interesting to warrant his full attention. Thus, he tended to be “20%, 25% involved, maybe up to 50%” with *WoW* while he watched TV with Sara. Jeff also noted that going out in New York City, where he lived at the time, was prohibitively expensive, so playing *WoW* was an inexpensive alternative.

At the time of the interview, *WoW* fit into Jeff’s life much differently than it did while he lived in New York City. His computer is no longer in the same room as the TV, so “separate but together time” was no longer possible. He now plays on a set schedule, raiding with his raid group for two three-hour sessions per week. He noted that when he played all the time, it was just another part of his daily routine, but now that he only played twice per week, he looked

forward to it. Furthermore, Jeff no longer quested or played other repetitive solo content at the time of the interview; instead, he exclusively raided with his group, which required intense focus. Thus, playing *WoW* went from being a pervasive background activity to an occasional, high intensity event.

Enjoying the sense of progress. Jeff emphasized that making progress though difficult content is central to his engagement with *WoW*:

The way I play the game—I mean there’s a lot of different ways to play *WoW*—and the way I like to play the game to be challenged with things ... when I log off I want to be, I want to have made progress during that time.

He said that his biweekly raiding sessions provided him with “something to you know, try to accomplish, because we are always doing different stuff in the game, trying to make progression through some of the harder, more difficult things that are happening, so it gives me like, a goal.”

The goals Jeff emphasized are related to progressing through the current raid:

I’m happy every time we make new progress in the raid, because the raids ... to me, as somebody who does the PvE²⁰ instead of the PvP stuff, raids are what you strive to do. And, the raids are split up into different versions, you know easier and harder versions, right now our group is pushing the harder, the hardest version, the heroic versions of a lot of the bosses, so we’ll spend hours trying to kill the same boss over and over and over, and then we’ll die, and then we’re like “Hey, maybe we should try this instead” and then we die and then it’s like “Hey, maybe don’t stand in that fire” and then we get past that part and then we die on something else so everyone’s learning, everyone’s adapting, and then when you think back to when you first “Alright here it goes, we’re going to pull this

²⁰ PvE stands for Player-versus-environment, which includes questing, dungeons, and raids—essentially any content where a player is playing against the entities in the game that are controlled by the software rather than by other players.

boss in like three seconds” and you die in the first three seconds of the fight, going from that point to “Alright we’re going to pull the boss in three seconds” and then you kill it, that, to me that’s what it’s, that’s why I play it, because there’s a challenge in front of me and it’s not easy to do.

Jeff was clear that his engagement and the satisfaction that he derived from it was structured around making progress towards and realizing challenging goals.

Increasing the power of his character in the service of raid progression was another pursuit that provided Jeff with a sense of having accomplished something:

Doing something useful to me means getting a new piece of gear, or getting valor to make the gear better, or getting tokens to get a bonus roll, which would in turn give you more gear, which you would use valor points to upgrade.

By increasing the power of his avatar, he would make that much more impact in each raid fight and the group would be that much more likely to succeed.

Jeff contrasted his pragmatic, progress-oriented emphasis with players who invest in the aesthetic and immersive elements of *WoW*. For example, he mentioned that some players seek out items just to improve the appearance of their avatar, whereas Jeff would not consider this to be “useful” and therefore not worthwhile. In this vein, he said that he has no interest in role-playing his character: “When I’m playing, I’m not a priest, I’m just me playing hah, you know?” When he talked about his character, he only mentioned functional attributes, such as: “One of the bad things about being a priest is that you don’t really have any spells that you can cast when you’re moving so you can really only move slowly.” The lore of the game was also of no interest to him. At a certain point during the raid, he closed a window that contained lore related to the

raid, indicated it was irrelevant to him. I asked if he ever had any interest in the lore and he replied, “No, I don’t care, I had no idea what that was even about.”

Despite the centrality of progress and goals to Jeff’s way of playing *WoW*, he added that the goals are, in some sense, “pointless.” I asked him what he meant by this and he elaborated as follows:

Jeff: It’s just a game, I mean, I used to play that *Two Towers* game all the time, and, since that was a typing game, I can type pretty fast now, but that’s all I got out of it, you know, that and *Lord of the Rings* lore, which I already knew a little about, so...

Jake: So you’re not playing for some—

Jeff: Yeah, I’m not, even, there was this article I read a while ago about somebody who was like “Yeah I’d love to hire *WoW* players to work for my company because they have these certain skills that hardcore raiders have and stuff,” and I’m like, “Yeah, that’s true I guess, but you’re also in an environment that is meant to be beaten, so it’s not like you’re all that awesome if you can do it—good job you did what you’re supposed to,” you know. So, it’s nothing that I’m gaining any skills from that I can use outside of the game.

There seemed to be a certain self-consciousness with the way Jeff talked about his in-game goals. Within the context of *WoW*, they defined for what they were worth striving. But from the perspective of life outside the game, they were pointless and useless.

Gear. Jeff spoke about the importance of gear several times throughout the interview. As indicated previously, acquiring improved gear is critical to progressing through a raid, while dispatching raid bosses is also how players earn better gear. Jeff highlighted the excitement he feels during the moments between defeating a boss and finding out what loot drops by portraying his internal dialogue as an animated, “What-do-we-get! What-do-we-get! What-do-we-get!

What-do-we-get! What-do-we-get!” He added that the anticipation was enhanced when there was a particular piece of gear that he was hoping to acquire. He tended to know in advance what gear his character needed by referencing online resources, such as a website called “Ask Mr. Robot,” which analyzed what gear your character needed. Jeff also spoke about using different in-game resources wisely to maximize the attributes of his gear, such as using Valor Points—one of many currencies in *WoW*—to upgrade gear. He explained that since he didn’t play enough to keep everything fully upgraded, he had to allocate his resources all the more wisely.

Socializing. Jeff explained that socializing with the people in his raiding group figured prominently into his enjoyment of *WoW*: “Everybody’s nice, everybody’s fun or funny, or just, interesting, and I just think it’s fun. If I was playing with my friends, we’d be having the exact same conversations that these people are having, you know.” He had been with his raid group for eight months (he joined after his previous group fell apart) and his guild for longer. One thing he especially liked about his raid group was the diversity of players:

We have a grandma in the group—she has a 4-year-old grandson, we have uh, two people from Wales—I think they are engaged—that play so it’s always fun making fun of their accents, and they make fun of us in the States, so it’s always interesting.

While Ben played, he put the voice chat over the speakers so I could hear the group talking. Although much of the talk was focused on the raid, there was plenty of banter as well. For example, at one point the group got engaged in a discussion about an actor on whom one of the women in the group had a crush.

In addition to joking around with one another over chat, playful interactions also extended into the game itself. For instance, Jeff explained that his favorite ability, which allows him to teleport another character to his character's location, can be used for fun during downtime. At one point during the game session, he used it to mess with another player:

So we need to get to the next phase and get up there and hit that button that pops up, but that guy was running up faster than me, so just for fun I grabbed him and pulled him back, which turned him around to face me, so he kept running forward but actually it was backward and then I hit the button instead of him.

Though Jeff usually enjoyed the company of his fellow players, the social dimension wasn't always agreeable to him. He noted that once they had to get rid of a member who made the rest of the group miserable by constantly trying to be funny and never shutting up. He also cited interpersonal conflict as the most common cause of an unpleasant raiding session:

Jeff: The times that are the worst are when we are trying to do different stuff, the more complicated stuff, the heroic bosses, and then somebody starts to get frustrated, and then it turns into people just blaming other people for losing, like "Why'd you do that it was all your fault!"—like "Whoa, chill out," when it gets like that. And when it gets like that early in the game, early in the raid, everybody gets real quiet—it's like when you're with a couple and they start to fight and it's like "Ooooo" and it turns into that, and it's very awkward. And then you have these two people that start fighting and then instead of having a third wheel you have a third, fourth, fifth, 10th wheel, you know? Hahaha.

Jake: So yeah, you're kind of feeling the tension.

Jeff: It's very, it's very unpleasant then, I mean nobody wants to be there anymore. and you can tell too because he gets frustrated because nobody's doing their job and then he

gets frustrated and then it gets awkward and then everybody starts to do worse so it makes it extremely unpleasant.

Jake: Hm, but people hang in there?

Jeff: Yeah, people hang in there. Sometimes if it's really bad it's like "Let's just call it, we're done, see ya later." And then everybody comes back and they are like, "Sorry I was being a bastard." You know? They know. That's the worst.

The impact that one person getting frustrated had on the group underscores that raiding is at its core a social endeavor. Jeff's description of someone getting frustrated also indicated just how attuned players are to each other, despite not being face-to-face with one another.

Instrumental interactions. Although Jeff made it clear that he enjoyed the companionship of his fellow players, he spoke more frequently about their interactions that were related to their mutual goal of raid progression, which was the group's *raison d'être*, after all. The satisfaction of making progress in a raid was also one of Jeff's primary motivations for playing, so it is unsurprising that he stressed the significance of interactions that are instrumental to success. It's worth stressing the point that in-game success comes as a result of the group performing well as a unit. Thus, success is inherently group success: "The best is when everybody works together and it's a well-oiled machine and is a team and does what they came to do." The instrumental interactions that this theme refers to are all related to achieving the ideal of a well-oiled machine.

The foundation for success is a group of players who are present for raids and satisfactorily perform their functions within the group. The first requirement necessitates the enforcement of an attendance policy. In Jeff's guild, members were expected to be logged in on

time each raid night unless they let the group know that they would be absent in advance, which gave the group time to arrange for a replacement. Jeff described an incident where the guild had to kick a member out once because he failed to log in on three separate raiding nights. Though this may sound like a strict policy for a video game group, the absence of one person results in a night wasted for the other nine people. In addition to being on time for raids, players must be competent enough to effectively carry out their role (i.e., tank, healer, DPS) and readily learn boss-specific mechanics. Having a reliable and talented group of players are the necessary conditions for the challenging work of formulating strategies to defeat raid bosses.

Jeff described the process of gradually developing and honing strategies that are tailored to the unique challenges posed by each boss:

So we'll spend hours trying to kill the same boss over and over and over, and then we'll die, and then we're like, "Hey, maybe we should try this instead." And then we die and then it's like, "Hey, maybe don't stand in that fire." And then we get past that part and then we die on something else so everyone's learning, everyone's adapting.

The process involves collaborating in order to get everyone contributing optimally:

Different mechanics happen and different things happen you'll find that like one person struggles with one thing, and you do what you can to help that person out, whether it's having them do it a different way, where maybe like, "Oh, you won't be able to attack the boss if you stand over here but then again, you won't get hit by that tornado." So, yeah, you try to figure stuff out to have the whole team work together a little bit better, or have one person change up one thing, so you can succeed.

Figuring out what everyone should be doing involves being able to think strategically about the fight mechanics. Before his group defeated the first boss, Jeff explained their strategy for beating him in detail:

The first boss, when you're doing him on heroic, there's one boss in the middle and you're attacking him, and once you get him down to zero life, he's still alive, but he explodes into these drops of water, and you have to kill these drops of water or heal them depending on what they are, as they go back towards the middle, and once they get to the middle, the boss reforms, and then you do it again. When you're doing the heroic version of that, there are these other things that he summons, I don't even know what they're called, but all I know is that if I attack them too soon, to kill them, they all come running over to me, because the tank was supposed to attack them first, and hold them, because, you know, he's the tank, these things can beat on him and nothing happens, but if I attack them first, they come over to me and they kill me super fast. And if they kill me, they go to someone else, and they kill them, if they kill them, they go to somebody else and then everybody dies. I'm sure you'll see that happen later. Um, but if you do it the right way—well that's the thing, if you do it too soon, that happens, if you end up doing it too late, you're going to end up dying because the more you attack the boss during that phase the more damage you take, because you're supposed to switch to these other little guys, but if you switch to them too soon they attack you, if you switch to them too late, then you die from the boss, so it's very important to do it at the right time.

When describing fighting as a group, Jeff emphasized their interdependence with remarks like, “You could really screw over the nine other people that you are playing with” and “A lot of little things like that impact more than just yourself.”

Jeff put the voice chat over the speakers, so I was able to listen in before, during, and after the fights. During the fights, talking was sparse and focused on the task at hand. The raid

leader spoke the most often, usually to give out instructions. Jeff explained, “I generally don’t say too much because there’s nothing for me to say that’s beneficial that the raid leader isn’t already going to say if it needs to be said, so I really don’t talk a lot.” After the group failed on their first attempt, they analyzed what went wrong and how to avoid it next time—in this case, it had to do with where everyone was positioned during different phases of the boss’s attacks. After a successful second attempt, they discussed their strategy for the next fight, which involved dealing with a mechanic that required them to pass something from one player to another. Here is a segment of their conversation:

Russell (raid leader): So, Andy on blue, throw to John on green, throw it to Mary on blue, and throw it to Jeff on green, so when he’s, when he’s doing his Desperate Measures, it’ll just be John and Jeff on green, um, and, yeah the DPS following it around, but, Mary and Andy will stay on blue until, once it’s dead you can run off and chase it.

Mary: Now I’m not sure what my cooldown is once I hit it that second time, um, hang on a second.

Jeff: Probably two minutes.

Mary: Um, yeah it says two minute recharge—is that going to be a problem?

Russell: No, but the second time it might only have one charge rather than two, so just let people know. When you’re throwing it to other people try and, since you’re usually not going to be able to do much or anything, with immunities up, just watch your timer and count it down as soon as you get it, so you’re throwing it to whoever in, “three, two, one,” throw it, so they know when to expect it.

Mary: Okay.

Russell: Cause you don’t want it to get a hit off and do a shit ton of damage to someone.

Mary: Okay, so I wanna count down when i'm gonna throw it off, right? Okay.

Russell: Right.

Although I didn't understand the finer points of what they were saying, it was clear that they had to communicate and coordinate their actions effectively in order to deal with that boss's particular abilities.

Sharing resources is another way in which Jeff and his fellow raiders interacted to further the success of the group:

A lot of the things I do too, I do to benefit the group, like if a certain piece of gear drops—which actually, the opposite happened last week, a certain piece of gear dropped and somebody else got it and I was like, “Ah, I really needed that” and he was like “Oh, you can have it” and I was like “Cool! Thanks!” you know? and I've done that before too, where I've gotten a piece of gear and the person was like “Ah man I really needed that piece” and I'm like “Here, take it, you need it more than I do, I mean it's going to help the group more if you have this one thing, so you take it.”

They also helped each other out by sharing the items that they could craft and gather on account of their avatars' professions. Jeff's character, for example, is an enchanter, so if another group member needs an enchantment, Jeff would craft it for him or her. Even Jeff's mount—a Grand Expedition Yak—had capabilities that benefited the whole group. From his yak it was possible for all party members to sell goods and reforge gear—activities that they would normally need to travel to town to accomplish. Reforging gear on the fly is useful during a raid: “So before we go into the boss fight, one of the healers, he plays one spec, he's a discipline priest most of the time, but then when he goes in to fight one boss it's better to be a holy priest for that, so he'll reforge all of his gear to be more suited towards a holy priest.”

Competence. When Jeff spoke about performance in *WoW*, he tended to emphasize the way the group performed as a unit over how players performed as individuals. When he did talk about individual performance, the emphasis was on being competent enough to perform one's function within the group. Performing one's role requires a great deal of skill and knowledge. Jeff spoke about his deep familiarity with his character's class and how he had his abilities linked to keys on his keyboard in such a way that he could hit the right one almost instantaneously in the midst of a fight (he noted that his large hands allow him to reach more keys than the average player!). He also explained that awareness, timing, and adaptability are important qualities for players to have—these are the capacities that make it possible for a player to take the right action at the right time, even when this means deviating from a plan. For example, “You all stack in the middle and that's a great plan, cause it needs to happen, but don't stack in the middle if there's poison under you, so it's like, figure out what's going on, you have to know what's happening so you can do what you need to do.” At one point during a fight, Jeff failed to have sufficient awareness of what was going on, resulting in his death:

So that was my fault I wasn't paying attention. I kept attacking this guy, and dispelled myself but not quick enough. But I died because like I said if you don't switch off the boss you take more damage, which is exactly what just happened. Now I have to run over here and kill all these little drop things. And I did a bad job because I tried to kill too many when I could have just focused on a few and actually killed them.

In this instance, Jeff's death led to the failure of that attempt at beating the boss, since the group couldn't recover from losing a player.

Always more to do. Another theme that came up at various times throughout the interview was Jeff's sense that there is always more to do in *WoW*. Early on, he spoke about the many activities one can pursue:

If you wanted to make a different character and play as a different class you could go and do that, play different things out, and do, and do different dungeons, and do different things that they have in the game, like seasonal things, and stuff like that ... "Oh it's Halloween, let's go do all those fun, different Halloween things they put in the game" ... you know.

At a later point I asked what keeps him playing, and he responded, "The fact that you can't win is good." Besides the absence of a victory condition, Jeff explained that the regularly released expansions prevent him from having the sense that he has reached the end or done everything there is to do. Instead, he played with the knowledge that there will always be another chapter, another raid, another territory, another set of gear, and so on. Jeff explained that he got especially excited to play when a new expansion came out:

The new expansion came out, it's called Mists of Pandaria, when that came out there was a whole new island that you were exploring, there were, they increased the level cap from 85 to 90, there were all new dungeons and raids and scenarios, and different classes and different races, and different talents, and everything, every time there's an expansion they kind of, at least slightly, overhaul something, I mean everything, and sometimes there's major overhauls and stuff. So there was more of a sense of urgency to play then just because it was all different, and I wanted to learn it, and I wanted to experience that.

It seems that knowing that the content of the game will continue to expand indefinitely makes it possible for players like Jeff to take up *WoW* as an ongoing pursuit rather than as a consumable piece of media.

Closing thoughts. Like Ben, Jeff emphasized raiding, teamwork, and socializing.

However, for Jeff, *WoW* seemed to be a much more casual pursuit in the overall scheme of his life—this disposition was indicated in his *Harmony with Real-Life* theme and the fact that he only played six hours per week. It seemed he wanted to express that although he enjoyed playing *WoW*, it wasn't something that he saw as inherently valuable. Despite this attitude towards the game, he took his responsibilities to his raid group quite seriously.

Shawn

Shawn was a 29-year-old white male who had lived in Pittsburgh since he began college in the city. He responded to the post on Reddit, indicating that he thought the study was a “cool concept.” During the interview, Shawn told me that he was a video game writer and, as one who also thinks and writes about games, was particularly interested in my research.

Description of the interview. When I arrived at Shawn's apartment on the night of our interview, he greeted me enthusiastically and then dashed back into his living room, indicating that he was in the midst of something. As I entered the room, I could see that he was playing a game on a vintage arcade console that occupied the corner of his living room. He later explained that it was originally a 1983 *Donkey Kong* console, later converted into a *Duck Hunt*, and then converted once again into a Nintendo *Player's Choice*, which lets the player choose between various Nintendo titles.

Shawn was tall and slim, and wore his dark hair pulled back in a ponytail. He was dressed in a Pittsburgh Penguins jersey and corduroy pants. His living room—which was where he played his MMORPG, *Final Fantasy XIV (FFXIV)*—was visually dominated by aqua-colored

carpeting. The walls, by contrast, were white and mostly bare. Several bookcases filled with neatly organized video games circled the room. In one corner sat a large LCD TV and in the other the vintage arcade consol. Across from the TV was a couch and large coffee table. Shawn was in the middle of his dinner (pizza and soda), so we chatted while he finished eating and then began the interview.

Shawn spoke in a confident, energetic, and almost theatrical manner throughout the interview. He used a sophisticated vocabulary along with a wide range of expressions; some, such as “that’s pretty much the size of it,” had an old-timey feel, whereas others were derived from contemporary internet culture. The fact that he was a video game writer was evident when he made allusions to meta-issues, such as how virtual economies work.

An hour into the interview he logged into *FFXIV*, which he played on his Playstation 3 hooked up to the aforementioned LCD TV, rather than on a computer. Shawn seemed invested in sharing as much as he could with me, making a point to show me different elements of the game such as questing and cut-scenes. As our time was running out, he lamented that he still hadn’t been matched up with a group in order to show me a dungeon. Just before we called it quits, however, he was assigned to a group, so I got to see him complete a dungeon run as well.

Shawn’s gaming career. Shawn began playing video games when he was three or four years old and they have remained a passion of his ever since. At the outset of college, he wanted to be a computer programmer, but soon realized that writing suited him better. He gradually built a career on writing about video games for various websites and publications. At the time of the interview, he played and reviewed games for work in addition to playing games during his

leisure time. On account of his long video-gaming career and his profession, he had played a wide array of games.

Shawn indicated that the *Final Fantasy* series was a longstanding favorite of his. It was also the series that introduced him to MMORPG genre, since *FFXI*, released in 2001, was the first MMORPG that he tried. Several people in his college social group were playing it, so he and his girlfriend at the time joined in. Shawn ended up playing *FFXI* for nine years. He made the switch to the new *Final Fantasy* MMORPG—*FFXIV*—about five months prior to the interview, since he was ready for something new. He explained that *FFXIV* has an interesting history: it was a complete disaster when it was initially released and the developers eventually took the entire game offline, revamped it, and then re-released it. Shawn didn't get onboard until after it was re-released.

He played for 40 hours a week on both week nights and weekends. Often, he alternated between playing and other activities such as chores and other media. He belonged to a small guild that consists of friends of real-life friends (he has only met one of them in person while traveling). However, they played significantly less often than he did, so he was often the only one from his guild logged on. Since his guildmates were usually not available, he used the “Duty Finder” (which is equivalent to *WoW*'s “Looking for Group” feature) to group him with other players to complete group content such as dungeons.

Individual themes. Below are the individual themes that I found during my analysis of Shawn's interview transcript.

Achievement orientation. Shawn characterized himself, according to a classic article on MUD players (Bartle, 1996), as an achiever type, which means that he was oriented towards earning in-game rewards such as leveling his character's professions, acquiring premium gear, and accumulating wealth. Shawn pointedly explained that "Bigger numbers are better, that's pretty much the driving force behind every RPG ever made, bigger numbers are better." While elaborating, he referred to a "sense of increase" that is part of the experience of making bigger numbers bigger. Since virtually all elements in the game are quantified—profession level, character attributes, damage, currency, and so on—all things can be increased, which, for Shawn, was the driving force of most game activities.

Shawn explained that *FFXIV* includes 33 different professions, some of which are combat-oriented, while others are disciplines of crafting and gathering. A character can specialize in all of the professions, though can only be in one professional mode at any given time. Thus, characters switch from one profession to another based on what task they are taking up in the game. Shawn had fully leveled his character on several professions and was currently working on a handful of others. This endeavor involves earning experience points by completing quests and dungeons, gathering materials, crafting items, and other activities that are relevant to each profession. To illustrate, he completed a quest for his botanist profession, which required that he gather 15 units of laurel for a townspeople who desperately needed it for a dinner party. Reading from the screen, Shawn explained, "This quest is going to yield me 90,000 experience points, a new hatchet, and some gear." Collecting the laurel took about 15 minutes, though his progress was interrupted by a band of brigands ambushing him. Upon being attacked, he switched to his

warrior profession, defeated them in combat, and thereby earned experience points for the warrior profession.

In *FFXIV*, each profession has requisite gear: Martial classes have weapons, fishers have fishing poles, botanists have hatchets, and so on. Ideally, gear is improved in tandem with the character's level. In fact, gear has levels that correspond to the profession levels, so it is easy to tell when a character is due for a gear upgrade. Since superior gear contributes to the power of the character, part of the process of leveling professions is acquiring gear by finding, crafting, or purchasing it. Shawn showed me a table that he had drawn on a white board that listed all of the pieces of high-level gear he was seeking.

The endeavor of leveling and gearing professions was Shawn's focus at the time of the interview—this was the form his achievement orientation to the game had assumed. He noted that there's "always a next thing to do," which means the game always provides an opportunity for further achievement. Shawn mentioned that an upcoming patch is rumored to include guild housing, which would introduce the possibility of purchasing, finding, or crafting furniture and other home goods. When I asked what was attractive about the possibility of having a house, he replied that it would give him a place to showcase "fruits of labor." He imagined a guildmate checking out his abode and thinking, "Hey, Shawn pounded through enough levels of carpentry to make that thing, isn't that shiny." He also indicated that "There's going to be, you know, 'my house is nicer than your house'—that kind of stuff is always going to be there." These quotes indicate that achievement occurs in relation to other players who can function as admirers and competitors.

Efficiency. Shawn indicated that he savors obtaining the fruits of his labors, though he emphasized that much of the satisfaction lies in the process, the “means to the end.” He went on to say, “To me, there’s a certain kind of pride in figuring out how to make big numbers get bigger as efficiently as possible, kind of a, ‘Okay I’m going to analyze the logic behind this, I’m going to read up on some of the mechanics.’” Thus, for Shawn, playing is about the striving for the markers of success as skillfully as possible, with skillfulness often taking the form of efficiency. Playing efficiently involves understanding the mechanics of the game and using that knowledge to maximize productivity. For instance, at one point during the interview he crafted a weapon using his blacksmith profession, which involves a mini-game that he explained as follows:

In order to complete the synthesis you have to fill up the progress bar by using actions that increase progress and decrease durability. If you want to make a high quality version of the item, you also have to increase the quality bar, which increases the probability of an HQ item, as indicated by the percentage underneath, but using those actions also decreases durability. You have to balance which of those takes priority and still finish crafting before the durability all goes away.

The simplicity of this mini-game makes it a convenient example of game mechanics, though most endeavors in the game are much more complex.

Shawn implicitly and explicitly mentioned efficiency and mechanics in relation to various elements of the game during the interview. On the most general level, he chose what to do each gaming session based on which activities would be most valuable according to various factors:

Really depends on what my priorities are at the time. I mean, right now just getting experience points and leveling up jobs is a little devalued because there’s a patch coming out in a couple days that is going to redo how experience points are gained on certain

classes. So I'm like "You know, I'm going to hang back and work on my gathering and my crafting levels at this time," while still doing some dungeons, getting stuff to get shinier pieces of armor.

In this case, Shawn was attempting to make the most of his time by selecting the activities that would contribute most in advancing him towards his goals. In a similar vein, it was clear that the way Shawn managed his resources—currencies, gear, crafting materials, and so on—was based on an understanding of how the economy works and therefore how to make the most of what he has. This approach to playing materialized in situations during the gaming session as well. For example, when Shawn was collecting laurel and was unexpectedly waylaid by brigands, he made the most of the opportunity by earning experience points for his warrior profession. He chose his warrior profession over other fighting classes that he had available because it was the most efficient response based on various considerations:

Jake: So why did you choose to be your warrior class instead of your dragoon?

Shawn: Well, as you can see from the data over there by the timer, this is a level 27 fight, and mostly, these particular fights are best for gaining experience points, and since my dragoon is already at maximum level, he can't gain experience points. I could have done it on my bard, but then I would have some durability issues, so I grabbed the next best thing. Also, the warrior can actually dish out some decent damage, whereas if I would have switched on to my paladin, it would take a whole lot longer to kill any particular MOB. More durable though.

Jake: So durability issues mean that you would have a greater chance of dying?

Shawn: Yeah. In this case against this level MOB, the warrior can get by just using his own abilities to heal himself, whereas—oh hello, you're not dead yet, let me fix that—whereas bard would have to dance around for seemingly ever just to get anything done.

When the brigands arrived, Shawn made a series of calculations to determine the most efficient and profitable response.

The most explicit discussion of efficiency arose with regards to something that Shawn doesn't have any control over: the random group of other players he is assigned to when he uses the Duty Finder to do dungeons and other group content. The best outcome is to get teamed up with a group of adept players and get through the dungeon as efficiently as possible. The worst outcome is the opposite: "People doing everything wrong, and my wanting to throttle them." He explained that efficiency is important "because some of these dungeons you might have to run it ten times per week to cap out at this particular currency that I've been collecting, so you know, if you have an option between 150 minutes or 300 minutes, you're going to save yourself the two and a half hours, right?" During the game session, I witnessed the unfortunate scenario in which Shawn got assigned to an incompetent group of players. In this particular instance, they were playing what was essentially a raid boss fight against a harpy named Goroda:

Shawn: She's going to create those big tornado zone things, and I'm going to get bounced around them, because the tank didn't pull her to the right corner fast enough, and then die again. Now she's going to call two little sister things, one of them is going to have a green line attached to her, and that is the one we need to focus fire on. And I'm dead again. And the folks in the fight don't even know the correct strategy because they're hitting the wrong one.

Jake: So this would be an example of an inefficient fight?

Shawn: Yeah. The red one just makes Goroda hit harder, and that can be dealt with more readily because usually the tank is fairly well geared and the healers can focus on him,

and they're fine. In this case, they decided to ignore the green one which just restores Goroda's health and is a lot more difficult to deal with in the long run.

The group continued to perform poorly until one frustrated player quit, which precipitated the dispersal of the remaining players. In Shawn's view, this was an instance of wasted time, since nothing was gained in the 15 or so minutes spent trying and failing. The reason for the failure was that the players didn't understand the mechanics of the fight.

Dungeons and other group content offers the most complex challenges in terms of mechanics. During the fight against Garoda, Shawn was playing as his dragoon profession, which happened to be the one with which he is most familiar. Thus, he was able to maximize his character's potential with ease, using his abilities and positioning for optimal damage output. By contrast, at the end of the gaming session, Shawn was grouped up to complete a dungeon as a white mage, which is a healer class—a role he rarely plays. At first, he struggled to make optimal use of the white mage's unfamiliar array of abilities and to stay on top of his responsibilities as the group's healer. He was surprised, for instance, how difficult it was to keep all of the party members poison-free. As time passed, however, he became increasingly competent. The following passage provides a sense of the mechanics that he was learning to master:

Shawn: Alright, I'm getting the gist of this a little bit better. It's a learning experience, it really is. Especially since there are two healer classes and they act very differently. *long pause* Good practice in any effect. Alright, we should be coming up on a boss room again. Oh come on. *long pause* Yeah getting the sleep rotation down is certainly making things a bit easier.

Jake: The sleep rotation of...

Shawn: Getting things slept so they're not dealing damage to the tank and basically further conserving my resources. Again, a thing as I've mostly played melee DPS before I've never even had to consider up until this point.

Jake: And your resources are what?

Shawn: Magic points and the time I have to spend between each cast.

It was instructive to see how he learned the mechanics and adjusted his approach for better results. In this case, he realized that using his sleep ability on a MOB reduced the amount of damage on the tank and other party members, which reduced the demand on the resources required to heal them. Sleeping a MOB proved to be a more efficient use of his magic points and time than just using healing abilities to try to stay ahead of the curve. Shawn clearly enjoyed the process of working out strategies for a new corner of the game and making himself that much better rounded of a player.

Plot progression. Shawn explained that *FFXIV* involves various plotlines that unfold as you level your character's professions. There is a main plot, a plot for each profession, and "prestige class" plots that occur once a profession is at max level. In all cases, a series of quests build on one another to form the bulk of the narrative, and cut-scenes at every five levels portray crucial events. Shawn noted that alongside his desire for achievement was excitement about progressing through plots:

Part of it is bigger numbers are bigger, part of it is that for each different job, whether it's, you know, archer, or blacksmith, or everything, there's a story line and a progression of plot, that goes along with you know just gaining levels and making big numbers bigger. So part of it is, okay I want to see the next event that's going to happen here, and a couple

of them really sink in, I can think of a couple particularly interesting bits of plot that paid off at certain points.

He reiterated that a big part of the motivation to keep slogging through the levels is getting to see what happens next; after seeing a cut-scene for the first time, his reaction is typically: “Okay that was really interesting, that’s going to drive me a little bit right after seeing that chunk of plot and making me want to get to the next point.”

Shawn showed me one of his favorite cut-scenes, which is the final cut-scene for the armorer profession’s plot. Prior to the scene, Shawn’s character has entered a competition with another member of the armorers guild (a cantankerous old man who is averse to the inclusionary policies of the current guild leader) to determine who can craft the best suit of chainmail. The scene portrays the series of trials by which the suits are judged against one another. While the scene played, Shawn theatrically narrated the action:

You didn’t know how she was going to test it and it turns out that she’s going to stick a guy in each suit of armor, and then send dudes to just beat the shit out of them. Filmed in nausea-vision. And the guildmaster is kind of shocked as shit that this is how it’s going down. The old curmudgeon of the guild is like “You think this is something, you wimp?” Heheha. And he’s still talking smack and armor is still standing! The admiral is quite impressed by this display ... and then takes matters into her own hands. **the admiral draws two pistols and fires a shot into each of the two subjects wearing the armor** Guildmaster’s a little bit upset, but, that’s what it was there for. **one of the subjects wearing the armor falls to his knees** But, oh hey look, his armor cracked under pressure, turns out the guy just couldn’t stand getting the shit beat out of him and then a gunshot wound. I win. That felt good. And when I talk to folks about the different crafting jobs, they say that the storyline for the armorer is the weakest, until the cut scene where it’s just like, “Okay, okay that was pretty darn cool.”

I asked Shawn if this was a big moment of satisfaction, and he replied, “Absolutely,” and attributed the sense of satisfaction to “getting to see that particular chunk of plot, getting to see this boastful curmudgeon finally get put back in his place, the fact that it took a couple of gunshots to do it—certainly entertaining. And you hear a round of applause ‘cause you just saw two guys get shot.” Witnessing this scene—along with Shawn’s enjoyment of it—gave me a concrete sense of how fully leveling his armorer profession was not only an achievement in terms of making big numbers bigger, but also the satisfying culmination of a story about which he cared about.

Busy work. As I have mentioned, I watched Shawn undertake a quest that involved collecting laurel during the gaming session. To complete this quest, he first had to travel to a certain area of the map that he knew was a suitable location to forage. Once he arrived, he set to work, which consisted of walking in a circle between four bushes while avoiding hostile mobs. When he arrived at each bush, he selected it and then navigated a “harvesting menu” in order to harvest the laurel along with whatever other flora there was to be found. After about 15 minutes of running through this cycle, he had collected the required amount. He admitted that, “There’s kind of a sense of busy work about it,” owing to the repetitive and undemanding nature of the task. He added, “I wouldn’t really do it as an entertainment value, I do it more as a means to an end,” yet, “there’s something relaxing to it, knowing that I accomplishing a goal, in a manner of speaking.” The combination of relaxation and productivity reminded me of my experiences of questing in *Rift*.

Later on, when Shawn completed the quest by delivering the laurels, he, with trumped-up indignation, exclaimed:

Shawn: There's your stinkin' laurels—I feel like I'm saying that a lot.

Jake: Hahaha—there's some resentment in that.

Shawn: Well, there were brigands, and I had to beat them down, so it took a while. You're welcome. Now I'll go back here—I don't think an MMO would qualify as an MMO if there wasn't just running back and forth for quests like this.

Despite the toilsome nature of quests like the one just described, Shawn considered such activities to be essential to MMORPGs. Curious about why, I questioned him about the significance of busy work:

Jake: Yeah. What do you think would be different if the game just didn't include this sort of stuff? Like it just had the more, I don't know, the content that requires your full attention?

Shawn: Um, well I don't know if I'd really miss it. *long pause* You know I think I actually would miss it a little bit if only because I can't really think of any other means by which to acquire these things, that would be, you know, anything other than just throwing money at it. At least here you can go out and harvest things for yourself if you know you're going to be cooking a whole lot of, say, acorn cookies, you can go out and get the acorns yourself, which will probably, in the long run, take more time and effort than just buying them, but at the same time it gives you a little bit more engagement, even if it is running around to the same four bushes.

At a later point I followed up my question with another on the same topic:

Jake: I'm curious, I'm getting the sense that there's a lot that this kind of game involves that is like not instantly gratifying, like it's stuff that you're sort of, like working.

Shawn: Absolutely, you're building up to it.

According to Shawn, advancement and achievement wouldn't work in the same way if actual labor wasn't a part of the system. He explained that the work involved in gathering materials is the only thing that prevents the market from being flooded, which would ruin the game's economy and the endeavor of "making big numbers bigger" along with it. The satisfaction that comes with achievement (both in terms of acquiring valuable items and in terms of overall success) is tied to the fact that it is not easily attainable—it requires actual work. The aforementioned importance of efficiency is also closely related to the presence of work, since its value is derived from reducing work, which would be meaningless if the amount of work was negligible. Thus, the sense of achievement that Shawn experienced relied on the inclusion of tedious work in *FFXIV*—this is why he would miss work-like activities if they were not a part of the game. Shawn also indicated that doing in-game work also provided him with a sense of engagement.

Multi-tasking. Shawn explained that he mitigated the drudgery of some of the more mindless activities in *FFXIV* by multi-tasking. While collecting the laurel, he noted that, "If you weren't here I would almost certainly have something on Hulu or something just to share my attention of the moments of downtime I get." His laptop would normally sit on his coffee table that is in front of the couch, so he could easily have both screens in view and switch his attention between the two of them. Of course, certain activities, like dungeons, required most of his focus, but when it comes to rote activities, "It's nice being able to patch something else in there."

Multi-tasking also came in handy with regards to waiting for the Duty Finder to assign him to a group, since it could sometimes take over 30 minutes. He could use this free time to work on in-game tasks, or for virtually any other activity around his apartment, such as “making fried rice,” “checking Facebook,” or playing *Mario 2* on his arcade console, as long as he was able to hear the notification that sounds when he is assigned to a group. He said that *FFXIV* is often on in the background while he was home in the evenings and that he would frequently switch back and forth between in-game and out-of-game activities.

Shawn stated that he liked to multi-task in all spheres of life and thus avoided activities that require his full attention, such as reading comic books. His penchant for multi-tasking seemed to be an extension of his orientation towards efficiency. *FFXIV* provided him with many opportunities to multitask in a way that offered him a satisfying sense of being efficient: He could be watching a TV show *and* gaining experience points, waiting for the Duty Finder *and* making dinner, waiting for his guildmates to log on *and* be playing an arcade game. Anything he did outside of the game was infused with an added sense of efficiency because it was paired with pursuits in *FFXIV*. Thus, through multi-tasking, the pleasure he derived from efficiency extended outside of the game and into real-life activities.

Convenience at the cost of immersion. When Shawn first showed me his character—a humanoid cat called a “cat-boy”—he explained that he didn’t have a designated class, unlike avatars in most MMORPGs. In *FFXIV* there are professions instead of classes, and a character can level all of the professions. Additionally, a character can instantly switch from one profession to the other simply by switching the primary weapon or tool that is equipped. Onscreen, the

character's whole outfit changes in a flash. When I asked him if he had a sense of his character having a back-story or personality, he replied that the fact that his character could master a wide range of professions all in one lifetime spoiled the illusion that he was a "mortal character" and that the "gaminess" and "artifice" of the game shows through in this way. I asked if this bothered him, and, comparing *FFXIV* to its predecessor, he replied:

On the one hand, coming from *IX* where to change jobs you actually had to go to an inn or a certain place and could only change it there, it does lose a little bit of the, kind of sense of immersion, but on the other hand it is so much more convenient, so much more convenient.

When Shawn read the text to the foraging quest, I got the sense that his mocking tone reflected his experience of the artifice of the game showing through in that instance as well:

reading from the screen "A dear old friend of mine has found himself in a predicament, he's in dire need of a botanist's aid." What the hell kind of predicament would you need to be in where you would need to enlist the help of a *botanist*?

In this case, the fact that the game is structured around providing opportunities for characters to gain experience points for each profession is in tension with the fact that there would only be so many townsfolk desperately in need of a botanist. There were other features of the game that I noticed that seemed to offer convenience at the price of immersion. For example, it was possible to teleport from one town to another, which diminishes the sense of distance between areas, though it saves the player from having to travel that distance. The duty finder serves as another example, since it saves the player the trouble—and the realistic experience—of having to seek

out companions the old fashioned way: going to the local tavern and approaching other adventurers “in person.”

The streamlined design of *FFXIV* makes it possible for players to be efficient. “Time sinks” (a popular term, though not one that Shawn himself used) such as travelling, finding a group, and switching characters are not necessary in the gameplay, saving players time that can be used productively. In this sense, *FFXIV* itself is more efficient at getting players into the action. Sacrificing immersion is the main tradeoff that Shawn mentioned, and, although he regretted this loss, he seemed willing to accept it.

Imperfect communication. One thing that stood out to me during the gaming session was how limited communication was between Shawn and other players—he probably only sent out two or three messages during the entire hour-and-a-half that he played. One contributing factor was the fact that Shawn played on a PlayStation 3 without a keyboard or headset, which meant that he had to input messages by navigating an onscreen keyboard. This proved to be slow and cumbersome, creating a significant interruption to the flow of play. Shawn confirmed that because of the time and effort it takes, he only sent messages when it was essential.

The paucity of messages surprised me since I had the understanding that frequent communication was vital to coordinated group activities such as dungeons. Shawn explained why sending messages isn’t as essential as I had thought:

Jake: Yeah, so it sounds like, it seems like when you do the dungeons and raids you have to cooperate, right? I mean it sounds like it’s not...

Shawn: We do, but the end game stuff really is so familiar to everyone right now, that you know where you are, and it's just kind of taken as read.

Jake: So as long as everyone knows their stuff you actually don't really need to say much to each other to pull things off.

Shawn: Exactly. And even then, if there's something I need to say, I'll say it, but there isn't really that much you need to say, if everyone's ... again we're in that lull where everyone is so familiar with this material that more often than not you're just going to get in and go.

In another vein, Shawn indicated that the difficulty of sending messages to other players could actually be an advantage when he got frustrated:

Admittedly, my playing on PS3 helps my temper a little bit, because sometimes I might be a little more caustic than I prefer to comport myself, but if I actually want to tell them off, I have to type everything in using a D-pad and buttons, and I just don't want to take that time so I keep my mouth shut.

In these instances and others, Shawn indicated that he views the barrier to communication imposed by playing without a keyboard as unproblematic.

During the game session, I observed that, in lieu of sending messages, players communicate using a marking system, which allows them to place symbols over MOBs that are visible to other players. Marking a MOB doesn't have a set meaning, but often players can infer one based on the context. For instance, during the raid boss fight, Shawn marked a MOB, hoping that the party would get the message that they should attack that one first (they didn't). Later on when Shawn was doing a dungeon with another group, the tank marked two of three MOBs, leading Shawn to believe that he should cast Sleep on the third:

Shawn: Okay, now that I've got his targeting down, I know which one I can safely sleep, and then black mage just wakes that one right back up.

Jake: What do you mean now that you have his targeting down?

Shawn: Now that I'm realizing "Okay, when he marks two targets, that means that there's actually three, and the unmarked one should be slept."

Jake: Mmm. So you have the Sleep spell?

Shawn: I do. I just recently realized that I do.

Jake: Okay. So how do you know that that's what he—

Shawn: I, from how other tanks have operated in the past, it's mostly an educated guess.

Jake: Uh huh.

Shawn: And that time there's not a third, so I'm just going to Sleep the second one. May have defeated my entire presumption there.

Jake: Hahaha. So it seems like you really have to kind of operate on a kind of an imperfect communication system.

He agreed, and went on to explain that he used to play on Japanese and international servers, so he is used to relying on indirect communication.

Though none of his guildmates were online during the interview, he indicated that communication is almost as limited with them as it is with players he doesn't know. This defied my expectation that Shawn would want to be able to chat with his friends so as to enjoy their company, but he indicated that it was not a priority:

Shawn: Um, well I don't really communicate with that much of anyone except, you know, the people in my guild, and they're the ones who are actually worth typing things

out—I mean I could get like a USB wireless keyboard but the upgrade that it would pose to my current play is minuscule at best, I don't feel like spending the money.

Jake: Huh, so it really must limit your ability to type things to each other, if you're doing it through ... I've never done that so I'm not sure, but it seems like it would take a long time to type anything.

Shawn: It does, which is why I usually save my words for if there's something I actually really want to say, or you know, if it's one of my friends, who needs a response from me, they get a response, even if it takes me longer to type it.

He added that in rare instances he hooked up a keyboard for the purpose of teaching them new content, since in that case there was no way to avoid sending a significant number of messages. Most of the time, however, he wasn't able to quickly and easily communicate with his friends.

Instrumental interactions. Although Shawn didn't utilize *FFXIV* as a medium to socialize, other players still factored significantly into his experience, since he relied on them to complete group content such as dungeons. Shawn explained that when he was assigned to a group by the Duty Finder, he hoped to be paired with other players who knew how to complete the dungeon efficiently, thus furthering his achievement-oriented goals.

The fight against Goroda, which pitted Shawn and seven other players against a raid boss, was one instance in which Shawn frequently remarked on the instrumental interactions between players. The group proved to be incompetent, offering a prime example of what Shawn hoped to avoid. Shawn was most vocal about the failures of the tanks, with statements like: "Tank not nearly moving fast enough, managed to wipe most of us," and, "Why are the two tanks on top of each other? This is going to hurt bad." He explained that the main tank should be keeping the

boss still, making everyone else's job easier, thereby boosting the overall performance of the group. Shawn's character, for example, dealt extra damage when he attacked the enemy from the flanks and rear—this was more easily accomplished when the MOB was stationary. He made similar remarks about his companions during the dungeon run that occurred later in the gaming session:

Now this is normally the point where ... (a) these little MOBs running along the sides would be taken care of, and (b) the other caster would consider throwing out a couple heals himself. That doesn't seem to be the case. Ideally the tank would be holding all of those MOBs simultaneously and would not have had the MOB standing inside of the room to poison everyone right at the beginning of the fight.

In this case, the demands on him as the group's healer were greatly increased by the tank failing to prevent everyone from getting poisoned and failing to prevent the less durable characters from being targeted by MOBs. Shawn also noted that ideally the other player with some healing abilities would have pitched in. Shawn's commentaries during both the dungeon and the raid boss gave me a vivid sense of how the actions of other players had a considerable impact on his experience despite minimal communication.

Since Shawn was playing an unfamiliar profession (white mage) and role (healer) during the dungeon, he made his share of mistakes too.²² At one point, he accidentally locked himself out of his healing abilities, fatally leaving the group without a functioning healer. He reacted by saying, "Uhhh, well, that was stupid. Hehe, now I feel horrible!" He remarked on his shortcomings as a healer at other points as well:

²² One might wonder why he would have played as a healer during the interview if that was not what he usually played. The reason is that he wanted to get assigned to a dungeon as quickly as possible, and since there tended to be fewer healers than tanks and DPSs, signing up as a healer usually speeded up the process.

Shawn: Aw shit.

Jake: What happened?

Shawn: My targeting got messed up. And we're currently in combat so I can't raise him either.

Jake: So the paladin died?

Shawn: Yup, cause I'm not very good. Well admittedly I don't really have very much practice at healing. I want to call it that before I get into any particular slights against my own skill.

Shawn's reactions to his mistakes gave me a sense of how responsible he felt towards the players with whom he was randomly grouped. He confirmed that he had a sense of responsibility to other players in an email following the interview, in which he stated that it is important to him to "hold up [his] own end" and "make everyone else's run that much better because [he's] prepared."

During the dungeon run, Shawn remarked on how playing different classes and roles improves one's capacity to be a team player:

Shawn: I think it's one of those situations where the more you play, the more diverse your experience the better it is in the long run. Cause instead of just thinking you know what the healer has to do in a circumstance, you actually have hands on experience knowing "Okay, this is where the healer wants me to be."

Jake: Yeah.

Shawn: And then that contributes, like I said, to how everything flows together and how at some point you don't really need so much communication because not only does everyone know the fight in and out, but they know multiple aspects of the fight.

Jake: It's almost like you have to have a certain kind of empathy for what other people are trying to do and how what you're doing is affecting what they're trying to do.

Shawn: I certainly agree. And I feel like, you know, specifically these Final Fantasy MMOs where you can play all of the classes on the same character really encourages moving throughout the classes and learning those things a little bit more intimately that you would if you had to pick one class and stick to it.

The ideal that this exchange suggests is one in which each player is attuned to the circumstances of every other player, which has the effect of optimizing the group's performance. Achieving this degree of awareness is especially valuable in a context where direct communication is difficult to actualize.

All of the above indicates the degree to which players interact as a team. Players must be aware of their role-based responsibilities and, ideally, how to assist other players with theirs. When the members of a given party were successful, Shawn felt a satisfying sense of things having gone well. When players struggled to play adeptly enough, he became frustrated. And when he was the one struggling to fulfill his role, he felt a sense of guilt for failing the group. All of these scenarios speak to the interactive nature of group content.

Feeling at home. At one point, I asked Shawn why he had chosen to play *FFXIV* over other MMORPGs, since they all offered him the chance to pursue achievement in the manner that he described. He explained that since he had played all of the *Final Fantasy* games to date, he was at home in the world of *FFXIV* in a way he wouldn't have been in other games:

I mean, I've played a little bit of actual real time strategy *Warcraft* so I know a couple of the things, but if I tried playing *WoW* I'd just go "what the heck is any of this supposed to

be?” Whereas, with *XI* and *XIV* I can go “okay those are Chocobos, I can see how this is working out, there’s going to be a guy named Cid right ... good” and it’s hitting all of these touchstones and making me feel at home in it.

At another point, Shawn noted that, beyond being set in the *Final Fantasy* universe, *FFXIV* is suffused with references to content from other *Final Fantasy* games, often for the sake of humor. Shawn enjoyed this playful dimension of the game content and the feeling of being in on the joke:

There’s a kind of referentialness to it that I find entertaining from a humor perspective mostly because it’s exactly the kind of stuff that’s running through my head as well and they’ve tried to smash together as many *Final Fantasy* references as possible. Like you can go through a cut scene and go “Okay that’s from *FFVIII*, they’re referencing something from *FFVII*, that’s a recurring theme, that’s a recurring theme” and they’ve just tied it up into an MMO that I enjoy playing. I suppose it’s my familiarity with everything else in the series and how they’re taking another look at it.

All of the familiar references gave Shawn a sense of intimacy and at-homeness: “It’s one of those things where the more you know about the series the more you get it, the more you get the in-jokes, the more you get the references, and it feels a little more intimate to you.”

Long-term Investment. Shawn expected that he would play *FFXIV* for a long time, largely because the game would continue to expand: “You know how MMOs kind of cycle: ‘Okay here’s a new patch and a whole lot of content, and then roll roll roll, you get through that, ‘Oh here’s a whole bunch of new content.’” At the time of the interview, Shawn anticipated the release of the next patch, which was expected to add PvP, new dungeons, updated versions of old

dungeons, and, as I mentioned previously, guild housing. The anticipation of future updates keeps him invested even after the existing content has become stale:

Compared to a lineage of Final Fantasy games where what was on the disk was pretty much all there was, the fact that you know expansions are released and patches are updated, there's you know a refreshment of content. Even if I get to a point where I'm not so, I'm not as interested in this as I might have been before, there's still a part of me that going, "I'm going to stick around because I'm expecting this."

In Shawn's case, "sticking around" doesn't just mean playing something else until the new patch is released—he was actively preparing for it by diversifying his resources so he could get a jump on the new content. He noted that, because of the development team's track record, he had confidence that future updates were worth the wait: "With the new patches that they've got rolling out, it seems like they've really got the timing down. More so in this than there ever was in *FFXI*, there's a feel of connection between the development staff and the players." Shawn's expectation that the world of *FFXIV* would continue to expand at a satisfying rate made it possible for him to make a long-term investment in the game; he could continue to enjoy the "fruit of his labor" as the game unfolded indefinitely.

Closing thoughts. Shawn was primarily oriented to mastering the content of his game, not only in terms of being a skillful team player when it came to combat-oriented group content, but also with regards to determining the most efficient way to approach economic activities. In both instances, he relished the challenge of analyzing the game's underlying mechanics. Shawn also delighted in the narratives and the familiar thematic backdrop of the *Final Fantasy* universe. I had the sense that Shawn was very much in his element when he played *FFXIV*.

Crystal

Crystal was a 39-year-old white woman. She lived with her husband, Peter, in his parent's home, which was located in the Pittsburgh area. She grew up in rural Pennsylvania, then moved to the city in the late 1990s to pursue a degree in computer animation and multimedia. Though she hadn't yet found a job in that field, she hoped to someday. At the time of the interview, she worked for a large corporation as a "pencil pusher."

Description of the interview. Crystal found one of the flyers that I had posted at a local gaming store. She informed me that both she and her husband have played *WoW* for many years and that she was eager to participate in my research. We scheduled the interview for a Sunday afternoon, since she had the most time to play on the weekends.

When I arrived for the interview, Crystal greeted me and guided me up to her and her husband's bedroom, which was where their computers were located. The room occupied the entire attic level of the house and had a pleasant cave-like feeling due to dormer windows, clay-colored paint, and sloped ceilings. The decorations made it feel more like a game store than a bedroom: The walls were liberally decorated with *Star Wars* memorabilia and costume props and several bookcases filled with neatly organized books, many of which were related to gaming. Crystal and Peter each had a computer desk that sat about six feet from one another. Nearby was a couch oriented towards a TV. For most of the interview, Crystal and I sat side-by-side on the couch. Peter was present for the entire interview, sitting nearby at his desk. He alternated between playing *WoW* and painting a miniature with his back turned to us. Though he

occasionally made a comment or answered a question from Crystal, for the most part he stayed out of the conversation.

Crystal was on the shorter side and somewhat overweight, with a friendly, round face and lively eyes. She had her straight dark hair pulled back into a bun and wore pajama bottoms and a black tee-shirt that said, "I'm not a minion, I'm upper management." Peter was thin, had a long ponytail, and wore glasses, sweats, and a fleece pullover. Crystal was friendly and accommodating, making sure I had what I needed throughout the interview. She had an energized, unfiltered, and blunt way of speaking that was punctuated by laughter, groans, and other expressive vocalizations.

Crystal's gaming session was different than those of my other participants in that she spent the entire time showing me her different characters and their various costumes instead of playing game content per se. I could have requested that she do a dungeon, but since the characters and costumes seemed to be at the heart of her engagement with *WoW*, I decided that it was more important to learn about them.

Crystal's gaming career. Crystal had enjoyed fantasy books, miniatures-based gaming, and pen-and-paper role-playing games since her teens. At the time of the interview, she played *Werewolf*, a pen-and-paper RPG, with Peter and a group of mutual friends on a weekly basis. She had also been a long-time *Star Wars* fan, and belonged to a *Star Wars* costume group, which involved making her own costumes and participating in group functions such as charity events. She had also participated in live action role-playing and reenactments. Crystal viewed *MMORPGs* as part of the same family as her other hobbies, especially role-playing.

The first MMORPG that Crystal played was *Final Fantasy XI*, which Peter played too. When *WoW* was released in 2004, he switched to *WoW* and encouraged Crystal to join him. She was initially resistant to the idea because she felt invested in the world of *Final Fantasy* and didn't particularly like the cartoony graphics of *WoW*. However, she gave it a try and never looked back. At the time of the interview, Crystal typically played for a few hours after work each weeknight. On the weekends, she would play for longer stretches.

Individual themes. Below are the individual themes that emerged during my analysis of Crystal's interview transcript.

Grinding. For many players, fully leveling a character is just the prelude to the endgame, which is where the real action starts. This was not the case with Crystal; she explained that she loved leveling characters and that once she had fully leveled a character, she preferred to move on to leveling another rather than engage in endgame content: "For me, it's just going from 0 to 90 and then once I hit there, you know that's cool."

Crystal's approach to "level grinding" or "power leveling" consisted of repeatedly running her characters through dungeons with pick up groups, which is the fastest way to gain experience points:

When I am level-grinding, I don't quest. I don't go out of my way to go here to there to here, you know, go over there, kill so many people, come back. I don't do that. That's too time-consuming to me. All I do is when I hit 14 or 15, go straight into the dungeons, and that's all I do. To me that's the fastest way of leveling.

She had fully leveled nine of her dozen or so characters using this approach, and was actively working on another pair (she preferred to work on two different characters at a time so she could alternate between them for the sake of variety).

Her typical night of *WoW* involved completing as many dungeon runs as she can. Since she didn't belong to a guild, she used the Looking for Group feature to link up with other players, since dungeons require a party of five. Depending on how quickly she got assigned to groups, she could complete between two and six dungeons in an hour. Her attitude toward dungeon runs was: "Get it done, get the experience, get the loot, get out of there, done."

One of the consequences of Crystal's approach to power-leveling was that she had done each dungeon many, many times. How many?

I do have my favorites and stuff like that, but I've done every single dungeon 100s of times. At different times, you know, like I'll have a lowbie²³ versus, you know, my highbies, you know, but, yeah, it's, I've done dungeons hundreds and hundreds of times. There are 75 dungeons in *WoW*—if she really did mean all of them and her estimate of a 100s of times each is accurate, she has completed at least 20,000 dungeon runs overall! As a result, she has become intimately familiar with these virtual spaces:

They're so familiar, yeah, I mean I know every little crook, crevice, I know where I'm going, you know, I can, with my warrior right now, it's crazy because half the people are just trailing behind me cause I'm just boom, next person, boom, next person, I'm just going crazy, pulling everything, you know, as long as the healer can keep up with me, then I'm going through that dungeon in five seconds, you know. They almost yell at me

²³ A lowbie is a low-level character while a highbie is a high-level character.

to slow down because they need to loot everything, cause I'm not concerned about looting either, I'm just boom, next person, boom, next person.

The bread and butter of Crystal's engagement with *WoW* was running through these dungeons, time after time, character after character, slowly grinding out levels.

Crystal indicated that she enjoyed the sense of progress and achievement that comes with leveling characters. When I asked her to describe what a typical night of character-grinding feels like, she replied: "To me it feels good because I see progression, I see that I'm working towards my goals. If I see that little bar moving, then I'm happy." When she gets a character to max level, she feels a sense of completion: "Then that progress bar goes away at 90 haha and then that's it!" I got the impression that Crystal enjoyed the straightforwardness and familiarity of leveling characters and the definite endpoint of hitting level 90.

Crystal did sometimes play with characters that have already been fully leveled, but not for the purpose of making them more powerful. To do so would involve grinding for gear, since once a character is fully leveled, the only way to increase its power is via better gear. Crystal explained that she abhorred the process of grinding for gear, which, in the endgame, is done by completing daily quests for reputation points. Daily quests, or "dailies" as she sometimes called them, are quests that can be done once per day. Each time a daily is completed, the character earns reputation points, or "rep." Thus, a player who is grinding for rep would do the same handful of quests every day for as long as it takes to gain the number needed to purchase a given piece of gear. Crystal was also outspoken with regards to how much she disliked the daily quest format:

I'm not gonna, like those same five quests every day, and I have to go back to that place again and again and again, it just does not do it for me. I can't do, I can't do those. My husband can, I can't, no, I, *noooooo!!* Haha.

She explained that being required to do the same thing every day was unbearable, especially since she was playing for her own enjoyment. In addition to disliking the format of dailies, Crystal was also deterred by the fact that acquiring a new piece of gear provided her with only a fleeting sense of accomplishment, since there will always a better piece at some point:

It's just something in my head that gear grinding to me ... and and too, I know this upsets my husband too, is like, once you get the best gear, within a few months, it's crap, it's crap. And you have to grind it all out again ... I just don't, I think it's the uncertainty cause once you get that best gear, there's nothing out there that says that's it. But once you hit 90, that's it, there's nowhere else for you to go.

Because Crystal was not part of a guild and therefore couldn't raid, daily quests were the only avenue by which she could acquire the next level of gear for her characters.

At a certain point, we both noticed the apparent contradiction between her attraction to level grinding and her aversion to gear grinding, since they are quite similar in terms of both content and structure:

Crystal: I have, I've tried, it's just, it never seems, like I can't make myself do that same thing, those *dailies*—that's an evil word for me—dailies—is like, ugh, monotonous. But yet I like repeated stuff, so, I don't know what it is about it that, I guess it's the forcing me to do it.

Jake: Hm, yeah because you sort of do the same dungeons daily.

Crystal: Yeah, so I do that, but I don't understand why I can't get over, why does instances not bother me but dailies do?

Jake: Yeah. Is that just a mystery for you?

Crystal: It's a mystery, it's a complete mystery. Because Peter loves them. My husband can do dailies till the sun doesn't shine. And he's, you know, it's a good way to get cash and money and all that other stuff, but I just can't, *I can't do it*, and I don't know why, I don't know, it's a complete mystery, I have no idea why I don't like it, cause you would think, with the way that I am I would love it but I can't, I don't, nooo!

Jake: Well it seems like the thing that—

Crystal: Cause it's got a progress bar too, because you can see the reputation going up and up and up, but I don't know, I have no clue why that bothers me so much, it just does. That is really strange.

Jake: Is this something that you've been aware of or is this something that just, us talking about now—

Crystal: Yeah I just never really thought about it until now, and it's just like, well I do like all those things, so why can't I stand it? And it's just in my head, it's like that word "daily" is just like ahhhh! *sigh* And you would think I would love it because it's the same stuff, but I don't, and I don't understand it, it's a weird thing.

She couldn't stand the monotony of doing the same quest every day, yet her activity of choice was repeatedly running the same dungeons. She felt motivated by the progress bars for experience filling up, yet not for the progress bars that corresponded to reputation. She chose routine, yet couldn't stand to have it imposed upon her. Although she couldn't say why, it seemed that grinding was at the heart of what Crystal loved and hated about *WoW*.

Having many characters. Typically, players have a primary character (called a “main”) that they strive to make as powerful as possible. Crystal stated that the idea of having a main didn’t appeal to her; instead, she preferred to have many characters, so that she could play as many of the 11 classes as possible. Having a wide range of options at her disposal allowed her to tailor her experience at any given time:

I like all the different characters, because if I’m healing and stuff is wiping or I’m tanking and things are just not working out correctly, I’ll just switch to DPS and just go crazy, but I have that option you know, that’s what I like about it: if I don’t want to do one thing I don’t have to.

The capacity to choose from an array of roles allows her to match her function in the game with her mood:

I can do whatever I want to do depending on what my mood is and you know I have it at the maximum amount that I’m allowed to have—I might not have the best gear, but I can still go out and do it, it’s just, do I want to do it?

As I describe in more detail later, each character’s function (along with his or her personality), called forth a different mood for Crystal. Thus, she was able to match or modify her mood through her choice of character.

Having so many maximum level characters also made it possible for her to have each profession fully leveled on her account (each character can practice two of the 11 possible professions). In *WoW*, a profession makes it possible for a character to either gather a certain type of raw material or craft a certain type of item. Often, players in guilds will freely share their gathered materials and crafted goods with one another. It is also possible to buy these items at the

auction house from other players. Since Crystal was not in a guild, she covered all of the bases with her own characters instead:

I almost have every single profession covered at the maximum level, so if I need a jewel for one of my characters, this character has it, so I don't have to go to the auction house and waste my money on somebody else to do my work. I'll go out and grind the crap out of my materials. I'm not going to sit there and spend thousands of gold.

In addition to being able to outfit all of her characters with crafted items, she could offer them to Peter's character as well, which she found satisfying. Her array of characters occasionally came in handy in other ways too. For instance, at one point she fully leveled her rogue to help him earn a particular achievement:

Crystal: Peter needed help with only a rogue, a rogue, there's a certain item that Peter needs to increase one of his, uh, his reputations, and you have to go up into this instance and steal lock-boxes—pickpocket them and only a rogue can pickpocket, so I had to max my rogue out so he could go into this place and pickpocket all these boxes so he could turn them in for rep[utation]. But he doesn't like level grinding, I do.

Jake: So it worked out.

Crystal: So it worked out. I had to have one, I had to have a 90. He needed a rogue, you know, to finish up his title and so it just happed. So what he'll do is he'll take my account over, go take my rogue, do what he's gotta do, and then, so he'll just, he'll hijack my character for a little while. So then, some of the things I do for my husband is he loves those achievement things and stuff so I'll help him out finishing out what the best gear is and tell him what he needs—that kind of stuff.

Having many different characters expanded the scope of what Crystal could do and experience in *WoW*.

True characters. Crystal's characters were more than different combinations of classes, professions, and other functional attributes—they were characters in the true sense of the word. She created a back-story and personality for each one, which was usually reflected in their class, specialization, and gear. Some of her characters had been “with [her] forever” and she spoke of them fondly. She explained that she was in the habit of creating depthful characters for pen-and-paper RPGs, so it was only natural that she did the same in *WoW*:

I've started with pen and paper. To me, role-playing—and that's why I think I'm on a role-playing server, and I do this through my own MMOs, but role-playing is not mainstream anymore. I mean, pen and paper is a lot different than MMOs: more character concepts, more coming up with ideas, costumes, personalities, feelings, you know, that kind of stuff, and that's not really done as much with MMOs.

Role-playing (RP) servers are designated for players like Crystal who want to role-play their characters. These servers are the minority in *WoW*, accounting for approximately a fifth of total servers.

Crystal spent the gaming session showing me several of her characters while describing their personalities and back-stories. One of them was her orc mage:

I made sure she had the blue eyes, but she has the green skin, so kind of like Thrall²⁴ where she might be more human, like maybe be more like a half-breed. But she was trained by humans and stuff like that, so that's why I kind of gave her a mage, because a lot of the mages and teachers and schoolings—it's not quite orcy, you would think orcs are more like, shamans and stuff like that so that's why I kind of gave her more blue eyes and she more, looks a little bit more like a—she's not tribal or anything—more human, has a human background a little bit or maybe gets along better with humans than most

²⁴ One of the characters in the *WoW* narrative.

orcs would, so that's kind of like my mindset with her ... so I figured she would be more of a, you know, she's not quite all orc, so orcs might actually distrust her and that's why I kinda gave her the blue eyes cause it's unusual, for her, so that's why I figured she might have a little bit of human in her somewhere maybe in her background or something, she just never quite was a full orc but eh.

One piece of gear that this character had equipped made it possible for her to understand the communications of Alliance characters (the faction consisting of humans, dwarves, elves, and other orderly races), which are usually unintelligible to members of the Horde (the opposing faction to which orcs belong). Though this item didn't convey much of an advantage to Crystal's character in practical terms, she valued the way it reflected her character's familiarity with humans. She also noted that this character had always been a fire mage and, despite the fact that frost mages are more powerful at this particular point in time, she wouldn't change specializations because it would violate the integrity of the character.

Crystal's imaginative involvement with her characters extended beyond their roles and functions within the game. For instance, she imagined that her blood elf paladin was, among other things, a cat lover:

My paladin to me is not somebody that's snooty, it's somebody down to earth, is used to working with his hands, you know, get the job done more like a mercenary up for hire. *Peter makes an effeminate hand gesture* Oh stop that, he's not gay ha. He just likes kitties ha, he does, that's his quirk, he likes cats. He has all the cats, like all the little cute cats and stuff like that. and I actually want to try to get an artist, to, like, I could draw it myself but I don't think I could get it quite right, so I wanted to try to get a professional to try to draw my character with all these cats lying around him, and he's in this super uber armor you know, and they're like laying across his shield, and he's like you know

haha, you know, I just thought I'd be really funny, is like, he's lounging on one of those chaise lounges and have all these kitties draped around him and he's petting them and stuff but he's all in this big bulky armor and stuff like I that and I just thought it would be hilarious and he has that one like, you know, game show host grin with the little twinkle in the corner of his teeth you know, haha, you know that cheesy grin.

Crystal's obvious delight in this dimension of her paladin's personality indicates how much she enjoyed imagining her characters as fully fledged persons.

Towards the end of the interview, we discussed the ways in which the personalities of Crystal's various avatars reflected different elements of her personality and background:

I still stay close to home, meaning that those characters have concepts of me in them, and it's easier for me to understand than a berserker running around with a two-handed sword chopping people down. I'd be that other person with a shield going "No you can't!" or you know, healing that person.

She noted that many of her female characters had a "den mother mentality" and were either healers or tanks in order to best portray this disposition. Another common theme across many of her characters, including her orc mage, is that they were in some way defying expectations or fighting to overcome stereotypes. This theme captured some of Crystal's experiences as a female gamer:

Crystal: Yeah or whatever, probably more guys than girls, cause even when I go to the gaming store I could count on one hand how many girls there are versus how many boys are running around you know, so...

Jake: Right, so you're kind of, blurring the boundary of what a gamer is a little bit?

Crystal: But I'm not, yeah, but, even gamer girlfriends, they go there, most of the times, from what I've seen, they're going there just because their boyfriends kind of pushed them into it, not because they want to. I do. And I haven't met too many people like me so, it's just not the stereotypical, and that's usually how I play my characters.

Although many characters reflected facets of her personality that are familiar to her, others got her in touch with aspects of herself that she experienced less often. For example, her warlock—whom she described as diabolically evil—provided her with a chance to “let loose” and embody her “crazy” side.

Immersion into a character. Crystal explained that becoming immersed in the mindset and mood of the character she is playing was a vital dimension of her engagement with *WoW*:

Crystal: There is fulfillment in being a character, you know, and not being yourself for a while.

Jake: What do you get out of that? Being a character and not being yourself for a while?

Crystal: It's relaxing because I don't have to worry about my own problems, you know, that I can be into this role and I might have a different set of problems, but it's a game, I can turn that off, you know, and then go back to my real-life, so it's, it's you know, it's an escape for me.

Jake: So when you're playing a character, you're sort of seeing the world through their eyes—

Crystal: Yeah, how they would react to something versus how I would.

Crystal is describing the experience of becoming immersed in a virtual self. Part of the appeal was leaving herself and her problems behind, yet remaining “close to home” by playing “characters [that] have concepts of [her] in them.” She found that playing as either a healer or a

tank resonates the most with her usual sense of herself, though she experienced the strongest and most dramatic sense of immersion when she played her undead warlock (a DPS), who she described as follows:

He's sneaky, you know, he's evil, like he's got evil intentions. To me when I play him is like, you know, I might be the most nicest person in the world, I'll be like, "I'll be your best friend" but I'm that best friend with the knife on your back hahaha you know? On the front I'm "Yeah, everything's fine, everything's good, let's go to this party" you know or whatever have you but at the same time he's slipping that whatever in your drink haha you know, it's like, you know, "What do you need?" you know and stuff like that, but at the same time it's like well if I do this for you you're going to do something for me, in the long run, or something like that, so I kind of play him like that. But he's also a little bit wild and crazy, so you know.

Unlike her tanks and healers, who were oriented towards the wellbeing of others, her warlock is completely self-interested. She often played him when she was tired of worrying about other players and wanted to let loose:

It's like that once in a crazy way, that one day, that full moon of the week haha, that I'm just like: "Oh my god, I'm stir crazy!" You know haha I want to let loose, you know, but the other two are very rigid, and, I have to do this and this is what my purpose is, this is what my responsibility is, but then there's that full moon, every once in a while that "ahhhhh."

At another point she said:

But, if I get into him, I kinda get a little bit, I don't know I get too excitable 'cause I'll like PvP with him, and I'm just throwing out DOTs²⁵ like crazy and stuff, I mean I might die but they'll die with me hehehe you know

Jake: So it seems like there's a certain feeling for you that goes along with that, like being kind of crazy?

Crystal: Uh huh, that's my crazy character haha

Jake: So what does it feel like to be in that mode?

Crystal: I get too rambunctious and I'll start yelling at the TV hahaha or my monitor, I'll be like "Oh no he didn't!" you know haha and stuff like that and uh, I have to stop myself sometimes so I can't do that for too long cause then I just get too excited at my computer and start messing things up.

Crystal's warlock seemed to provide her with ready access to a less characteristic way of being, which had a powerful cathartic effect.

Costuming with gear. Crystal stated that she was not concerned with acquiring high-end gear and also pointedly expressed her aversion to grinding for it. However, she enjoyed collecting gear for the purpose of modifying the appearances of her characters. Although players can't design their own gear in *WoW*, there are such a vast number of existing pieces that they can be combined into almost infinite combinations, making it possible for Crystal and like-minded players to create unique looks for their characters. She noted that the appeal of creating outfits for her avatars is the same as the appeal of making herself *Star Wars* costumes. In addition to collecting gear used for costuming purposes, Crystal also sought out other items for their

²⁵ DOTs are attacks that progressively inflict damage over a specified amount of time, rather than all at once at the moment of the attack.

aesthetic qualities, such as novelty items (which look or do something unusual and don't have a practical function in the game), pets, and mounts.

During the play session, Crystal showed me many of the pieces that she had collected over the years. Her enthusiasm is apparent in her description of her paladin's assortment of spare gear:

So here's all of his stuff. So like, down, here's all that gear I have. It's tons of it. I have the tuxedo pants, there's the shorts that I was wearing for my, hah, I have the witch's hat that I thought was cool for Halloween, you know, there's the sandals hahaha, you know, there's a really cool sword that summons pumpkins, you know pumpkin minions, so that's, you know that's just something funny that I had, you know that kind of stuff. And I just went out and bought—not bought—but got, like, that's a cool looking shield, um, you know, just kinda weird odds and ends stuff like this one's my favorite because it's a skull and it was really hard to get back in the day, there's the Sword of a Thousand Truths that was on *South Park* ... There's a pair of bunny ears hah—don't ask! Hahaha!

She also showed me one of her favorite novelty pieces, which was a mask that gave her character the ability to make the headless horseman laugh. These various items were entertaining in their own right and, along with regular gear, could become the raw material out of which cohesive costumes are composed.

Although she didn't explicitly make this distinction, it was my impression that Crystal created two types of outfits: clothing and gear that reflected the personalities of her characters and themed costumes to dress them in for fun. For example, her warlock had a wild, gothic look with dark robes and a mohawk. Crystal was especially enthusiastic about the appropriateness of the scythe he carried: “*perfect* for a warlock, *come on* ha, you know?” To further complement his

look, he usually rode a nightmare, which is a black horse with flaming hooves. His appearance was consistent with his evil, unhinged personality and the death-oriented magic that he wielded. Her orc mage, on the other hand, was dressed in a “wild West” outfit, replete with gloves, boots, and a black cowboy hat—a look that didn’t have anything to do with her backstory, as far as I could tell. Crystal noted that dressing characters up in costumes is common on role-playing servers, especially for planned gatherings:

People come in all different kinds of costumes, and they plan on this stuff for ages and stuff and I think that’s why it’s cool on an RP server, because RP servers, most of the times they’re more concerned about what they look like than what they’re doing, so you know that’s kind of fun to see all these different outfits and things that you would never think would look cool but “Oh my god that’s awesome!” you know, and I think that’s where the RP side of me, and the costumes that we do, you know, it kind of triggers in my brain.

Since Crystal’s emphasis on aesthetics over functionality is shared by many on her server, she was able to enjoy costuming communally.

Mounts, essentially another class of item in *WoW*, deserve a special mention, since Crystal was willing to go to great lengths to acquire her favorites. For instance, in order to purchase a Sandstone Drake (a dragon that can seat two characters), she took the chance of buying gold from Chinese gold farmers—something for which she could be banned from the game. She was also engaged in an ongoing effort to get the Headless Horseman’s Mount, which she described as follows:

It’s a green, glowing you know, evil looking horse mount that’s half undead—it would be perfect for [my warlock’s] Ghost rider, you know thing, If he didn’t want to ride his

nightmare, he could ride this thing and he could fly with it, I can't fly on my nightmare, I could fly with this! You know, and stuff like that, and it's just cool looking, every time it stomps it's like green flames around its legs, and it's just like *ah yeah*.

This mount cannot be purchased—it can only be acquired by completing a short quest that is exclusive to the Hallow's End event that occurs each October. The quest can only be attempted once per day and once per character and there is only a small chance of the mount dropping when the boss is defeated. Crystal had been running the instance once a day with every character she has for the past three Hallow's Ends! She remarked:

I swear to god Blizzard is laughing at me somewhere! I've tried! And it's just something that I've gotta have and I will do it every—and it's in my head, it's clicked in my head that I will have it haha.

Crystal explained that she placed a premium on mounts because they provide a special chance to complement a character's outfit and personality:

Some of my mounts, like for him [her blood-elf paladin], I only use red mounts, I don't know why, but in my head, he only rides like the Flaming Hippogryph, the Red Dragon, or like a red colored wyvern. Some of my other characters, like one of my priests, I, she's a troll, she's got blue skin, she will only use blue mounts. In my head—I have no idea! I guess it's cause I have these concepts in my head of what my characters are like, and they have preferences just like other people do.

Again, with mounts she prioritized the integrity of her characters, since this constituted a vital dimension of her engagement in *WoW*.

Limited socializing. When she plays *WoW*, Crystal preferred to stick to herself and largely eschewed socializing with other players. She had been in guilds in the past, but was disappointed by her experiences with guildmates; she found that they formed cliques and squabbled with one another:

They start pointing fingers, things don't go right, you don't have the right kind of leaders but yet you can't say anything, you know, or whatever had you, and it just got pointless. It was high school all over again and I just, that wasn't enjoyable. I'm not paying 15 dollars to be in high school again.

She also found it difficult to connect with and trust people whom she only knew through text and voice chat:

And I find it a little hard because I don't see their face. I hear a name, or I might not even know their real name, or anything like that, but all I hear is a voice, you know, and who's to say who's on that other side, they could be telling me "Oh I work as a lawyer, you know this that and the other," but how do you know?

Despite these limitations, there were instances in which she formed a friendship with another player, though only to find that people move on capriciously.

Crystal: Um, we've had a few people that we've talked to and things like that, but they either move on ... you know they find new friends or you know, we were the hot item for a little while, but then their interest floats other ways, which is fine we understand that, I mean that's the nature of people and the way it goes.

Jake: What do you mean you were the hot item?

Crystal: Well I mean they don't find many couples that play together and stuff like that and they want to talk to us and we're older and we had a few like, I think there was a girl

up in Canada that we talked to, and she had some problems and I don't know, some sort of family life, and we talked to her for a while, you know just to help her out and stuff and tell her some of our experiences because we were older and stuff, but eventually she found somebody else that apparently talks to her too and, you know, I don't know things just didn't work out and she decided to say that she was gonna drop the guild and move on to someone, to something else so it's like, "Okay, you know, whatever, you know, you do whatever it is that makes you happy."

As a result of these disappointments, Crystal hadn't been affiliated with a guild for many years. She added that because she has two large groups of friends in real-life, she didn't feel a strong need to find friendship in *WoW* anyway.

Since more intimate relationships in *WoW* hadn't worked out, Crystal's interactions with other players tended to be anonymous, transient, and remote. The Looking for Group feature made it possible for her to find pick up groups for dungeons without having to talk to other players. During dungeon runs, players usually stay focused on the task at hand and don't communicate much, if at all. In between dungeons, she did keep an eye on the trade chat, which is essentially a general chat for all players in the game.

I'll watch what they're talking about and every once in a while I'll input something you know, or they'll start screaming out a song and I'll, I'll like type in the next piece of it or you know, but I'm just like reading what other people are talking about and I might comment while I'm waiting and interact with them that way. But I try not to troll, because I see trolling happen all the time and I'm not going to be evil or be real mean about stuff but, you know, if I set time aside on the weekends or whatever then that's different. But I do interact with people, you know, and talk to people when I'm waiting, you know, or I'll strike up a conversation.

Perhaps her favorite social interaction was attending costume parties thrown by a guild on her server:

There's a group that holds weekend parties sometimes or special events, and it's called Club Styx, and they actually pump music, that like, through one of their websites, and you can go to their website and listen to them DJ music while you're at the party, so there's people there, there's tunes there, and it was a beach party, so I actually went out and bought clothing that looked like beach attire, you know, like a pair of thong sandals and a pair of shorts and a little tank top and stuff and I went there and just, you know, danced around and listened to their DJ music and stuff and it was fun, I thought it was fun. People come in all different kinds of costumes, and they *plan on this stuff for ages*.

It seemed that although Crystal enjoyed the presence of other players in the game, she tended to stay at a distance where she wouldn't get ensnared in the unpleasant dynamics that she has experienced in the past.

Role-playing with others. Although Crystal didn't tend to socialize with other players, she would occasionally participate in a staged role-play. She enjoyed role-playing in general, which of course was reflected in her commitment to playing characters with developed personalities and the fact that she participated in pen-and-paper role-play on a weekly basis. In the past, she was affiliated with a role-playing guild, and thus had frequent opportunities to participate in role-plays. Peter was still affiliated with that guild at the time of the interview, so when they need an extra person, she would sometimes join them:

They needed somebody to die and their characters, their guild people were gonna come kill me. You know, and that was fun to me, that was great. I mean I got to sit there and sneak up on them and typed it all out that I, you know I was a hunter at the time, and I

camouflaged myself, you know, and I was, had this outfit on, and I was sneaking through the snow and stuff like that you know and then when they caught me it was like “Oh my god!” you know and I had to, you know, “You guys are liars!” you know, “You’re a bunch of ... !” So I got to play that, so that was fun. I mean it was a couple hours out of my day, and they got to have fun, and I was like, “Ugghh!” gurgling and “Nooo! You can’t!” and they were carving my eye out and torturing me and stuff, and it was just like “Ahhh!”

She also engaged in what might be considered a lighter version of role-playing that went hand-in-hand with the fun of dressing her characters up in costumes. For example, she sometimes put “Ozzy glasses” on her warlock and ran through town yelling “Sharon!” She also came up with the idea for her and Peter to get Mechano-Hog mounts (which are essentially motorcycles) and biker outfits and ride around the outskirts of enemy towns like a biker gang.

Playing with a partner. Crystal enjoyed playing alongside her husband Peter. Although they often play at the same time, they are usually doing different things in the game since they each have their own priorities. Unlike Crystal, Peter was focused on pursuing traditional achievements and was part of a raid group. Crystal appreciated the chance to watch him raid so she could experience the content without the stress of doing it herself. She also liked helping him pursue achievements using her various professions and character classes. Occasionally, they did play together using characters that they created for that purpose:

So it’s funny, Peter and I came up with an idea and we’re actually playing twin monks—he’s Ying and I’m Yang. So it’s like, everything about us is the same, we wear the same clothing, the same everything, um but his hair’s black and mine’s white. So that’s the only thing that you can tell them apart, because you know ying and yang is black and white mixed together.

They casually quested or just “goof[ed] off” with these characters when they play them, enjoying the fun of experiencing the game together.

It's just a game. I noticed that Crystal would often say something to the effect of “it’s just a game” after describing a facet of *WoW* that she avoided because she found it too stressful and anxiety-provoking. For instance, she didn’t like the demands of guild membership, such as performance expectations and interpersonal conflict. Raiding was another thing that involved too much pressure for her to enjoy:

I’m not going to put my characters in there and have all that, you know, anxiety on me, pressure, to, you know that kind of stuff, cause then I can’t concentrate on the game, I have to concentrate so hard on what I’m doing, and I’d rather watch the story.

In a similar vein, she avoided playing newly released dungeons:

New expansion out and all these new dungeons come out, I don’t want to play right away because they have to come up with the mechanics first so I know what to do, I’m not one of those people that can just willy-nilly go in there cause I mean, I don’t have a guild with me and friends that I would know, and if we wipe too many times, they’ll be like “Oh, you suck” and all that kind of stuff and I just don’t want to deal with that, this is a fun game, I don’t want to deal with that.

She preferred to wait until she had watched guides posted by other players so that she could feel confident that she knew how to complete the content successfully.

Crystal’s aversion to feeling anxious shed light on her preference for running through familiar dungeons repeatedly. At one point, she indicated that she takes comfort in the fact that the familiar array of dungeons is “always there, and it’s never changing, not really. I mean

sometimes they change, but it's not that bad ... I could run, uh, Black Phantom Depths 500 times and know exactly where everything is and what's going to happen." She also enjoyed playing content that was easy and thus stress-free. For example, when I asked her to recall a particularly fond memory, she described running an old raid with characters who were leveled well beyond the difficulty of the content:

Yeah we were like 90s, but this raid that was back like during the 60s, so everyone that was in the group was 90s and could run around like cats, I don't have to conform to that group standard, that I as a tank had to go out and there's a certainty of death or wiping. We could just run around like crazy and be fine. So that was fun to me, like that was ridiculous fun, because we just went back ... so it's just kind of fun to go back and do those content but not have all that kind of responsibility on you that you have to do it in a certain way.

Her preference for playing content that she knew she could count on beating was congruent with her tendency to play *WoW* as a way to wind down after a day at work. She was not seeking challenge and novelty—rather, she wanted to relax with familiar activities.

Engaged in the story. Crystal had always felt engaged in the unfolding story of *WoW*, which chronicles a longstanding conflict between the Alliance and the Horde. The content of the story is revealed through quests, dungeons, raids, and cut-scenes and progresses every time a new patch or expansion is released. Crystal had also read supplementary materials like comic books so as to further enjoy the depth of the game's lore. She explained that the story was a significant part of her involvement with the game:

I want to know where things are going to go, I've always been—like I love reading, I read a lot. And even like a lot of RP games, I really do enjoy reading the stories and

things like that. And I do like playing too but you know, it's just knowing what's out there, where it's going to go, how things progress. I like the characters changing—you know, having Thrall still being the overlord, whatever have you, it's nice to see a change, even if the change was bad, you know, but the story's moving forward, you know, things can't always be rosy all the time. And that's what, *Star Wars* is like that, you know, there's always going to be a time of rift and change, but then it's going to be for the better eventually if you can just last through it, you'll be better off for it. It's that whole, even in *The Hobbit*, you know, there's always that story of the dark times before you move onto something better and I think that's what appeals to a lot of people about *WoW* is that story line you know, there's always going to be good, bad.

She based her character concepts on the lore of *WoW* and noted that sometimes she researched it expressly for this purpose. Because she was so invested in the story, she didn't think she would stop playing *WoW* until they stop developing new content:

In the long run, I still want to experience the content, I wanna see where the story goes. Even if it's bad, even if I don't approve of it, I'm still gonna play, because it's not going to stay that way forever, you know, just because I might not enjoy certain things doesn't mean that it's not going to change and they're always going to come out with new classes, new whatever, levels are going to go up, you know, whatever have you, so there's always going to be something that I'm going to want to do or experience, so I don't ever see myself stopping unless the game stops.

Ongoing expansions provided her with a sense there will always be more for her to enjoy in *WoW* and that she would be playing it well into the future.

Closing thoughts. Crystal used *WoW* as a medium for imaginatively crafting characters and role-playing them—an approach to MMORPGs has become less common as the genre has developed (Rowlands, 2012). It was interesting to note that despite her divergent priorities, fully

leveling and accessorizing her numerous characters required her to undertake many of the same activities that more achievement-oriented players do. Thus, although she had a different orientation to the game, she still engaged in the structure of grinding for levels, resources, and loot, though primarily for the purpose of leveling and accessorizing characters.

Robin

Robin was a 54-year-old white woman living in the greater Pittsburgh area with her husband, 20-year-old daughter, and two cats. She also had a 28-year-old son who lived nearby. She worked from home typing up inventories and doing computer tech work. Robin explained that she had multiple medical conditions that affected her mobility and described herself as disabled.

Description of the interview. Robin responded to my posting on Reddit and stated that she was interested in participating. As things turned out, Robin had to reschedule the interview several times because of health and family issues. When a date finally worked out and I arrived, Robin greeted me warmly. Robin was of average height, above average weight, and had short, dark hair flecked with grey. She was dressed simply, wearing black pants, a dark fleece pullover, and a few adornments. She guided me to a room in the back of her house where her computer was located. On the way, I met her daughter, who seemed shy but curious about the interview. The room that housed her computer room doubled as a storage room and office. Both her desk and the shelving that wrapped around much of the room was constructed with 2x4s and plywood. Everything on the shelves—mostly books, computer games, and labeled storage bins—was arranged neatly, though some exercise equipment cluttered up the middle the room.

For the first half of the interview, Robin sat turned away from her computer and faced where I was sitting in a dining room chair that her daughter had brought in for me. Robin tended to speak at an even pace and often looked off to the side while she was composing her thoughts or remembering things. She described her experiences in a matter-of-fact way, often making summative statements like “it’s just fun.” Robin tended to tell stories about things that had happened in the past; a great deal of them were unhappy ones. I had the sense that she appreciated the chance to talk about some of these less-than-happy events with a sympathetic listener. At other times, however, she recounted things with fondness and would break into a peal of high-pitched laughter.

An hour into the interview, Robin logged on to *Guild Wars 2 (GW2)*, the MMORPG that she played. I pulled my chair up next to her so I could watch over her shoulder. For most of the gaming session, she participated in a “world versus world” event called “Edge of the Mists,” which involved two large teams battling over strategic locations spread across a large swath of territory. For a significant portion of the event, Robin simply tried to join up with the main group of players on her team—the map was large enough that finding and catching up with them was time consuming. There were, however, a few instances where I got to see her in the thick of combat. While fighting, she had to focus intently and couldn’t continue talking to me.

Robin’s gaming career. Robin considered herself a gamer through and through—at one point she joked that she had told her kids to take her out and shoot her when her eyesight declined to the point where she can’t play anymore! She started playing PC games in the early-to mid-1980s when she was often stuck at home raising her young son. Adventure games and

RPGs were her favorite genres, though she played “anything [she] could get [her] hands on.” She was also involved in MUDs and other online communities during the early days of the internet. She enjoyed the detail and the character-creation in RPGs and thought it would be fun to enjoy these elements in a social environment when that became possible with the advent of MMORPGs. She tried *WoW* not long after it was released in 2004, but balked at the “cartoony” graphics. About a year later she started playing *Guild Wars 1*, a game that she found visually pleasing and affordable.

Initially, she found it difficult to find in-game companions, but eventually joined a guild that suited her. After some time with this guild, the leader was in a car accident and couldn’t continue playing. Robin volunteered to replace her temporarily, but her post ended up lasting for years. Due to the many responsibilities her position entailed, Robin was logged in for hours every day. This arrangement held until she got sick and had to take a month off from her position as guild leader. When she returned, the guild was in shambles, which was deeply disappointing to her. That was essentially the end of her involvement with *Guild Wars 1 (GW1)* and roughly coincided with the release of *GW2* in mid-2012. She had been playing *GW2* steadily since then, usually logging in daily at 8:00 pm and playing for a few hours.

Individual themes. Below are the individual themes that emerged during my analysis of Robin’s interview transcript.

Enjoyable social dimensions. Throughout the interview, Robin often made reference to the enjoyable social dimensions of *GW2*, such as her in-game friendships, guild-related activities, and group content such as dungeons. Robin had also played with her son and daughter,

though lately both of them had been too busy to play. She especially enjoyed “hanging out” with the members of her guild that she knew well, which consisted of playing while conversing over voice chat. The group might have been discussing topics related to the game or just chatting. She indicated that she had a handful of friends that she talked to regularly, including one of her current guild’s co-leaders—a woman with whom she had a lot in common. She also mentioned a male friend, Johnny, who referred to Robin as his in-game “wife.” In turn, she called him her “faux hubby.” Robin explained that her daughter liked him as well, and described their playful interactions:

She always wants to come on and talk to Johnny, pick on him and drive him insane cause if I’m his wife then she’s his daughter you see, and she’ll pick on him you know haha she, she uh, haha, she um, she um, she private messages him sometimes and she says “Daddy where do babies come from?” and he messages me “Why is your daughter asking me about this?” Hahahaha and I said “To torture you” haha. But that kind of stuff, it’s just silly. Just silly. But um, he’s trying to level up newer characters too so sometimes we’ll get together and do that, just screw around or whatever, you know, it’s fun, so.

Robin spoke fondly of these opportunities to enjoy the companionship of others. Additionally, she discussed less personal yet still satisfying instances of grouping up with guildmates for various in-game activities. She also described *GW2* players as generally supportive and friendly.

The demands of cooperative play. Although Robin often enjoyed the social elements of online gaming, she also spoke frequently about instances where playing with others was demanding and even upsetting. In fact, Robin spent more time describing negative social experiences than positive ones. This could mean that they are more salient to her experience of playing MMORPGs, though it might also be the case that she was simply making good use of a

sympathetic listener. Either way, she made it clear that group play has often been a source of stress and discontentment for her, especially during her time as a guild leader where it was her responsibility to mediate conflicts between players. She had also repeatedly experienced guilds and friendships falling apart, though Robin had come to accept the impermanence of online relationships.

Robin's many years of playing *GWI* was defined by her long stint as the leader of a guild. She spoke often of the various demands of guild leadership during the interview. The first thing she said was: "I'll never be a guild leader again, it was horrible." She explained that she had never aspired to the position in the first place, but after the leader of her guild had abruptly stopped playing due to a serious car accident "somebody had to volunteer to keep it all going." She took up the post "assuming the other leader would come back eventually and then one of us found out that she wasn't coming back and I was kind of stuck with it and nobody else really wanted it." She remained the leader of the guild for six years until she had to take a month-long break because of a serious illness. When she returned, the guild had completely fallen apart, leaving her feeling bitter and unappreciated.

As a guild leader, Robin felt burdened by her many responsibilities and had to log on for hours daily in order to fulfill them. For instance, she said it was important that she kept a close eye on the activities of new guild members "because people would guild up and try to extort stuff from other players and whatever and you'd have to, you know, put a stop to that before they, you know, made everybody broke." She also enforced rules regarding appropriate language because "not everyone was a 30-year-old adult or whatever, you know, we had kids, and being a mom I

was, I felt responsible for everybody, you know.” Although she did have help from other officers, she explained that “ultimately everything kind of fell on [her] and [she] had to log in a lot more.” There were also times that Robin would have to get rid of members who were causing problems within the guild, such as in the following instance:

We had a youth minister um, who came in and he was god’s gift to *Guild Wars*, you know, he was just the best player in the world and um, and started, like he seemed to be a nice guy at first and he wasn’t that great of a player even though he was in his own mind, but he was okay, and um, but then he started talking about his kids and his ministry and what trouble they were and, you know, and like, just started getting really like verbally abusive in a way, you know like, what he was saying didn’t match who he said he was and, you know, we had younger people and stuff and he was like, if somebody screwed up he would be the first to tell them and, you know get on them as though they’d done it on purpose you know what I mean, such a bad player, and like I said he wasn’t the perfect person anyway, but yeah, so we had to get rid of him, and uh, I don’t know, we had some people I’ll tell ya.

In addition to maintaining the guild by policing disruptive and socially unacceptable behavior, she also had to participate in weekly guild meetings and monthly meetings with the leaders of allied guilds—she told me that these meetings got “really old” after six years.

While the various responsibilities related to maintaining the guild were tiring, the most challenging element of leadership for Robin was dealing with conflict. She explained that:

Whenever you have a mix of people with different ideas you have conflict, and um, so it just became a never ending conflict for whoever was in charge, you know, like “This person wasn’t on longer,” or “This person didn’t do this,” or you know, “I’m doing more

of this than anybody else,” and, “Why can’t we have that?” or “Why is this person still with us?”

She said that guild members often wanted to institute changes that were at odds with the guild’s existing priorities. For example:

We had new members, some new members that came in who really wanted to just change the guild and change the alliance and decided that they knew better than any of us did and um, you know, one guild in the alliance had been with us, the one that was made up of families, had been with us from the beginning, you know what I mean. And they weren’t with us to be, you know, a competitive edge, they were with us because they were loyal to us and we were friends and we liked each other but somebody didn’t like the way that guild leader played in a certain situation, and he has to do this but he won’t listen, he wants to do it this way with this character blah blah—well don’t play with him then, you know what I mean? It’s that simple, you know instead of getting rid of that guild and getting another guild that would be more cohesive to *you*, you know, just don’t play with that person, play with somebody else other, you know, there’s like a bunch of other people here you know, but it was that kind of thing, you know, we had about four or five guild meetings over teamspeak about this, it just wasted time, nobody could play because we were just dealing with all this crap and um, yeah, it got old really fast.

She said instances where guild members wanted different things led to "constant mediation, constant constant mediation" which took a great deal of her time.

Robin emphasized how draining it was for her to constantly have to attend to her responsibilities as a guild leader:

It was just, you know, after a while sometimes you just want to log in and be invisible and play the game, you just want to play and you don’t want to think about what anybody

else is doing and you could never do that if you were an officer or a guild leader, you could never do that.

At another point she said, “There were times that I did not want to log in towards the end because it was so miserable.” During a certain period of her career, Robin was essentially logging in to do her job as the guild leader, rather than playing a game for her own enjoyment: “I didn’t get to play, there were a lot of times where I logged in and just didn’t get to play at all.”

Robin felt hurt when the guild fell apart during her month-long break. After all of her hard work over many years, no one was committed enough to her or to the guild to hold things together during her relatively short absence. Everything that she had worked to build and maintain was in shambles when she returned. To make matters worse, a former guild member had started a new guild and appropriated many of the guild’s members and even part of its name. Because of the disappointment and bitterness associated with this betrayal, Robin has deliberately avoided contact with anyone that she knew in *GW1* ever since she made the switch to *GW2*. She has also avoided leadership positions, preferring to remain as independent and free of responsibility as possible.

Although Robin has leaned towards playing more independently since the launch of *GW2*, she still chose to join a guild and socialize enough to make friends. In her experience, both guilds and friendships have often proved to be transient. For instance, she said, “There’s one person who I was really good friends with and she just sort of dropped off the face of the Earth altogether so I don’t know, we don’t know what happened to her.” Robin also mentioned that the first guild she joined in *GW2* was going great until people achieved everything the game had to offer at that point and started to leave the game. Things went downhill from there:

So the guild died off, you know started to die off and then we had one guy come in, um, who was basically put in charge—you know we had an awesome website, we had, you know just a lot of good stuff and he came in and somebody put him in charge of fixing the website, he ended up getting the forums hacked, he lost all the stuff that had been part of the website and that got ruined, and everything fell apart and the leader was really pissed off that he'd been given permission to do all this, and it just completely blew up.

In an email after the interview, she clarified that she didn't blame this individual for the demise of the guild—the website being hacked was merely the nail in the coffin. At the time of our interview, her current guild seemed to be in the process of dying as well, in part due to inconsistent availability of one of the co-leaders:

You could always count on her to be there, and it was good, and now, I guess she had some health issue, or her husband was travelling and she was going to go along, just all these things happened and she was away for a while and she was supposed to come back and she came back for one day, and then she's gone for a couple weeks, and then she came back again! ... For one day and then she's gone for a couple weeks, so we don't know what the deal is.

When I followed up with Robin several months after the interview, she confirmed that the guild had disbanded and that she and her daughter had migrated to a new guild. Robin's attitude towards the instability of friendships and guilds was that it is inevitable and she just takes it in stride:

So we'll go into another guild and it'll be fun for a while too until it falls apart, so we'll go to another one ... it happens, you know, it just happens. But, yeah you get used to that, I mean it happens in life too, you know like, you go to college and you have friends, you know what I mean, and then everybody sort of goes their own way because that's what they do, you know, life is change, so, I think you just, it just kinda mimics life, you know,

you do what you can do with this group of people and then you move on to the next thing, you know, and that's just the way it is.

She noted that she was much more hurt when the guild that she led fell apart because she took it personally.

Seeking independence and freedom. Apparent in the first two themes is the tension that Robin felt between wanting to play socially and avoiding being burdened by the demands of others. At several points, she spoke directly about how the demands of cooperative play conflict with her more “independent nature” and how she avoided responsibility so that she could simply enjoy the content of the game. For instance, “In *GW2* I've decided no more, I don't want to be an officer, I don't want any responsibility, I don't want any anything.” At another point, she mentioned that she wouldn't join a guild that involved requirements of any kind. In the email she sent me after reading the transcript, she reiterated the point, writing:

It is nice to make new friends and do things with others, but I am naturally very independent in nature. I tend to group up when I have to, or when doing something with a group is more fun than doing it alone. Otherwise, I quite enjoy being just off alone solving a puzzle, or fighting some epic boss with a group of others who aren't really totally dependent on me, any more than I am on them.

There seemed to be a tension at play for Robin with regards to just how involved she wanted to be with other players.

In addition to avoiding having her freedom to choose what to do limited by other players, she also didn't like how the design of the game itself required certain activities. Thankfully, *GW2* lent itself to greater flexibility and choice than *GW1*. She explained that *GW1* was designed in such a way that players were often required to do certain activities. For example,

in *GW1*, players were under pressure to earn “faction points” for their guild—as a result, conflicts arose when players failed to meet their quota. Robin believed that *GW2* is set up in such a way that allows players to “pretty much do anything.” She provided more detail in the following exchange:

Robin: You don't really *have* to do anything, I mean you can just hang out, you know. you can play at your own pace pretty much, and you can still get where you wanna go, you may have to do it a different way next month if you change your mind about something, but there's always a way to do, you know whatever you want to do.

Jake: And a lot of those activities you mentioned are kind of activities that you would group up with other guild members to do?

Robin: Yup, you can also do them solo, you know, a lot of them. Some things you have to do with other people but there's really a lot you can do by yourself.

At other points in the interview, she characterized *GW2* as a game that offers various activities, none of which are required. As a result, she felt free to choose whatever is most appealing to her from an array of possibilities. She contrasted the sense of freedom she had in *GW2* to her impression of *WoW* as “grindy”: “You know, ‘get four of those, get six of these, kill 20 of those’ *and that's all it is.*” The premium that Robin put on her independence and freedom factored heavily into her choice of game and how she related to other players.

Enjoying the content of the game. At various points, Robin stated that, more than anything else, she simply enjoyed, “the play of the game.” She reiterated this point in her follow-up email by writing: “The big draw for me, playing these types of games is the game itself first.” In accordance with this emphasis, she spoke a lot about the content of *GW2* throughout the

interview. She emphasized the fact that the game offers a wide range of activities, many of which can be done either solo or with a group, such as questing, puzzles, crafting, dungeons, raids, PvP, world vs. world, and daily events (“these big monsters that you kill for really good loot”). During certain holidays, themed quests, puzzles, and items are temporarily added. There are also various achievements and rewards to pursue, such as completing daily quests and crafting a legendary weapon, which involves seeking out rare materials and recipes.

I got the impression that questing and puzzles—elements also featured by RPGs and adventure games—were two mainstay activities for Robin. She liked the way the quests in *GW2* were tied into an engaging storyline and didn’t feel chore-like. More recently, however, her go-to activity had been *Edge of the Mists*, which involves two large teams of players battling for strategic locations over a large territory. Each team has a leader, but communication and cooperation are fairly minimal, since players essentially just need to stick together and fight as a group. Robin said that she liked how she can play with a group that isn’t “really totally dependent on me, any more than I am on them.” The daily events that involve fighting an “epic boss” similarly involve being grouped up with other players who collectively pool their efforts but don’t really need to communicate or cooperate. Robin characterized group events such as these as “only a strength-in-numbers kind of thing,” since players aren’t expected to perform specific functions and are thus less dependent on one another. Robin did dungeons sometimes, even though they require a higher degree of teamwork, since each of the five players in the dungeon party each has a specific role to fulfill. However, Robin abstained from raids, since they necessitate an ever-high degree of strategic coordination and individual performance.

When I asked her of what a session on a typical night would consist, she replied that lately she would most likely first play *Edge of the Mists* and then:

Once I get done with that, I get my daily, I check and recycle my stuff, or sell stuff that I got, or use stuff that I got if it's good enough and um, and then I'll get on another character and level that one or try to level it, but, and talking to people you know.

This is just a generalization, however—she emphasized that rather than having a set routine, she spontaneously chose what to do each time that she played:

I usually don't have anything in mind when I log in, I don't really usually know what I'm, you know, specifically going to do. And I've logged in having some kind of plan and “Oh look, that's going on!” you know, and, I'd rather do that or somebody will say, “Oh! can you, we need one more to do this dungeon, you know, we had five and somebody just left and just logged in so do you want to come do this with us?”

As the previous theme emphasized, Robin liked to feel free to do whatever she feels compelled to do, rather than being required—by others or by the game—to do certain tasks. Thus, the wide range of activities in *GW2* suited her well.

Another thing that Robin particularly liked about *GW2* is the fact that new content is added every two to three weeks (a feature called *Living World*), which is a much more frequent rate than that of most MMORPGs. Each update furthers the storyline of the game through new quests and other content. She also mentioned that other elements of the game change from time to time as well, such as combat mechanics and server structure. She said that regular change “keeps the game fresh.” In relation to her appreciation of the ongoing updates, Robin mentioned that she was always disappointed when she got to the end of a single-player RPG or adventure

game, since it was painful to have invested so much in her character and then not have anything to do with him or her anymore. In *GW2*, she is able to continually enjoy new content with the character that she has devoted so much time to:

With this type of a game, it's basically that adventure game, you're questing and questing and getting rewards and it just sort of never ends and it's kind of nice, but you're not doing, it's not like you're just replaying the same game, like I said with the living story it adds so much more content, and sometimes that content builds on something that's already in the game that you want to do more of.

She also mentioned that without the consistent updates, she probably wouldn't keep playing because eventually she would run out of things to do. Earlier on in the game's existence, there was a point where there wasn't enough new content to keep players satisfied and many left the game.

Being rewarded. When describing her enjoyment of the game's content, Robin often made reference to earning rewards. For instance, she described Edge of the Mists as "more about collecting loot, and karma, and gold and stuff than anything else" and mentioned that daily events yield "really good loot." Part of the fun of each Living World update are the new "things to earn, titles, armor, weapons, all sorts of things, skins, um, all all kinds of things." She also noted that the game included:

A series of things that you do daily to get like a daily reward and then there's a series of things that you do monthly to get a monthly reward, and then, you do so many of those things over the course of the game you get yet another chest, you know every so often, for so many points.

Gold is required to repair items and to purchase the materials for crafting gear. Robin stated that someday she hopes to acquire the exotic materials and recipes required to craft her character's "legendary weapon." Other items can be upgraded throughout the game as well. For instance, I inquired about the mechanical apparatus on her character's back. She informed me that it was called the Advanced Spinal Blades of Ruby, an item that improved her character's overall power. It is a piece of gear that can be progressively upgraded.

In addition to acquiring loot, Robin also mentioned that she endeavored to earn titles, which are awarded for completing various challenges. She earned a particularly difficult one by visiting every region in the entire game, including enemy territory where she could have easily been killed. Upon completing the challenge, she felt "awesome" and now has a "little gold star over [her] head" and the title "Been There, Done That."

The importance of aesthetics. Robin emphasized how critical it is that she found the aesthetics of her game pleasing. She explained that she is "really, really visual" and chose to play *GW1* over *WoW* largely because the graphics are "definitely prettier." Of course, the graphics are even better in *GW2*. During the play session, she panned the camera around at various points so I could admire the richly detailed scenery. After we finished the interview and I had turned the recorder off, Robin loaded up a few other characters because she wanted to show me the graphics for more races and environments. The graphics, though they portrayed a fantastical world, were highly realistic. I also appreciated how imaginative the architecture and other design elements were. Her enthusiasm for showcasing the visual dimensions of *GW2* throughout the interview indicated how salient they were to her experience of play.

Closing thoughts. The degree to which Robin emphasized having the freedom to do whatever she desired in a given gaming session was a noteworthy aspect of how she played *GW2*. Rather than logging on with a particular goal in mind, she expected that the game would provide her with a possibility that would attract her interest, such as new Living World content or an event such as Edge of the Mists. Though Robin was still drawn to earning loot and other markers of success, her orientation toward achievement was not at odds with her preference for playing spontaneously, since in *GW2* it was possible to earn rewards through any activity.

Across-Interview Analysis

After conducting, transcribing, and analyzing each interview, despite the significant points of overlap and variations on shared themes, I was struck by the considerable differences in the way the five participants played their respective MMORPGs. In order to capture the similarities and differences in the interviews, the across-interview analysis section is divided into three parts. In the first, I highlight the unique characteristics of each participant's engagement with their game of choice. In the next section, I present the most salient themes that are shared by multiple participants. Finally, I describe the most prominent theme present across all of the interviews—a single, broad theme that speaks to the way in which my participants engage with their MMORPG.

Unique themes by participant. The following characterizations depict the unique features of each participant's account.

Ben. Out of all the participants, Ben was the only one who spoke about his game as an arena within which he competed with other players. The *Social Comparisons and Self-Image*

theme indicated the degree to which Ben was impacted by how well he compared to the skill and success of other players and how he felt about himself—at least as a *WoW* player—as a result. The *Ranking* theme revealed the degree to which Ben was invested in climbing the rankings, which are a formal quantification of how he stacks up against others. Perhaps paradoxically in light of his competitive attitude, Ben also seemed to be the participant who had developed the deepest and longest lasting friendships in his game, as indicated in his *Socializing* theme. The fact that Ben traveled to meet players in his guild and ended up having a long-term romantic relationship with one of them indicated a degree of social engagement that went well beyond that of my other participants. Finally, Ben was the only participant that raised concerns about the negative stereotypes of MMORPG players. I suspect that this is because he identified strongly as a MMORPG player, yet not with the stereotype. Jeff, by contrast, seemed to see his involvement with *WoW* as an incidental activity, while the other three participants seemed to be more comfortably identified with geek culture.

Jeff. In many regards, Jeff engaged with *WoW* similarly to Ben. They both raided with a group of adept players and valued skill, teamwork, and progress. However, as compared to Ben—and the other three participants—Jeff portrayed himself as more casually involved in his game. He played on the most restricted schedule and didn't seem to value the pursuit of playing an MMORPG as intrinsically as the other participants did (“It’s just a game, I mean ... it’s nothing that I’m gaining any skills from that I can use outside of the game”). He was also alone in emphasizing the importance of the harmony that *WoW* had with fitting into other aspects of his life, suggesting that he wouldn't prioritize it as much as the other participants would.

Shawn. Shawn shared Ben and Jeff's emphasis on achievement and skill, yet played in a more solitary way. Since he didn't belong to a raiding group or use voice chat, his typical sessions weren't collaborative, social engagements like Ben and Jeff's raiding nights. Instead, Shawn chipped away at his various in-game projects on his own or with anonymous pick up groups. Shawn's emphasis on efficiency, busy work, and convenience, along with *FFXIV*'s inclusion of more trade skill-oriented content, made his style of striving for achievement feel more like an entrepreneurial challenge than a team sport.

Crystal. Crystal took up her game with a different focus than the other participants: her characters. She was the only participant who played a large number of avatars. She was also the only one who crafted detailed personalities, back-stories, and outfits. For her, creating and maintaining an authentic sense of character was more important than functional considerations related to her avatars. While my other participants indicated that they didn't role-play their avatars ("When I'm playing, I'm not a priest, I'm just me playing" [Jeff]), or even had a sense of their avatars as characters ("Considering on one character you can literally do everything ... it kind of loses the illusion ... of being basically a mortal character" [Shawn]), Crystal indicated that when she played, she got into the mindset of her characters and acted as they would. She was also the only player who was on an RP server and participated in staged role-plays. Since her characters were her primary source of engagement with her game, her priorities were vastly different than those of the other participants, especially the more skill- and achievement-focused men. Instead of raid progression, acquiring increasingly powerful gear, and other quantifiable pursuits, her projects included leveling additional characters and seeking out gear for aesthetic purposes. Crystal was also the only player who played with someone close to her in real-life at

the time of the interview, though Robin had played with her son and daughter in the past and planned to in the future.

Robin. Robin emphasized the content of the game in the way that other participants didn't, with statements like, "The big draw for me, playing these types of games is the game itself first." Of course, all of the participants really liked playing the game that they had chosen—what was Robin uniquely emphasizing? One thing that seemed different about the way Robin engaged her game was that she looked to the game to provide her with enjoyable content on a session-by-session basis. By contrast, the rest of my participants were wrapped up in ongoing, established projects: Ben and Jeff's play was organized around raiding with their respective groups, Shawn was working on leveling all of his professions and acquiring other trappings of success, and Crystal was working towards leveling her characters and acquiring mounts and gear for costumes. Robin didn't have as clear of an orienting project as the rest. Rather, she cited the wide and frequently growing array of activities in *GW2* as the focal point of what continued to draw her to the game. When she said that she disliked "grindy" games like *WoW*, this suggests that she wasn't particularly drawn to focusing her efforts on a limited range of long-term endeavors. Robin was also the only player who emphasized the degree to which the visual aesthetics of her game mattered to her.

Shared themes across participants. For the most part, each participant's individual themes don't perfectly correspond to those of the other participants, even where there is an overlap in content. Thus, in order to account for themes shared by multiple participants, I usually had to create a theme with a broader meaning than the individual themes. When naming these

broader themes, I either retained a theme title from an individual participant (if it was representative of the new shared theme), or created a new one. For example, the *Skill* theme below is comprised of Ben's *Striving to be a Skilled Player* theme, Jeff's *Competence* theme, and Shawn's *Efficiency* theme. Sometimes a shared theme included more than one theme from the same player, such as the *Narrative and Lore* theme, which subsumes Shawn's *Plot Progression* and *Feeling at Home* themes. Though I arrived at the list of shared themes by comparing the individual themes of the five participants, I also occasionally drew from relevant material from the interviews that wasn't accounted for by an individual theme.

Skill. Ben, Jeff, and Shawn each indicated that playing skillfully is important to them, though each put a different emphasis on this topic. Ben discussed skillfulness the most frequently of the three, indicating that improving his performance as a player was a driving force in his engagement with *WoW*. He made frequent reference to the qualities of adept players and how he compared to others in terms of skill. The narrative of his career was focused on him gaining entry into increasingly competitive guilds. By contrast, Jeff talked about being competent enough to fulfill his function within his raiding group, rather than being on a path to glory. Thus, he often spoke about skill in the context of contributing to the group effort during raids. Whereas Ben and Jeff mostly talked about their skill as raiders, Shawn mentioned skill in reference to a broader range of game content. In addition to discussing the ins and outs of performing well in combat, Shawn explained how he analyzed the mechanics behind various other endeavors in order to discern the most efficient way to approach them. Shawn shared Jeff's sense of responsibility towards the players that he teamed up with for dungeons, even though they were not people that

he knew. Shawn and Ben explicitly stated that they enjoyed the sense of pride and mastery that comes with playing skillfully.

Instrumental interactions. For Ben, Jeff, and Shawn, instrumental interactions with other players were a significant component to their experience of playing an MMORPG. For Ben and Jeff, these interactions took place in the context of their raiding parties. These groups, oriented as they are to overcoming challenging content, function like sports teams: Members formulate and execute strategies that require timing, awareness, communication, and coordination. Fellow raiders also support each other by sharing knowledge and resources. Shawn, whose guildmates don't play often, did dungeons with pick up groups, which put a different spin on his interactions with his collaborators. Being paired up with subpar players was a regular source of frustration for him, while he relished the occasions that he was grouped up with other competent players. Crystal relied on pick up groups for dungeon runs as well, but she said little about the interactive component of these groups.

Big numbers. Due to the pervasive quantification present in MMORPGs, progress is largely constituted as increasing values that correspond to various elements of the game (e.g., attributes of avatars and gear, the damage caused by attacks, the value of items, etc.). Ben and Shawn, who were achievement-oriented players, explicitly discussed the centrality of numbers to their experiences of their respective games, especially the satisfaction of increasing them. Shawn went so far as to claim that all in-game pursuits boiled down to “making big numbers bigger.” It seems that the never-ending pursuit of bigger numbers is the alternative to a fixed endpoint in MMORPG design—and a goal that players find compelling.

Socializing. Ben, Jeff, and Robin all indicated that socializing was something that they enjoyed about playing an MMORPG. They were also the three participants who used voice chat, which allowed them to speak freely with others while they went about in-game activities. Jeff and Ben primarily socialized with their raiding parties during the downtime between raid bosses, while Robin, on account of her free-form sessions, could chat anytime during her play. Since a great deal of MMORPG content requires minimal concentration and voice chat makes it possible for players to converse easily without interrupting play, conditions are ideal for casual banter. Ben, Jeff, and Robin all indicated that they have become intimately familiar with and befriended many of their companions over time.

Negative social experiences. Robin and Crystal both spoke emphatically about negative social experiences. At various points in their careers, they found that living up to the demands of others could be stressful and unpleasant. They also indicated that although they enjoyed cooperative play, it often wasn't worth the seemingly inevitable conflicts. Additionally, they shared the disappointing experience of having friendships end without warning or explanation. Both have concluded that transience is a feature of online relationships and have adjusted their expectations of and involvement with other players accordingly.

Freedom from. Robin and Crystal were also the only two players who described taking measures to avoid the stress and responsibility that resulted from either other players or game content. Both players had felt stressed and burdened by the social obligations in the past and thus avoided the contexts in which those stressors arose: Robin shunned leadership positions and guilds with membership requirements, whereas Crystal eschewed guilds entirely. Both also

stated that it was important to them that they not spend their time on game content that they didn't feel compelled to play. Robin indicated that she managed exclusively to play content that she found enjoyable by choosing a game that was designed to allow players a great deal of flexibility. Crystal, on the other hand, simply did what she liked in *WoW* (level grinding, costuming and accessorizing her characters, and role-playing) and avoided what she didn't (gear-grinding, raiding, and daily quests).

Immersion. Despite taking up *WoW* in significantly different ways, Ben and Crystal were the only two participants that described feeling immersed when they play. Crystal described her immersion in terms of entering into the experience of her characters, which involved seeing the world through their eyes and making decisions from their perspectives. She also described taking on the mood of her characters, especially her maniacal warlock. Ben had only a vague sense of his avatars' personalities, yet, like Crystal, described having different experiences when he played different ones. Ben's sense of inhabiting his character seemed more tied to his avatars' abilities and their graphical representations, while Crystal's was related to her characters' personalities.

Narrative and lore. Shawn and Crystal were the two participants that spoke at length about enjoying the lore and unfolding narratives of their respective games. In Shawn's game, *FFXIV*, various narratives are tightly woven into the content, which motivated him to progress through it in order to see the plot lines unfold. In addition to enjoying the narratives of *FFXIV*, he was also charmed by the many subtle references to previous *Final Fantasy* games, which were so familiar to him. Crystal also enjoyed being intimately familiar with the *Warcraft* universe, and

the lore served as a backdrop upon which she created her characters' individual lives. Robin also mentioned that she took pleasure in the lore of *GW2*, though added that it faded quickly from her memory.

One theme to rule them all: investment. In addition to the themes that are shared by a subset of the participants, my analysis also yielded one theme that emerged from the data in all five cases. This theme is broader than those listed previously, in the sense that it composes a structural dimension of their accounts. Additionally, this theme is pertinent to the orienting question of my research: what is it about MMORPGs that engages players?

The theme is *Investment*. In their own particular way, each of the participants invested a great deal of time and effort into their respective games. They experienced these investments as worthwhile and intended to keep making them well into the future. Additionally, they all said something about how their games provided worlds worth investing in. To summarize, the three elements that the *Investment* theme is composed of are:

1. The investments themselves (e.g., work, time, passion)
 2. The rewards (e.g., gear, levels, achievements, a satisfying sense of making progress)
 3. The conditions in MMORPGs that make long-term investment possible and satisfying
- Ben most pointedly articulated this theme when he described becoming and remaining committed to playing *WoW*:

It became important enough to me to get stronger that I was willing to just go ahead and okay, yes, I will do these quests, I will do this, I will kill this boar, I will run to this town, and I just wanted to get stronger. I didn't want to be weak, I didn't want to be watching stronger guys run around, I didn't want to have to run away from this animal and it just, I don't know, it something about the game, at that instance saying "Hey, you can't get

stronger until you do this” and I did it and I was just like alright, now, now I’m invested in it, now I have money in it, now I’m just going to get something out of this game, I’m going to get stronger, I’m going to be something.

This passage describes Ben’s experience of *becoming* invested, which was located in an event that he retrospectively identified. At another point, he described how difficult it is for him to take a break from *WoW*, which suggests a sense of *being* invested:

Ahhh, I should be doing my dailies to get my tokens, I should be raiding right now, I’m gonna fall behind on my gear, I don’t want to fall behind on my gear, cause then it’s a pain to get caught up, I don’t want to fall behind on players, I don’t want to fall behind on boss strategies, like uhhhh god it’s going to be so hard to get caught up again.

This passage indicates the degree to which he had invested in his ongoing projects in *WoW* and how painful it was to let the competitive edge he had worked so hard to hone go dull. In the following sections, I use material from all five participants to provide more illustrations of investment, organized into the three elements outlined previously.

Investing. Prior to collecting data, I had the impression that MMORPGs involved a lot of repetitive and time-consuming activities. My participants confirmed that this impression was accurate. Crystal and Robin both used the word “grinding,” Ben used the word “farming,” and Shawn used the phrase “busy work” to denote activities that are relatively easy, repetitive, and not intrinsically rewarding. Instead, they are undertaken for a reward of some kind, such as experience points, items, reputation, titles, and so on.

I don’t think an MMO would qualify as an MMO if there wasn’t just running back and forth for quests like this. (Shawn)

[When I level grind I] go straight into the dungeons, and that's all I do ... I've done every single dungeon hundreds of times. (Crystal)

There's a series of things that you do daily to get like a daily reward and then there's a series of things that you do monthly to get a monthly reward, and then, you do so many of those things over the course of the game you get yet another chest, you know. (Robin)

So [earning] that [achievement] took, just to get that map took months, so that was frustrating, so you have to keep going in to see if you own that part of the map and or if you don't if it's a good time of day to go and do that hahaha. (Robin)

There's achievements and stuff that you can display in certain items that you can only get by doing ... like legendary quests, like I have a legendary mount that you can only get by completing legendary quests. And these legendary quests—it took me, uh, seven, eight months to do this quest. (Ben)

Questing is you go out into the world and you find someone who says “do this for me” and then you go run a stupid errand for them and then you come back and they give you five valor points. (Jeff)

I will use the descriptor “work-like” to denote activities that participants characterized as not intrinsically rewarding, yet carried out for some sort of reward. The issue of whether these activities are in fact work (as opposed to play) is addressed in the discussion section.

More engaging activities like raiding were described as enjoyable for their own sake, though they were often still time-consuming, repetitive, and undertaken for the sake of rewards in addition to whatever pleasure they offered. Ben and Jeff highlighted the ways in which raid progression involves hammering away at the same content over long periods of time:

We'll spend hours trying to kill the same boss over and over and over, and then we'll die, and then we're like “hey, maybe we should try this instead” and then we die and then it's

like, “hey, maybe don’t stand in that fire” and then we get past that part and then we die on something else. (Jeff)

So for instance, going into to that heroic mode where it spawns two of them if you weren’t expecting that , first of all, now you’re panicking cause you have no idea what’s going on, so, and then, okay so you probably dies that time. Alright. Everyone rezes, comes back into the raid. Alright, let’s do this again. Do it again. Now you’re expecting there to be two of them, except that you don’t know that you have to split them apart. Well, it might take you three or four more deaths to figure that out. So now that’s an hour and a half of your time, just spent dying and coming back. (Ben)

Although they both enjoyed the challenge and intensity of fighting raid bosses, the only bosses that provided a significant degree of excitement were those with a difficulty level that closely matched the raiding party’s power. Once the party surpassed a given boss in power level, the boss became just content to grind or farm for loot: “If you have a fight on farm, basically it’s so easy that it’s just farming, all you’re doing is just the same motions, kinda grinding gear out” (Ben). Raids, though challenging and exciting, do retain some of the work-like features of easier content, and, as the group becomes more powerful, eventually become easy content. The Edge of the Mists event that Robin played during her interview provides another example of content that was undertaken for fun, yet also because it generated ample rewards: “[Edge of the Mists is] more about collecting loot, and karma, and gold and stuff than anything else.”

Besides investing time and effort towards completing game content, participants invested themselves in their games in other ways as well. Crystal, of course, had applied her imagination to create her characters. Ben, Jeff, and Shawn all noted that they have spent time researching their respective games in order to become knowledgeable about underlying mechanics and

optimal strategies. The three men also made references to honing their skills, especially in terms of becoming adept at playing one or more character classes in dungeons and raids. Forming and maintaining relationships—for both social and instrumental reasons—are additional kinds of investments that my participants discussed. Making friends involves time, self-disclosure, negotiation of differences, reciprocity, and other efforts, while having a group of in-game friends enriches the game. Ben and Jeff also invested in their raiding parties by being on time for raids, sharing resources and knowledge, and striving to be team-players.

Progress and rewards. All of my participants emphasized that they enjoyed making progress and earning rewards as they played through content:

There's something relaxing to [collecting items for a quest], knowing that I accomplishing a goal, in a manner of speaking. (Shawn)

To me it feels good because I see progression, I see that I'm working towards my goals. If I see that little bar moving, then I'm happy. (Crystal)

When I log off I want to be, I want to have made progress during that time. (Jeff)

It's a huge upgrade compared to my jankey 502... Well they just gave it to me, so I just got a new cloak, so that's cool. I like new cloaks, new cloaks make me happy. Heh heh. (Ben)

I think I just like boppin' around and doing different things, and getting rewarded. (Robin)

So this quest is going to yield me 90,000 experience points, a new hatchet, and some gear. (Shawn)

Making progress and earning rewards tended to overlap in my participants' accounts, since almost all activities in MMORPGs earn the player something and most progress involves earning and spending rewards. To play is to earn. To earn is to make progress towards goals that are based on accumulating a certain amount of something. Often, small rewards add up gradually to earn larger rewards, like accumulating enough experience points to level up or generating enough currency to buy a piece of gear. Sometimes different projects chain together: One might quest in order to earn gold, which is then used to purchase raw materials at the market, which is then used to craft items, which generates experience points that go towards leveling a profession. Most rewards, like gear and levels, make one's avatar more powerful. Ben and Shawn both talked about these kinds of quantified improvements in the simple terms of making numbers get bigger. In some sense, making numbers bigger is, as Shawn later said, "a means to an end"—but it also seems to be an end in itself in the context of a game that doesn't have a traditional endpoint.

My participants also discussed their ongoing and future projects, which often took the form of rewards that they hoped to earn. Ben, Jeff, and Shawn each had a system to catalogue the particular pieces of gear that they sought for their characters, along with information on how to acquire them: Shawn maintained a chart of the gear he is seeking on a whiteboard; Jeff referenced a website to help guide his future gear acquisitions; and Ben used addons that displayed information about the loot that bosses drop. Crystal spoke about her ongoing endeavor of obtaining the Headless Horseman's Mount during the yearly Hallow's End event. She also had a pair of characters that she was in the process of leveling. Robin mentioned that she hoped to eventually undergo the many tasks required to craft a legendary weapon—one of the highest

achievements in *GW2*. Shawn ambitiously planned to eventually fully level all of the 33 professions in *FFXIV*. He was also looking forward to the possibility of purchasing and furnishing housing that was rumored to be included in the next patch. All of these projects speak to the idea that my participants imagined themselves continuing to be engaged in their games and that it was their projects that pulled them into the future.

Just as my participants invested in their games in ways that went beyond simply playing through game content, they also described less tangible rewards for their efforts. Ben relished the sense of mastery that came with his years of practice and research. Crystal appreciated the relaxation she felt when she set aside her own problems and entered into the world of one of the various characters that she spent countless hours leveling and accessorizing. Shawn described feeling a sense of pride when he worked out the most efficient approach to a facet of the game. Compared to the literal rewards of MMORPGs, satisfying experiences like these are rewards in a broader sense.

How MMORPGs facilitate investment. The cycle of investing and being satisfyingly rewarded is at the heart of what has kept my participants engaged in their games over the years. It seems that MMORPGs are worlds that are especially well-suited to facilitating long-term investment. Some of my participants explained their understandings of why their games have kept them playing for so long, as in the following example:

I love adventure games, you know, and even those there's no replayability I still play them ... and at the end of the game it was always "Wow I'm glad I beat all of that, and I collected all of these things, and I did all of this," but there was no reason to do it again and with this type of a game, it's basically that adventure game, you're questing and

questing and getting rewards and it just sort of never ends and it's kind of nice, but you're not doing, it's not like you're just replaying the same game, like I said with the living story it adds so much more content, and sometimes that content builds on something that's already in the game that you want to do more of, or you wanna, you know this back piece was part of the um, the uh, living story stuff, and I can continue to gather more materials to level it up some more, you know what I mean? And it just adds to my stats. (Robin)

A lot of other games that I've played, Grand Theft Auto for example, there comes a point in the game where you're pretty much done, [whereas in games like this] you really don't get done, they kind of have so much stuff to them that you can do something different from them all the time and benefit from it, and you know what I mean by benefit by now, um, and that's what this is too, cause you can keep doing different stuff. The fact that you can't win is good. By the time you've got to a point where you can't get anything else, the new expansion is coming out, and then things are just totally changing. (Jeff)

Both Robin and Jeff note that, unlike games from other genres, MMORPGs offer virtually endless content by being composed of such a wide array of time-intensive activities and by being updated periodically with patches and expansions that build on existing content.

You know how MMOs kind of cycle: "Okay here's a new patch and a whole lot of content," and then roll roll roll, you get through that, [then the next patch is released and] "Oh, here's a whole bunch of new content." (Shawn)

In the long run, I still want to experience the content, I wanna see where the story goes. Even if it's bad, even if I don't approve of it, I'm still gonna play, because it's not going to stay that way forever you know, just because I might not enjoy certain things doesn't mean that it's not going to change and they're always going to come out with new classes, new whatever, levels are going to go up you know, whatever have you, so there's

always going to be something that I'm going to want to do or experience, so I don't ever see myself stopping unless the game stops. (Crystal)

Robin noted that at a certain point, *GW2* too slowly offered players enough to do and many quit—there was no longer any way for them to invest themselves in the game:

People started, like finishing up with their characters and they were like “Okay, now what?” You know, “Now what do we do?” and Living Story hadn't really gotten a good foothold yet and people got bored, like “I don't want to just do this with another character now, what's the point?” You know. “I've got this, I've got that, there's nothing more to want.” And they stopped playing.

With nothing more to want and therefore nothing more to do, the game lost its appeal. Ben indicated that not just any update will do, however—the content has to be compelling enough to keep players invested. After a particularly lackluster patch, many players from his raiding party decided to take a break from the game: “Essentially people logged, you know, like ‘Hey, I'll come back for the next expansion, but I'm not re-running this stupid boring raid every week, for eight months.’ There's no point.” He went on to describe how the raid bosses in this patch didn't require any interactive strategies, which is what makes raiding a compelling activity for high-level players.

There was some indication that the presence of other players that are engaged in the same pursuits had a significant impact on how my participants perceived the value of their investments in their games. Ben was the most explicit about how the accomplishments and status of other players spurred him to invest his time and energy in becoming more powerful himself:

You want to be someone that people look at and say “Hey, wow, that’s like ... you know, look at that guys gear, oh my god, he must be really good, you know, look at this, look at that. Oh my god he killed that boss, that’s incredible, you know. I can’t do that.” I didn’t want to be the person who said “I can’t do that,” I wanted to be the person people were looking at like, “Holy crap, how did he do that?”

The other four participants made passing references to how their pursuits and accomplishments compared to those of other players. Aside from the more obvious competitive dimension, I suspect that the mere fact that players are brushing shoulders with others jockeying for the same resources and achievements serves as an affirmation that the virtual world of the game is indeed one worth the investment.

Summary of Results

Each participant’s individual themes portray the most salient dimensions of their engagement with their MMORPG. Collectively, the individual themes indicate that each of my participants engaged with his or her game in a multifaceted and distinctive way. The shared themes, on the other hand, trace the commonalities across my participants. The *Investment* theme was the most inclusive, reflecting a wide range of the data from all of the participants. This theme also offered the most explanatory power with regards to the orienting question of this research: “Why do players play MMORPGs?” In the following chapter, I will compare my findings—with an emphasis on *Investment*—with the research detailed in the literature review and attempt to draw out further implications.

Chapter 6: Discussion

The centrality of work-like activities, captured by the *Investment* theme, is one of the most striking features of my participants' accounts. Common sense suggests that people would not choose to work during their leisure time. As the *Investment* theme indicates however, work-like activities are not merely tolerated by players—they are essential to the structure of being engaged in an MMORPG. Other researchers and commentators also have directed their attention to the prevalence of work in these games (Golumbia, 2009; Nardi, 2010; Poole, 2008; Rettberg, 2011; Rowlands, 2012; Yee, 2006). In this chapter, I integrate the contributions of these thinkers with my own findings to consider the potential meanings and implications of the *Investment* theme, since this aspect of MMORPG engagement is prominent in both my analysis and in the literature. My intention is not to reduce all of my data to this dimension, but rather to highlight and explore a vital thread. I also consider how other facets of my participants' accounts relate to this perspective on MMORPGs. Finally, I reflect on the limitations of this study and suggest avenues for future research.

Work or Play?

Because MMORPGs are designated as video games, it is suggested that they are *games* that people *play*. However, the ubiquity of prescribed, repetitive, time-consuming, utilitarian, and frankly boring tasks in MMORPGs has led many researchers (Golumbia, 2009; Rettberg, 2011; Rowlands, 2012) to conclude that the bulk of the activities in MMORPGs are better understood as work rather than play. Furthermore, these authors contend that work in MMORPGs is compelling to players because it allows them to participate in the worldview and practices of

modernity (especially capitalism) in a satisfying way. Nardi (2010) is the notable exception to this conclusion; she argues that MMORPGs offer a viable medium for play and that the work-like activities that they involve allow players to “play with” unsatisfying real-life work experiences.

The *Investment* theme is relevant to the question of whether or not MMORPGs are principally play, since it directly addresses the work-like activities inherent in these games. Investigating this theme in terms of its salience to play is relevant to my overarching inquiry about what is it that engages MMORPG players. To further explore this line of thought in the following section, I follow the lead of many aforementioned authors in utilizing Huizinga’s (1950) framework on the nature of play. In addition to providing another perspective on my findings, I hope to make a contribution to the ongoing debate about the nature of MMORPGs.

The formal characteristics of play. Before attempting to situate my findings in terms of work and play, I will restate the formal characteristics of play according to Huizinga (1950) in a list adapted from Nardi (2010):

1. A subjective experience of freedom
2. An absence of social obligation or physical necessity
3. A subjective experience that is absorbing, compelling, or pleasurable
4. Occurrence in a separate realm sometimes referred to as the magic circle
5. Activation through cognitive and/or physical skill
6. Tension, contingency, chanciness
7. Order achieved by rules
8. Opportunities for limited perfection

The list format suggests that these features are either present or absent in a straightforward, binary way. However, Huizinga, along with other play theorists, indicate that the nature of play is ambiguous, nuanced, and even paradoxical. As a result, rather than functioning like dichotomous requisites to name something as play, these essential features serve as conceptual guide posts that help one think about whether or not a given activity can be considered play.

Although Huizinga uses the word “game” throughout his analysis on play, he doesn’t define it. Throughout his discussion, the concept of game appears to be undifferentiated from the concept of play. In his usage, a game is just a manifestation of play: playing “pretend” is a game just as much as a formalized, competitive instance of play, such as chess, is a game. Nardi makes a distinction between play and game play, indicating that only game play is defined by tension, order achieved by rules, and opportunities for limited perfection, whereas play, more broadly defined, need not meet these criteria. She seems to indicate that the distinction between play and game play is present in Huizinga’s analysis, but he clearly attributes tension, order achieved by rules, and opportunities for limited perfection to all instances of play.

The nature of work. Huizinga (1950) doesn't define work (nor do Golumbia [2009], Nardi [2010], Rettberg [2011], or Rowlands [2012]), though it is possible to articulate at least some of its features by extrapolation from his definition of play. In contrast to play, work is an activity that *is* undertaken for social obligation and material necessity—this is its defining characteristic. On second thought, however, we might change “material necessity” to “material gain,” since many people work to obtain more than the bare necessities of life. The prominence of the American Dream is a testament to the fact that the desire to earn more in order to afford a

more lavish lifestyle is a powerful cultural fantasy. Another way we might express this characteristic of work is to define it as an activity that is undertaken for the sake of an end (social, moral, or hedonistic), rather than for the experience of the activity itself, the means. Nardi, borrowing from Dewey's theory of active aesthetic experience, indicates that an activity that is undertaken solely for the ends is the antithesis of active aesthetic experience and commonly manifests in the situation of the modern workplace, where work is often repetitive and unengaging. Thus, work at its worst is performed exclusively for pay, though this does not characterize all work, since work can involve engaging activity that is undertaken for both the ends and the means.

Another feature of work is that it occurs within the ordinary sphere for life, rather than in an extra-ordinary realm that is set off from it. Thus, rather than becoming absorbed into an alternate disposition and ordering of activity as in play, in work one remains in the "natural attitude" (Rowlands, 2012). Work is practical and mundane; it is about achieving some kind of "real" outcome in the world, such as manufacturing, selling, or transporting a product, providing a certain kind of experience or a service, and so on. In play, on the other hand, the desired outcome has to do with ending the tension of the game, which arises from the particular ordering of the game world. The desire for the outcome, then, arises from the structure of the game and exists within the magic circle of the game, rather than from practical considerations that belong to everyday reality.

Though the two characteristics just outlined do not provide an exhaustive definition of work, they provide a framework for thinking about the nature of work and how it can be differentiated from play.

A consideration of work-like activities. On a manifest level, many of the activities in MMORPGs are structured in the same way as real-life labor. Golumbia (2009) points out how productive activities in MMORPGs are hardly different than other computerized tasks such as data entry, which are readily recognized as work. Additionally, in-game success takes the form of earning something upon the completion of a task, just as one earns a paycheck for a job. Poole (2008) described this arrangement as “working for the man” and dubbed it the “employment paradigm” in video game design. He draws attention to the fact that virtual bosses that appear in various guises direct players through games. In MMORPGs, jobs are typically assigned by the inhabitants of towns—the butcher, the baker, and probably even the candlestick-maker are all likely to have some errand for an aspiring warrior or rogue. These “quests,” however, are often not the spiritual journeys upon which archetypal heroes embark; rather, they are menial errands, usually carried out for prosaic reasons—jobs, to put it bluntly. These portrayals of MMORPG activities as work-like are in accord with the experiences of my participants. As Jeff put it, “Questing is you go out into the world and you find someone who says ‘Do this for me’ and then you go run a stupid errand for them and then you come back and they give you five valor points.” Ben’s description was similar: “You’re doing stupid quests, like ‘Go fetch me these flowers. Oh, and for some reason they only, you can only get them by killing this monster, so go kill 10 of this monster and get 10 flowers, and then come back to me.’”

The flip side of earning is spending, and MMORPGs are just as saturated with items to purchase as they are with jobs. Material items like gear, mounts, and crafting materials are, of course, always for sale. Even things that one can't buy in real life, such as skills, physical and mental capacities, and a good reputation, are essentially purchased in MMORPGs with points that are earned in the same way as money. For example, in *WoW*, a character's reputation with a given faction is earned by completing quests that award reputation points. When a character accumulates a designated number of reputation points, certain privileges are granted, such as the license to buy certain items or to access restricted territories. Thus, gaining the trust of a group in an MMORPG functions in the same way as earning and spending. It is important to note, however, that spending in MMORPGs is better equated with investing money in a business to increase its future earning potential, rather than with consumer shopping. Items and attributes are not purchased for consumption, but rather to increase the power of the avatar. Rowlands (2012) points out that the attributes of an avatar, such as its level, gear, and so on, determine its value in the world of an MMORPG, which he refers to as "avatar capital." Increasing one's avatar capital is the pursuit around which earning and spending are oriented.

Rowlands, Rettberg, and Golumbia all consider the factors that render the buying and spending embedded in MMORPGs attractive to players. Rettberg argues that because the values of capitalism, including the Protestant work ethic, loom so large in our culture, working productively is experienced as pleasurable and virtuous, whereas playing freely might feel like a frivolous waste of time. Complementing Rettberg's point, Golumbia evocatively describes the pleasure of completing discrete, digital tasks. Additionally, Golumbia draws attention to the lust for power that MMORPGs satisfy—all productive activities are in service of amassing power to

one's avatar. Rowlands describes the way a productivity-oriented approach to MMORPGs, which he calls the dominant strategy, evolved over time. This dominant strategy is more than just a set of activities, but also a taken-for-granted attitude about the world of the game. Like Rettberg and Golumbia, he contends that this attitude is an extension of modernist, capitalist ideology.

Nardi (2010) disputes the portrayals of MMORPGs as capitalist work platforms. Though she acknowledges the preponderance of work-like activities, she argues that they occur within the magic circle of play, at least in most circumstances. She contends that within the play-spaces of these games, real-world experiences of toilsome work are "confronted and transformed in the hospitable environs of a game world" (p. 115). The key difference, according to her analysis, is that instead of yielding an inadequate reward for one's efforts (which is what happens in real life), MMORPGs provide an outcome that is "meaningful" and "exciting" (p. 113). She considers these moments of attaining rewards to be instances of experiencing the limited perfection that play fosters, according to Huizinga's definition.

Does Nardi's analysis, which construes repetitive activities as play, hold up in light of what I learned from my participants? Or is this dimension of MMORPG engagement better conceptualized as work? I next consider my findings in light of this debate, using Huizinga's structural elements of play as a conceptual framework.

A key claim of Nardi's (2010) argument is the fact that activities in MMORPGs are not undertaken out of social obligation or physical necessity, which Huizinga characterizes as an essential feature of play. To illustrate her point, she notes that, in contrast to regular players,

Chinese gold farmers (people, usually Chinese, who earn their living by selling *WoW* gold for real money) subvert this arrangement since they are in fact using *WoW* to meet material needs—thus, they are working rather than playing. Columbia and Rowlands also take Chinese gold farmers into account, though rather than seeing their activity as meaningfully different than that of regular players, they argue that the approach Chinese gold farmers take to gold farming is the same as the approach any player might take to farming resources. In both cases, the emphasis is on efficiency and productivity—Chinese gold farmers and regular players are both invested in earning as quickly as they can. This instrumental nature of this approach toward certain MMORPG content forecloses spontaneous free play, which, contrary to Nardi’s position, suggests that this mode of engagement is falls short of meeting the criteria for play and offers some support for the position that repetitive economic activities are better understood as instances of work.

Although my participants were playing voluntarily and not attempting to earn real money like Chinese gold farmers, they indicated that farming, grinding, and questing are undertaken for the sake of the outcome, rather than for the enjoyment of the activity per se. Shawn, in reference to the laurel-gathering quest, stated “I wouldn’t really do it as an entertainment value, I do it more as a means to an end.” Crystal described her attitude towards repeated dungeon-runs (the mainstay of how she leveled her characters) in outcome-oriented terms as well: “Get it done, get the experience, get the loot, get out of there, done.” Jeff, speaking more generally, stated “When I log off I want to be, I want to have made progress during that time.” Thus, despite being engaged in their games for enjoyment’s sake, my participants took up many activities for the sake of the destination, not the journey. In line with this orientation, they usually took the most

efficient route to earning rewards, which, in the context of MMORPGs, usually means repetitively completing the most profitable activities. This approach leaves little room for creativity or playful variation.

Additionally, repetitive activities such as grinding and farming involve little contingency or chance—the essential characteristics of play that imbue it with tension. These reward-driven undertakings are categorically low-risk, since high-risk activities aren't suitable for efficiently accumulating resources. Due to the absence of tension, the process is rote and undemanding. Since players are not incited to strive for performative excellence, I find it difficult to imagine how “limited perfection” could be achieved in the context of these activities. Nardi contends that the satisfaction of earning a fulfilling reward lends limited perfection to repetitive activities, but I fail to see how a pleasing outcome to an otherwise non-engaging activity is a moment of limited perfection according to Huizinga's construal; limited perfection is something achieved *within* the process of play, not a product of it.

My participants indicated that because many tasks involve little contingency or chance, they aren't particularly riveting or demanding. To mitigate boredom, most of them described engaging in complementary activities while playing repetitive content. Jeff watched TV with his fiancée while he quested, since it only required a fraction of his attention. Shawn spoke about how he liked to have Facebook, Hulu, or something else open on his laptop to entertain him while he completes simple tasks in *FFXIV*. Robin and Ben enjoyed chatting with their friends while completing undemanding content. These instances hardly constitute the engrossing, uncertain attempts at attaining instances of limited perfection that constitute play. Additionally,

the disengagement and participation in auxiliary activities while undertaking these tasks casts doubt regarding whether a magic circle of play is established at all during repetitive economic activities. Instead, players readily mesh certain MMORPG content with activities outside the game.

At several points, my participants also indicated that they found repetitive yet productive activities to be relaxing, in addition to experiencing them as undemanding and boring. For instance, Shawn, in reference to gathering laurel, said, “There’s something relaxing to it, knowing that I accomplishing a goal, in a manner of speaking.” In a similar vein, Crystal indicated that running the dungeons that she had previously played hundreds of times felt soothing due to their familiarity. At the same time, watching her character’s experience points accumulate contributed a sense that she was “working towards [her] goals.” I had a similar experience of feeling simultaneously relaxed and industrious while questing and grinding in *Rift*. I wasn’t exerting myself physically or mentally, yet I was getting tangibly closer to the things I had come to desire in the game, such as the next level-up or a new piece of gear. The pleasure that accompanied progress was appreciable to the point that I would feel cheerful after a particularly profitable night. It seems that the work in MMORPGs is often not experienced as strenuous in the way that most work is, yet the structure of rewards leaves the satisfaction of its completion intact, or even enhances it.

Although the work-like activities discussed here may be relatively mindless in and of themselves, Shawn’s *Efficiency* theme draws attention to the fact that even this class of activity calls for skills related to managing resources. Since these tasks are undertaken for the sake of

gaining the most resources with the least time and effort, players strive to determine the most efficient approach. Thus, in an MMORPG, the player is not only the laborer, but also the manager that directs labor for optimal productivity. Can managing one's digital labor be playful? Nardi (2010) answers affirmatively, arguing that MMORPGs "play" with the way real-world economies function by critiquing them: "The often disappointing results of sticking-with-it in real-life are critiqued; a deflating end to long toil is eliminated, replaced with rewards that delight, enhance, and create social cohesion—bright glowing things that move players forward in the logic of the game" (p. 116). However, the "logic of the game" that she references seems to be the very logic she claims the games are critiquing: the logic of turning labor into capital. Thus, rather than allowing players to critique capitalist economics, these games appear to provide a simulation, a chance to engage in a degree of resource management that is usually reserved for businesses elites, government officials, and military commanders. The fact that MMORPGs allow a typical player to become economically successful through the application of hard work and efficiency is why Rettberg (2012) deems them "capitalist fairytale[s]" (p. 20).

Huizinga's (1950) discussion casts further doubt on the proposition that engaging in activities related to economic production can be done in the spirit of play. He indicates that there has been a trend in Western culture toward more technical, less spontaneous manifestations of play. He explains that the more systematized and regimented games become, the more the "true play spirit" (p. 197) diminishes, since spontaneity and carelessness are lost. He decries the "fatal shift toward over-seriousness" in games where "calculation is everything" (p. 198). Any playful activity, he contends, can be "raised to such a pitch of technical organization and scientific thoroughness that the real play spirit is threatened with extinction" (p. 199). He cites the

popularity of bridge during the mid-1900s as example of this phenomenon, stating that “proficiency at bridge is a sterile excellence, sharpening the mental faculties very one-sidedly without enriching the soul in any way” (p. 199). Huizinga’s critique of bridge sounds almost identical to Rowlands’s (2012) critique of *EverQuest*: “Gaming in MMOs is clearly not characterized by the same playful, improvisational make-believe games from our childhood. Rather, it is systemic, repetitive, ritualized, and economic. It is institutional” (p. 74).

In light of the considerations I have discussed, repetitive economic activities, which are prominent in MMORPGs, don’t qualify as play, at least on their own, according to Huizinga’s definition. Is it possible that rather than being play in their own right, they are activities that support other, more playful, activities such as raiding and role-playing? And if so, might this qualify them as a component of an activity that is playful overall? After all, many instances of play require some sort of work to make them possible, such as doing drills at sports practice, setting up the components of a board game, or clearing an area to play with toys. On one level, it appears to be the same with MMORPGs. All of the work that goes into leveling and gearing a character is what makes it possible to participate in raids, for instance. Or, in the case of role-playing, taking the time to gather a large collection of gear, mounts, and other accessories makes it possible to personalize avatars in a satisfying way. Though this view seems compelling, on further analysis it breaks down. For one, efforts undertaken to make play possible are not necessarily part of the play itself; running laps, for instance, is not playing soccer, even though it may be in the service of playing soccer. One can fully engage in soccer without ever running laps—running laps is not part of the play experience. Another difference, noted by Nardi, is that MMORPG designers do not have to include work-like activities in their games. It would be

entirely possible to have a game composed of dungeons, raiding, role-playing, PvP matches, and other activities without requiring players to spend months acquiring gear, levels, and resources. Yet, as Shawn indicated, MMORPGs wouldn't be the same if you didn't have to work for the trappings of success. Nardi, along with Castranova (2007, 2010), agree: The effort required to improve one's avatar is tightly woven into the fabric of MMORPGs. Thus, work-like activities are not auxiliary to playing an MMORPG, they are an essential part of the experience.

Another question regarding work-like activities is whether or not they can be construed as work. On the one hand, it is clear that players are undertaking these activities voluntarily and not for any gain that exists outside the game. On the other hand, they *are* undertaken for gain within the game. This leads to the question of whether there is something meaningfully different about working in an MMORPG for an item in an MMORPG and working in the everyday world for an item in the everyday world. Another way of asking this question is: Is the world of an MMORPG set off from the rest of the world within a magic circle of play, or does it belong to everyday reality? Chinese gold farmer's show that, at the very least, these worlds can intersect: They work in an MMORPG for a payoff in everyday reality, whereas the players who buy gold from them work in everyday reality for gold in the MMORPG.

Shedding some light on why it may be difficult to neatly define repetitive economic activities as either work or play, Huizinga (1950) postulates that that ever since the industrial revolution, business has increasingly become more like a game. He attributes this development to the inception of statistics and records of trade and production, which introduced an element of competition both between and within companies. Thus, in Huzinga's view, not only has play has

become less playful but work has become more playful; as a result, the two have become less readily distinguishable from one another. Rowlands (2012) contends that a division between work and play has become a false dichotomy altogether and that activities in MMORPGs do not represent a blurring of work and play. Instead, he argues that MMORPGs are better understood as a medium into which the natural attitude of our culture is extended. Thus, players are not engaged in a simulation of capitalism, but are simply practicing it in a different space—a space which is not set off from the rest of reality in any meaningful way. Rettberg (2011) and Columbia (2009) also both conclude that MMORPGs are actual occurrences, rather than simulations, of capitalistic practices.

In conclusion, it is difficult to make sense of the attraction that players have to farming, grinding, and other economic activities in MMORPGs by conceptualizing them as play. Later in this discussion, I provide an alternate interpretation of the appeal of these activities in light of these conclusions. First, however, I consider whether some of the other ways that my participants spent their time in MMORPGs can be characterized as play.

Raiding. Though farming and other repetitive economic tasks were prominent in my participants' accounts, they engaged in other activities as well. Raiding, for example, was the primary focus for Ben and Jeff. Although raids are profitable (in fact, they are the source of the best gear in the game), they also tend to be the most challenging content in MMORPGs, requiring a great deal of individual skill and group coordination. Though other participants mentioned the importance of performance in raids and other challenging content, Ben emphasized it the most. He explained how qualities such as situational awareness, quick decision

making, and knowledge of the game are essential to success in the unforgiving environment of a raid boss fight. In addition to discussing the skill involved in raiding, he also described becoming totally absorbed in the game during a fight and the intense satisfaction of beating a boss for the first time.

Unlike farming and other repetitive, work-like activities, raiding clearly involves a high degree of contingency and exceptional levels of challenge for even the most skilled players. Nardi (2010) also draws attention to the performative aspects in raiding and argues that on account of the tension and skillful engagement that they entail, raiding most certainly qualifies as play. Indeed, raiding meets the criterion that it activates the skillfulness of players and absorbs them completely in the world of the game. When everything coheres smoothly and the raid is successful, a palpable sense of “limited perfection” is achieved. In light of these features, it seems that raiding—along with engaging in other challenging game content—does meet Huizinga’s (1950) criteria of play.

Rowalds (2012), however, argues that raids are not particularly playful events—instead, they are “rote, mechanical encounters in which imagination and innovation actually work to the detriment of the group” (p. 137). He provides a detailed description of his first raid in *Everquest*. Within his party of over 40 players, his sole function was to heal the tank when it was his turn, which would be announced in the chat box by the player in charge of managing the “heal chain.” His function, along with that of everyone else, was pre-determined to the extent that he didn’t have to think for himself. He was a cog in a machine that was structured so as to minimize risk: “The entire point of developing a heal chain is to compensate for error. Likewise, multiple tanks,

offtanks, and off-offtanks are assigned in case one or more falls in battle” (p. 107). In Rowlands’s account, there was a high degree of performance required, but it was not the playful sort.

I watched Ben, Jeff, and Shawn participate in raid content, and although I didn’t observe the heights of mechanization that Rowlands describes, there were degrees of it. Ben and Jeff indicated that they followed definitive strategies that were assigned by their leaders, rather than improvising during fights. I was able to listen to how their respective raid leaders disseminated instructions to the rest of the party before the encounters began. Additionally, both Ben and Jeff noted that they were expected to study established strategies for each boss, which are available online in the format of videos and written guides. Thus, players generally are expected to follow pre-determined strategies rather than creatively and spontaneously devise their own tactics. This fixed, technical approach to fighting raid bosses is undoubtedly related to the nature of software. The bosses themselves are set routines—they behave the same each and every time they are fought. Since they are entirely predictable and unchanging, beating a given boss is simply a matter of properly executing an existing strategy. Once a raid fight becomes easy for a raiding party and the element of tension is lost, the endeavor lapses into another instance of farming. It seems that although fighting a raid boss does qualify as play, it is the variety of play that Huizinga (1950) characterizes as having an emphasis on “technical organization and scientific thoroughness” (p. 199) rather than spontaneity and carelessness.

Role-playing. Despite the inclusion of role-playing in the term MMORPG, Crystal was the only participant who used her game for this purpose. She described herself as role-playing in

two different ways. One was by participating in staged role-plays with other players in which everyone would assume the identities of their characters and act out dramatic scenarios. This mode of role-playing is, like acting and playing make-believe, play in the purest sense according to Huizinga (1950). It is imaginative, spontaneous, set off from the rest of reality, and engrossing. Crystal also role-played on her own by taking on the attitude and perspective of her character while going about other activities in the game. In this way, she added an element of play to otherwise dull activities such as level-grinding by imagining herself as her character.

Rowlands (2012) provides a historical perspective on the practice of role-playing in MMORPGs. He notes that MMORPGs were influenced by both pen and paper RPGs, which involve imaginative free-play, and single-player video games, which encourage an instrumental orientation to beating the game. He contends that in the early days of *EverQuest*, players used the space with a great deal of variation and role-playing was commonplace. However, the tendency to treat the game as something to be mastered through the application of instrumental rationality became increasingly prominent and eventually emerged as the dominant strategy. At present, role-playing is still enjoyed by many MMORPG players, yet they have decidedly become the minority—a state of affairs that Crystal decried during her interview.

Interactions with other players. All of my participants indicated that interacting with other players was a significant aspect of playing an MMORPG. My analysis revealed that these interactions could be categorized as either instrumental or social. Instrumental interactions were those related to achieving in-game objectives and, though not play per se, could be part of a playful activity such as raiding. By the same token, these interactions could also be involved

with repetitive economic activities such as exchanging items or grinding group content (e.g., dungeons). In contrast, socializing didn't serve a function within game content. Instead, social interactions occurred alongside gameplay. Thus, although the social dimension was salient for some of my participants, it was neither integral to playful activities nor play in its own right.

A variety of activities to consider. My participants engaged in a variety of activities in the worlds of their games, some of which fell considerably short of being play, such as farming, grinding, questing, leveling professions, and other repetitive tasks that were undertaken solely to achieve an end. However, raiding, along with other difficult content, included the crucial element of tension, which invited skillful engagement, absorption, and the possibility of attaining limited perfection—attributes that qualify these activities as play, though perhaps play that is relatively more technical and institutionalized. Role-playing, though uncommon, is certainly play, and is comparably more spontaneous and imaginative than many other activities in a MMORPG. Perhaps the fact that MMORPGs house such a variety of different activities indicates that they are too multifaceted to be characterized solely as work spaces or play spaces. Maybe it is better to think of them as spaces in which players can engage in a wide range of activities, some playful, some not. This view seems to be congruent with Rowlands's (2012) statement that an MMORPG is not a "discreet, pocket universe within a magic circle" but instead provides "everyday spaces for their users" into which they extend the same attitude they would apply to any other "province of meaning" (p. 84). Since the appeal of MMORPGs can't be solely ascribed to the provision of playful experiences to users, and since players do seem to work in them to some extent, the question of what is it that makes these particular spaces so compelling remains.

As Rowlands, Rettberg (2011), and Golumbia (2009) suggest, the pleasure that these games provide can only be understood in light of their cultural context.

An Underlying Ideology in MMORPGs

The vast array of content in MMORPGs suggests that they are virtual sandboxes, allowing players to engage with them in any way they can imagine. While it is true that players are free to choose between many different activities, they are actually quite limited in terms of how they can interact with the game world through their avatars. By and large, the computer code of an MMORPG allows a player to interact with the environment by extracting resources from it in order to strengthen his or her avatar. For instance, the various beings that populate these worlds can only be attacked and then looted—not only is that the only possible way of interacting with them, but doing so is profitable. Of course, one could refrain from treating them in this manner, but the game doesn't allow for any alternative way to relate to them. The confines of the programming are based on the logic according to which these games are designed. As Rowlands (2012), Rettberg (2011), and Golumbia (2009) contend, the content of MMORPGs are manifestations of the ideology of modernity, including capitalist economics, colonial attitudes towards otherness, and instrumental rationality. In this section, I further interpret the findings of the present study through this cultural lens.

One prominent tenant of modernity is that the human condition will improve indefinitely into the future through progress in various forums. In capitalism, progress manifests as economic growth. In a similar vein, MMORPGs are structured in such a way that they instill in players a potent orientation to the future. This structure was revealed by the *Investment* theme—investing

is future-oriented by definition. My participants were always in the process of working for something that was on the future horizon: the next level-up, a better piece of gear, a new mount, and so on. According to the structure of desire, it is only possible to desire that which one does not already possess. MMORPGs capitalize on the nature of desire by regularly releasing new items and achievements for which to strive. Robin told an instructive story about a time when new content was being released too slowly in *GW2*:

People started, like finishing up with their characters and they were like “Okay, now what?” you know, “Now what do we do?”... People got bored, like ... “What’s the point?” You know. “I’ve got this, I’ve got that, there’s nothing more to want.” And they stopped playing.

In this instance, the driving force of engagement—something to want—ceased to exist, and as a result, engagement broke down. Thus, desiring something that one can obtain in the future is essential to the structure of being engaged in an MMORPG.

In the fundamentally quantified world of MMORPGs, the allure of new items lies with the higher values of their attributes. Ben and Shawn, both cutting right to the heart of the matter, explained that seeking higher-level gear is in the service of increasing the numbers associated with one’s avatar, thereby making it more powerful. Shawn emphatically stated that “bigger numbers are better” and that this axiom is the “driving force” behind all activities in MMORPGs. He added that when he fulfills this pursuit, he experiences a pleasurable “sense of increase.” Ben echoed his sentiment, exclaiming “Big numbers—the bigger your gear, the better your gear gets, the bigger your numbers are, and the happier you are because your numbers are huge.” In Ben’s

statement, “bigger” numbers and “better” seemingly blur together, just as they do in the capitalistic values of our culture.

The efforts players make towards acquiring gear and other items are ultimately in the service of making their avatars more powerful, which is the underlying desire that pulls players forward in the logic of an MMORPG. While in other games, players might endeavor to reach an endpoint, in MMORPGs increasing the power of one’s avatar is the organizing pursuit.

Columbia (2009) suggests that the pleasure that players experience as they accumulate and optimize their avatars is a manifestation of Nietzsche’s will to power: “These games turn on an almost pure lust for power: they repetitively enact the accrual of more and more power to a central and perceiving subject, with the rest of the world reduced to objects to be killed or consumed” (p. 189).

For some players, discovering the most efficient ways to make numbers become bigger becomes a meaningful goal in itself. Shawn reflected that “Making big numbers bigger might just be a means to an end, but sometimes analyzing the logic and mechanics behind the means—and executing them most efficiently—is a goal unto itself.” In a sense, the means have become the end. Shawn’s emphasis on the how rather than the why is a reflection of instrumental rationality, which is endemic to modernity. Though Shawn articulated this manner of thinking the most clearly, all of my participants expressed it at certain points in relation to their in-game pursuits. Heidegger (1978) describes this emphasis on instrumentality as a particular ontological mode of world disclosure called *enframing*. In this mode, the world appears to us as a stockpile of resources: “[A] tract of land is challenged in the hauling out of coal and ore. The earth now

reveals itself as a coal-mining district, the soil as a mineral deposit” (p. 296). Thus, in this mode we *set upon* nature in order to efficiently extract what we can use from it. Resources are ordered so as to be immediately on hand, a state that Heidegger calls *standing-reserve*. In MMORPGs, virtually everything that one can interact with—monsters, humanoid races, plants, and even magical substances—can be readily put to use or sold. Thus, MMORPGs are worlds that are pre-organized into standing-reserve. Even one’s own avatar can be taken up as nothing more than a resource to be optimized.

Rowlands (2012) points out that MMORPGs are such potent expressions of modernist ideology because this world-view, shared by designers, players, and the culture at large, is reified in the programming of the game: “[This] view of the world doesn’t simply become the way things are done. It becomes the world itself” (p. 148). In a similar vein, Golumbia (2009) states: “The world presented by *WoW* is not precisely our world, but, in certain ways, it mimics exactly the wish that capital and globalization encode for us” (p. 201). Rettberg (2011) agrees, succinctly stating that MMORPGs provide a “capitalist fairytale” (p. 20). It follows that these worlds are engaging to players insofar as they are particularly satisfying places in which to participate in modernist undertakings. As Rowlands puts it, they are worlds ripe for us to “seamlessly extend our labor and with it our instrumentality and emphasis on efficiency, optimization, and technique” (p. 17). Moreover, they are designed precisely for this purpose.

The view that MMORPGs provide satisfying experiences of modernist pursuits accounts for the preponderance of work-like activities. They are spaces that lend themselves to certain ways of engaging with the world because they are structured according to those very same ways

of viewing the world. They are programmed according to the modernist perspective, and thus modernist ways of seeing and doing are amplified within them. MMORPGS are worlds of quantification and causal certainty. They are worlds of earning and buying, of striving for more. They are worlds of endless new lands brimming with resources to be harvested. They are worlds without death, where progress and self-improvement unfurl so long as new expansions are released. Thus, they are worlds that offer that which we are all taught to desire. They work the way the rest of the world is *supposed* to work. They reward players for putting in the time, effort, and acumen to succeed. In MMORPGs, the natural attitude of our culture has found “hospitable environs” (Nardi, 2010, p. 115) in which it can be optimally enjoyed.

A Final Look at the Data

The interpretation that MMORPGs are engaging because they offer players an optimal environment for the pursuit of modernist projects is compelling and was supported by my data and analysis. This interpretation highlights the way taken-for-granted cultural values shape the MMORPG experience. However, these cultural values do not manifest uniformly across individual instances of engagement, which is evident in my findings. Each participant took up his or her MMORPG in a unique way. Their particular approaches were influenced by past experiences, present circumstances, and other values and priorities. Thus, manifestations of modernist ways of seeing and doing were constituted in a unique matrix of other factors in each case. In this section, I return to the individual accounts of my participants in order to ground the cultural interpretation in particular instances of lived experience, thereby continuing to explore the question of how it is that players become so deeply engaged in MMORPGs.

Returning to my participants' accounts also serves an important function with regards to reflexivity. Since I had familiarized myself with the literature on MMORPGs prior to conducting this study, I was already acquainted with the conceptualization of these games as reflections of modernist ideologies while collecting and analyzing my data. Inevitably, this perspective had an impact on the way I came to understand the accounts of my participants. This fact does not render the analysis invalid, yet it does indicate that special care is required to account for data that does not fit this interpretation. Thus, this final reflection on my findings serves as a chance to consider how well the interpretation discussed in this chapter fits the data of each participant on an individual basis. I will especially consider the *Investment* theme, since this theme is the most prominent finding of the analysis and is particularly relevant to the question of what it is that engages in MMORPGs. Although this theme provides support for the interpretation that engagement in MMORPGs follows the contours of modernist ideologies, I will also account for meanings that exceed this interpretation.

Ben. Attaining the best gear, “big numbers,” and other markers of success was a highly motivating enterprise for Ben. Several of the key moments in his gaming career were instances when he consciously invested himself in the project of becoming more powerful in the scheme of the game, which involved dedicating vast amounts of time to earning gear and other resources. This undertaking involved acquiring knowledge and skills in order to optimize his approach to the challenges of *WoW*. Ben's focus on accruing power through an instrumental approach to the game certainly resonates with the interpretation that MMORPGs foster modernist pursuits. Ben especially embodied the Nietzschean lust for power that Golumbia (2009) associates with the structure of these games.

For Ben, striving to become a better player with a more powerful avatar, however, was about more than just earning achievements and making his numbers bigger—it was about attaining a sense of mastery. Ben spoke directly to this point: “I think the desire to be part of a group and the desire to be good at something is, I think that’s fairly universal. It just happened to be that [for me] this thing was something that was in a game.” He emphasized that raids in *WoW* are extremely challenging endeavors, requiring the capacity to rapidly process information in order to make optimal decisions on a second-by-second basis. Ben described becoming intensely focused and absorbed during boss fights and stated that it was immensely satisfying to beat a boss for the first time. He also relished the competitive dimensions of striving for excellence: *WoW* served as a proving-ground where he tested himself against other highly invested and skilled players. It was a point of pride for Ben that he brushed virtual shoulders with medical doctors, engineers, and other intelligent, successful people.

Thus, Ben was highly invested in *WoW* not only on account of the characters he had leveled and the gear he had earned, but also because the knowledge and skills that he had cultivated over many years provided him with a satisfying sense of mastery. The considerable social dimension of Ben’s investment in *WoW* also stands outside the cultural interpretation. He was not a master of *WoW* in isolation, but rather shared his passion for the game with other enthusiasts.

Jeff. Jeff found the structure of earning rewards motivating and engaging. He stated that a satisfying session was one in which he made “progress,” which meant making it further in a raid or acquiring better gear for his character. Jeff spent the bulk of his time in *WoW* raiding,

which was an activity that required his full attention and effort. For Jeff, formulating and executing strategies to defeat raid bosses was a difficult and engaging challenge. He preferred the technical side of the endeavor, largely ignoring the thematic dimension of raids and of the game in general. Thus, Jeff's approach to *WoW* followed the logic of modernism insofar as he was oriented to making progress, earning rewards, and attaining technical aptitude.

These modernist pursuits all occurred in a highly social and collaborative context for Jeff: His raiding group was at the center of his *WoW* experience. He stated that raiding with his nine companions was similar to spending time with real-life friends in the sense that he enjoyed their company. In addition to socializing, however, they were engaged in the project of improving their performance as a unit, which entailed devising strategies and coordinating their attacks through collaborative problem-solving, communication, and practice. He noted that he highly valued the stability and adeptness of his group. Consequently, he actively worked to maintain it by reliably attending raid nights, performing to the best of his ability, and sharing resources. Thus, Jeff was invested in his raiding party not only in the service of pursuing the markers of success in *WoW*, but for the sake of the group itself.

Shawn. Shawn's account most clearly reflected the interpretation that MMORPGs foster modernist ways of engaging with the world, since he was particularly oriented to the economic and technical dimensions of his game. He characterized himself as an achievement-oriented player, seeking to earn levels, gear, and resources as efficiently as possible. He construed all pursuits in MMORPGs as essentially the same: making numbers bigger. In the service of making numbers bigger as efficiently as possible, Shawn analyzed the underlying mechanics of

various aspects of the game in order to determine the optimal approach. The process of working out how to most efficiently tackle game content was at the heart of his engagement in *FFXIV*. Shawn's motivation to earn, tendency to quantify, and emphasis on the means over the ends all reflect modernist ways of seeing and doing.

Shawn's instrumental approach did not, however, entirely eclipse the thematic dimensions of *FFXIV*. He found the many unfolding plots in the game compelling and entertaining. Furthermore, Shawn was consistently charmed by the humor that was cleverly woven into game content at every turn, especially since it referenced familiar touchstones from other *Final Fantasy* games. Thus, Shawn wasn't investing in a world devoid of meaning as his statements about big numbers might suggest, but rather in a world that he cherished.

Crystal. In many ways, Crystal defied the characterization of MMORPG engagement as being driven by modernist values. Rather than pursuing designated achievements such as earning powerful gear and progressing through increasingly difficult content, she used the space of *WoW* to create a cast of richly imagined characters. She found the lore of *WoW*—including the history of the world, the various races, the spirit of her faction, and the ongoing narratives—to be a compelling backdrop upon which to situate the lives of her creations. Additionally, the multitude of gear, mounts, and other items in *WoW* served as a virtually endless supply of material to use for outfits and accessories. When she played one of her characters, she experienced a sense of immersion, leaving her habitual self behind and engaging with the world of the game as though she were the avatar. She would also sometimes role-play with other players. Crystal's focus on

the creating and maintaining a coherent sense of character trumped the capitalistic and instrumental values that permeate MMORPGs.

Although Crystal's chief project of developing her characters does not reflect modernist values, she engaged in modernist ways of approaching the content of *WoW* in order to pursue it. Although Crystal could freely imagine the personalities and backgrounds of her avatars, she had to work within the structures of the game in order to fully level and outfit them, which was something she found worthwhile and motivating. In service of this aim, a great deal of Crystal's time was spent repetitively running dungeons in order to efficiently earn experience and resources. Although Crystal indicated that she couldn't bear to complete daily quests in order to earn high-end gear, she was quite content level grinding and felt a sense of satisfaction as she made progress. Thus, although Crystal's emphasis on character development transcended modernist values, she readily engaged in instrumental and capitalist practices in order to realize her characters in the world of the game.

Robin. Robin had an ambiguous relationship with the modernist dimensions of MMORPGs. On the one hand, she indicated that she was motivated to earn the various rewards and achievements in *GW2*, such as new items and titles. On the other hand, she balked at the notion of obligatory activities and turned up her nose at the repetitive, work-like quality of questing in other MMORPGs. Thus, it seemed that although Robin was motivated to earn, she certainly didn't want it to feel like work was being imposed upon her! Instead, she expected to be entertained by the activities in *GW2* and therefore compelled to do them on account of her own desire rather than as a means to an end. Thus, although she enjoyed earning, she generally wasn't

willing to invest her time in work-like activities, making her only partially amenable to the capitalistic structure of turning labor into capital. Likewise, she didn't seem to be particularly committed to pursuing a technical mastery of the game content since she rarely discussed the strategic dimensions of her undertakings. The premium she placed on the aesthetics of the game world and her enjoyment of the narratives also suggest that she related to world of *GW2* from more than an instrumental perspective.

Closing thoughts. These final considerations indicate that some of the ways my participants invested in their games reflected modernist ideologies, while others transcended this value system, such as forming friendships, cooperating with teammates, mastering skills, creating characters, learning lore, and attending to unfolding narratives. As my participants invested in their games in the various ways I have described, they became increasingly invested in them: over the course of, and as a result of, their engagement, the worlds of their games had become increasingly familiar and personally meaningful. MMORPGs are games that are particularly well-suited for long-term investment on account of their vast amounts of content, regular expansions, and high ceilings of difficulty—players know that there will always be more to do with what they have earned and created. Thus, there is a positive feedback loop that fuels the long-term, intensive engagement of MMORPG players: the longer one can play, the more one invests; the more one invests, the more reason one has to play for longer.

Limitations of This Research

I conclude by considering some of the limitations of this study. It goes without saying that this contribution is but one of many possible lines of inquiry into the multifaceted

phenomenon of playing an MMORPG. I set out to explore a particular question: What is engaging about MMORPGs? This question originated from my personal curiosity and it shaped my approach to the research at all stages. The methods I selected, the questions I posed during the interviews, the content that stood out to me during the analysis, and the emphasis I put on my findings are inextricable from the particular perspective that I brought to the work. Thus, what I discovered is limited in the sense that it is a view from one particular vantage point. I will attempt to account for some of the specific ways in which my study was limited by the choices I made.

The method chosen for data collection, interviewing several long-time players, had certain implications for my findings. While this approach allowed me to consider a range of experiences, it also introduced some limitations. For one, I was only able to learn so much about the experiences of each of my participants over the course of a two-hour interview. They had all played extensively for years, often with careers that spanned multiple games and different eras of their lives. Inevitably, they described their experiences in terms of what they felt was most salient and representative, leaving much unsaid. The questions I asked, and, more subtly, the topics I responded to with the most interest, also shaped the content that was covered. Thus, although the interview transcripts are the “raw” data of this study, they were already filtered, abstracted snapshots of many years of experiences. Although interviewing multiple participants gave my data more breadth by featuring several players, it didn’t allow me to dwell in the particular of MMORPG worlds to the degree that other means of collecting data might have, such as the participant-observer approach that Rowlands (2012) and Nardi (2010) utilized.

The gaming sessions granted me more direct access to the ways that my participants engaged with their games, yet they were only a brief glimpses. I had the strong sense that my participants had much more to show me than they were able to fit into the hour of allotted time. Circumstantial factors also played a role in determining what I saw during these sessions. For instance, Shawn was only able to play a dungeon using a character class that he didn't normally use; as a result, I got the chance to watch him figure out how employ an unfamiliar set of abilities. However, if he had he used a character class he was adept with, I would have seen something else. Another difficulty related to the gaming sessions was the inability to clearly capture the play observation in my transcripts. With only an audio-recording, it wasn't possible for me to describe what was happening onscreen in detail—an undertaking that have been unwieldy even with a video-recording. Thus, although the gaming sessions compensated for some of the shortcomings of interview data, they had their own limitations.

While my interview data only skimmed the surface of my participants' experiences in MMORPGs, I nevertheless often found it difficult to account for all the data that I had collected. Not only was there a great deal of variety between participants, but even within each individual account there were tensions and nuances as well. Since the method of analysis that I used, IPA, involves identifying patterns in the data, it was inevitable that some complexities were smoothed over in the process of developing themes. Though it was at times painful to realize that I couldn't account for everything that each participant had said, it was necessary to use my own understandings to tease out the most meaningful threads in their accounts.

Finally, in the discussion, I put a great deal of emphasis on the riddle of work and play in MMORPGs, which is a prominent topic in the literature. It was also a feature of MMORPG engagement that I found striking prior to beginning my research. My data certainly supported the significance of this focus, but it was hardly the only one that could have been explored. I chose this path because it seemed to be a particularly salient one that is highly relevant to the question of why people spend so much time in MMORPGs. I also arrived at a primarily cultural understanding of what players find engaging about MMORPGs. Though valuable, this interpretative angle hardly yields a comprehensive analysis. There is clearly more at work—and at play—in MMORPGs.

Directions for Future Research

The cultural interpretation discussed in the MMORPG literature and my discussion tacitly assumes that the MMORPG players have a Western background, yet these games are played globally and are just as popular in Asia as they are in North America and Europe (Nardi, 2010). Does the interpretation that engagement in MMORPGs is structured according to Western modernist ideologies apply to players from other cultures? Or is there an alternative set of cultural values that shape the way players from non-Western countries approach the content of these games? Research exploring these questions would shed additional light on the relationship between MMORPGs and modernist values.

Another promising avenue for future research would be investigating how MMORPG play is situated in the context of players' lives and personalities. Since this study was designed to collect and analyze data about engagement in MMORPGs per se, I only considered life outside the game when a participant happened to bring it up during his or her interview. However, I

caught many glimmers of potentially significant ways in which my participants' games served functions that can only be understood in the context of their lives as wholes. For instance, might Robin, physically limited as she was by her medical conditions, have been especially attracted to the freedom of movement and readily accessible forum for socializing that *GW2* provided? Along the same lines, the meanings of the themes that I developed could have been related to life outside of the game. For example, what was the importance of big numbers to Ben and Shawn on a personal, rather than a cultural, level? Did attaining big numbers provide narcissistic gratification? Compensate for something else? Uphold a cherished view of the self? Symbolically represent something related to a key concern or conflict? I couldn't explore such questions with the data I collected, since I did not systematically investigate my participants' personalities and lives outside of their games. However, it is feasible to design a study to explore the links between MMORPG engagement, personality, and the life as whole by collecting adequate data and orienting the analysis accordingly.

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Appendix 1: Flyer

Play an MMORPG?

Want to participate in research?

Receive a \$20 Gift Card of your choice for your time.



My name is Jake Rusczek, and I am a Ph.D. candidate in Duquesne's clinical psychology program. I have chosen to research the daily experiences of playing a MMORPG for my dissertation. I am curious to learn more about what players are doing while they play and what they find engaging about it.

If you choose to participate, I will interview you about your experiences and watch you play. The interview would take place where you normally play and be audio-recorded. Your identity would remain confidential.

To be eligible to participate, you must:

- 1) Be at least 18 years old
- 2) Live in the greater Pittsburgh area
- 3) Currently play a prototypical MMORPG (*WoW*, *EverQuest*, *Rift*, *Guild Wars 2*, etc.) regularly (15+ hours a week) for at least the past year

If you are not sure if you meet these criteria, feel free to contact me.

If you are at all interested, please contact me via email (rusczekj@duq.edu) or by phone (413-265-3738). I can go over the specifics of what participating in my study would entail and you can then decide if you are interested in participating.

Appendix 2: Posting on Reddit

Hello Pgh. Reddit,

I am a Ph.D. candidate in Duquesne's clinical psychology program. I have chosen to research the daily experiences of playing a MMORPG for my dissertation. I am curious to learn more about what players are doing while they play and what they find engaging about it.

If you choose to participate, I will interview you about your experiences and watch you play. The interview would ideally take place where you normally play and be audio-recorded. Your identity would remain confidential. Compensation is a \$20 gift card of your choice. I also hope that having the chance to talk about what you enjoy would be rewarding!

To be eligible to participate, you must: 1) Be at least 18 years old 2) Live in the greater Pittsburgh area 3) Currently play a prototypical MMORPG (WoW, EverQuest, Rift, Guild Wars 2, etc.) regularly (15+ hours a week) for at least the past year

If you are not sure if you meet these criteria, feel free to contact me. If you are at all interested, please send me a message (on Reddit). I can go over the specifics of what participating in my study would entail and you can then decide if you are interested in participating.

Also, please pass this opportunity along to anyone you think might be interested—I would really appreciate it!! Thanks :)



Appendix 3: Consent Form

DUQUESNE UNIVERSITY

600 FORBES AVENUE ♦ PITTSBURGH, PA 15282

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

TITLE: Experiences of Playing Massively Multiplayer Online
Role-Playing Games: A Phenomenological Exploration

INVESTIGATOR: Jacob Rusczek, M.A.

ADVISOR: Eva Simms, Ph.D.

Advisor's Department of School: Psychology Department

Advisor's Phone Number: 412.396.6515

SOURCE OF SUPPORT: This study is being performed as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the doctoral degree in psychology at Duquesne University.

PURPOSE: You are being asked to participate in a research project that seeks to investigate the experiences of playing a MMORPG. You will be asked to allow me to interview you and observe you playing an MMORPG. The interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed.

These are the only requests that will be made of you.

RISKS AND BENEFITS: There are no risks greater than those encountered in everyday life involved in participating. You may find it enriching to reflect on and share your experience.

COMPENSATION: You will be compensated for participation with a \$20 gift card of your choice.

CONFIDENTIALITY:

Your name will never appear in any of the written records related to the study (with the exception of this form!), including the transcripts and final report. Instead, a pseudonym will be used. Additionally, any personal information that would make identifying you possible will be altered. Consent forms will be stored in a locked file in the researcher's home. The recording of the interview will be stored on an encrypted, password-protected drive for five years following the study, then deleted.

RIGHT TO WITHDRAW:

You are under no obligation to participate in this study. You are free to withdraw your consent to participate at any time.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS:

A summary of the results of this research will be supplied to you, at no cost, upon request.

VOLUNTARY CONSENT:

I have read the above statements and understand what is being requested of me. I also understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my consent at any time, for any reason. On these terms, I certify that I am willing to participate in this research project.

I understand that should I have any further questions about my participation in this study, I may call Jake Rusczek, principal investigator 413-265-3738, Eva Simms, dissertation director 412-396-6515 and Dr. Joseph Kush, Chair of the Duquesne University Institutional Review Board 412-396-6326.

Participant's Signature

Date

Researcher's Signature

Date

Appendix 4: Ben's Interview Transcript²⁶

Ben: I'm curious what kind of games the people you have talked to so far have played, have you, mostly WoW players?

Jake: Mostly, and then one Final Fantasy 14

Ben: Okay. For such a, for a 9 year old game there's still an absolutely enormous amount of people that still play it

Jake: Yeah

Ben: I'd be surprised if, you're probably going to get different experiences from everyone of the WoW players, which might seem odd considering they're playing the same game, but it's such a huge, diverse game .

Jake: Yeah

Ben: I'm going to get some water for myself. *long pause* I need to get a nicer phone, every time I see someone with a nicer phone [haha] it reminds me that my phone sucks

Jake: I'm sorry, I'm having trouble figuring out—okay it's going now. Alright, so do you want to tell you a little bit about your life, just very basic details

Ben: outside of

Jake: Yeah, just kind of the

Ben: Okay, well I'm a 22 year old engineering student, mechanical engineering, I just graduated top of my class, like 3.96 summa cum laude, all that stuff . [wow] Um, pretty much, just, I've always had pretty much two interests—it's either cars or videogames [mhmm] I think my first video game was like Dr Mario on the Super Nintendo or something and [yeah] I've kind of always played around with em. Um, I'd say I'm pretty typical as far as friends and everything goes, um, I'm in a fraternity, got my normal group of friends, always had girlfriends since 15 years old. Nothing, anything really particularly special or interesting about my life.

Jake: Do you have a girlfriend right now?

Ben: Do not, but that's just, um

²⁶ All identifying information has been altered or removed from the transcripts, including the names of avatars and guilds.

Jake: Just in between girlfriends

Ben: Yeah, circumstantial [haha] hehe it's not exactly a trend

Jake: Yep. And you're living?

Ben: Currently I'm living, um, I'm in between residences, I just signed a lease for an apartment near where I'll be working [mhmm] but as of this moment I'm obviously in my parents' house [yeah] and this is kind of like been my home base for the last, though college and everything, cause I went to school in out of state [okay] live, obviously, have my home in Pittsburgh, so right now I'm kind of between residences

Jake: So you just graduated last semester?

Ben: Just graduated, yeah. I have an interesting school system that goes three months of work and then three months of school. Like a work the work is part of school [okay] So my term actually only ended in December [mhmm] and that was when I finished graduate, and it's a four and a half year program, so I graduated on time at the end of December, just starting work next week, which is my first real career, so.

Jake: What's the job?

Ben: Um, mechanical engineer

Jake: Oh cool. Congratulations.

Ben: Thank you very much. Since it was a job in my field and everything. That was the nice thing about the work, was the work for school was related to school, it was related to your major, so I've been doing engineering work for four and a half years now [yeah] Now I just get paid full-time

Jake: Yeah, so you're just doing the same thing and

Ben: I can take a day off now, which is awesome, cause I didn't have days off as a student

Jake: Yeah, so it will actually be potentially easier

Ben: It should probably honestly be easier, [hahaha] because now people won't bother me for menial tasks, I can say "Hey, I'm a full time employee with my own jobs and duties, go find the student!" hehehe. Whereas before I was the student and kind of a full time employee, so I had [right] I had my work and everyone else's, so, actually yeah, it probably will be easier *both laugh*

Jake: Yeah, that's great. So you're in a pretty prosperous part of your life

Ben: Yeah, no like

Jake: Finishing school, getting a job

Ben: Yeah, considering, I mean it was a top three engineering school and um, I was top of my class going into my field and everything, so, um, no real issues so far. I'll be going for my graduate degree. My company will pay for up to one or two classes a term for free so, slowly get my graduate degree, I have a lot of professors kind of insisting that I got for my doctorate eventually [yeah] It may or may not be on the list, I haven't really decided yet but [yeah] we'll see how it goes. I've already had six graduate-level classes and gotten A's in all of them so I'm not too worried about continuing school [yeah] so no big deal

Jake: So what's the story of how you started playing World of Warcraft?

Ben: That's ha

Jake: haha, is that the first MMO you have played?

Ben: Um, as far as your traditional like, um, the actual MMOs, which is stuff that you'll consider like EVE, World of Warcraft, Guildwars, those sort of MMOs [mhmm], yes, this is the first. Um, actually there was one that was free to play that played for a week, but it was awful because it was free and free to play and had not support and it was terrible [yeah] but um, this was the first actual, real, name-brand MMO I've played . Um, I did play online gaming before that, which was based, um, first on StarCraft, and StarCraft Broodwar [uh huh] and I played that obsessively, way more than I should have. And then, with WarCraft III and WarCraft III The Frozen Throne um I played that also very obsessively, particularly a game called DOTA, which now has DOTA II which is actually something that's on my desktop and I play quite a lot now that it's a stand-alone game. But, as far as traditional MMOs go, um, yes WoW was my first one [mhm]. The interesting story behind that is basically um, when it came out I had been playing WarCraft III, so I knew the WarCraft universe, liked, had a lot of faith in the WarCraft universe and Blizzard, the company that makes it, [mhmm] but uh, I actually avoided it for the same reason that I have been playing it for 374 days played *both laugh* I knew what it was!

Jake: You knew you were in danger!

Ben: Yeah, exactly, like I already play video games way too much, um, considering, you know, I was talking, I'd be talking to people on the football team and the cheerleading group, you know, I'm like, "okay, if the cheerleaders and the football players are playing this thing obsessively it's a bad thing. I'm not going to get involved" [*laughter* yeah] Stayed away until one of my girlfriends decided it would be an excellent idea to buy it for me for my birthday [uh huh] at which point I was like "well I'm not gonna, you know, ask her to talk it back or anything, so I mean I'll give it a try, hopefully I won't get too stuck on it" but that was, the game has long

outlasted the girlfriend so *both laugh* which is probably a good thing honestly, between the two, the game is the less dangerous *both laugh*

Jake: So, when was that, what year was that?

Ben: God, what year was that. Probably 2009 I would say, so I've been playing for five years .

briefly interrupted by mom

Ben: So yeah, 2009, 2009 was what I started, probably February of '09, so yeah, it's been about five years. [okay] And uh, yeah, it's been downhill completely from then. Um, it was kind of a slow start um cause, it's , it's not imme—I mean I'm gonna go, WoW is an addicting thing, it absolutely is, there's no question in my mind that it has addictive properties , you know, it might not, I'm not sure what the basis for that is, but, it started slow as far as, when you're at early levels you, I would say, it's not as gripping, you know you're killing level 1 boar mwhha I mean I don't know if you've seen the South Park before

Jake: Yeah, I have

Ben: Literally, that's, in the forest, killing boars [haha]. You know, you're doing stupid quests, like “go fetch me these flowers. Oh, and for some reason they only, you can only get them by killing this monster, so go kill 10 of this monster and get 10 flowers, and then come back to me” [mhmm] which, wasn't the most interesting things, you only have, I don't know if anyone has showed you a new character, I'll just pick any random realm. And so when you start, you're only going to have two or three abilities[mhmm] and they're not real flashy, they're pretty straightforward, it's like a Heroic Strike, or it's like a level one little flash of light that does damage. It's not, it's not so interesting. So you're not doing anything cool, you're not really killing anything cool, it started really slow [mhmm] but as I got more into it, uh, I eventually—oh god, my addons are freaking out. So, here, I only start one ability really, it's an Arcane Shot and it's fairly simple, there's nothing flashy, there's nothing too interesting about it [mhmm] but as you get going forward you're gonna end up with full bars and things that are much flashier, things that are much cooler [mhmm] and that was when it really hooked me in. Cause I remember, I got to level 20...I got to level 20 on a trial version, because before I opened the game, I was like “okay, I'm gonna try this, at least to she sees me playing, but maybe if it's not for me I'll just not play it” [yeah] and I got to level 20 and I was so frustrated because it wouldn't let me go above level 20, and I didn't realize that the level cap on the trail was 20 [yeah haha] I was so upset, and I was like—and that was the point where I was like “alright, where's the game” got the game out, opened the game, put it in, 30 days, good, alright, let's go haha [haha] yes! 21! Now we're going forward

Jake: So did it kind of take off from there?

Ben: Yeah

Jake: That was when it started

Ben: Yeah, like that first trial, I think it was 10 days, so, 10 days to 20 honestly is um, nowadays I can probably get to level 20 in two or three hours, [wow] so it's not, you know, I didn't play it that much, but I was sitting there, and I was stuck, and I was frustrated, I was like "I'm only level 20" and I was like, there's people that are running around that are like level 50 and I so upset [haha] that I got the game, put it in, got the, cause there's a free month when you buy the original, the vanilla, the original core game [yeah] got the free month, got to level 21, and it just went from there. I did everything on my way up, um, I still actually have my original character is the one I was logged into before, and he's kinda in bad gear so he looks like ass but [hmhm] but from there on I just leveled all the way up, I leveled all my professions, I did all the quests, I, I had no idea what I was doing.

Jake: So what was that transition—it seems like there was a real transition point

Ben: There was

Jake: from, from, being kinda underwhelmed to suddenly just being...

Ben: yeah

Jake: So what was it that grabbed you?

Ben: It's...I'd really...it was something to do with the leveling and then just getting stronger. like, it was right there, like all I have to, and, even nowadays, you see like, you have a goal: "I want to be stronger." Okay, simple goal. I'm sitting here, I'm stuck at level 20. All I need to do to get to level 21 is put this game in the computer and hit the I agree button and okay, [yeah] and now I kill another animal and I'm level 21. [uh huh] Okay now I'm level 21, I want to get stronger. All I need to get to 22 is do these 20 quests. All I need to do these 20 quests, I just need to kill 15 boars, and go talk to this guy, and it just, it seems like that was the point where it became important enough to me to get stronger that I was willing to just go ahead and okay, yes, I will do these quest, I will do this, I will kill this boar, I will run to this town, and I just wanted to get stronger. I didn't want to be weak, I didn't want to be watching stronger guys run around, I didn't want to have to run away from this animal [mhmm] and it just, I don't know, it something about the game, at that instance saying "hey, you can't get stronger until you do this" and I did it and I was just like alright, now, now I'm invested in it, now I have money in it, now I'm just going to get something out of this game, I'm going to get stronger, I'm going to be something, [mhmm] um, you know, like nowadays I am a desired quantity as far as being a stronger player because I'd been gone for the last three months and the first thing I see when I log in is "Dude where were you we need you?" hahahaha like, [*laughs*] like "Are you available Wednesday, because we need you...now" *laughs* yeah. Um, yeah and I think the desire to be part of a group and the desire to be good at something is, I think that's fairly universal. It just happened to be that this thing was something that was in a game [yeah] And to that point, you know, it's probably no different that, you know, someone who's working out:

okay, I ran a mile, tomorrow I'm going to run a mile-one, you know [yeah] a mile-two —it's just, take those steps, you want to get better, you want to be stronger, you want to be someone that people look at and say "hey, wow, that's like...you know, look at that guys gear, oh my god, he must be really good, you know, look at this, look at that. [mhmm] Oh my god he killed that boss, that's incredible, you know. I can't do that." [yeah] I didn't want to be the person who said "I can't do that" I wanted to be the person people were looking at like "holy crap how did he do that?" [uh huh]

Jake: It seems like there is a lot of awareness of what other players see when see you as a player in the game

Ben: Probably, because obviously you can look around in the game and see, um, it's not so prevalent now because there's new, there's a thing that's in this expansion that lets you change the way gear looks [uh huh] um, but especially, and actually I've wondered if that's had some correlation to the decrease in subscribers [hm] um, because, obviously you want to look good [yeah] but just like I was saying, like okay, this item level on this gear, which looks fairly good—reasonably good—it's got a few little flaws in it, but, this is 507 gear. [okay] The gear that I said earlier that I was actually kind of embarrassed to show you, because it's all mismatched and ugly is only 483 , [okay] so it used to be before you could change the way your gear looked, how good your character looked was directly tied to how good your gear was [mhmm] and you could look at a character as say " oh he's wearing tier 5 shoulders, so he's only—you know, if the current tier, if the newest tier is tier 7 [uh huh] and he only is wearing tier 5, which—I should have mention it builds up, so like the current tier I think is tier 15 [okay] so, um, tier 7, if I'm wearing tier 7 and he's wearing tier 5, therefore, I'm a better player [yeah] and it was obvious because anyone who played the game, you knew what you were fighting for, you knew what gear you were in [yeah] you knew that right at that point in time you'd only been able to kill up to a tie 5 boss and you were wearing tier 5 gear [uh huh] but you kinda dream, you had that vision in your mind of your character all beefy and at tier 7 [uh huh] so when you see someone run by with tier 7, you're like "oh man"

Jake: It's that goal right in front of you

Ben: Yeah, you're like "look at that guy, he's killed, you know, he's killed Arthas, he's killed, you know, any number of bosses," and it's, you're like "ugh! look how cool he looks!" [yeah] "alright, I gotta, you know" *demonstrated playing hard* *both laugh*um, and that's kind of the drive . My highest level character is the one that looks best, I think, and that's, that's a common um common thing, even now, there's achievements and stuff that you can display in certain items that you can only get by doing...like legendary quests, like I have a legendary mount that you can only get by completing legendary quests. And these legendary quests—it took me, uh, seven eight months to do this quest [wow] so, and at the time, and I did it while it was relevant content, so, um, and the achievements are all dated, so I can show my achievement for it, showing that I did it when it was relevant , when it was current, when it meant something, uh, and at the time when it meant something, there were probably only um...you can see here this is my character in the most up to date gear, this is 542 gear so you can see he all matches [yeah]

because all the gear is up to date, it all's from the same tier, it all matches [yeah yeah] um, it glows because it's enchanted with the highest level enchants,

Jake: So it's pretty impressive

Ben: So if someone sees me running around in this, there gonna say "wow, he's pretty good, like, with that"

Jake: Yeah, so there's really clear markers of achievement

Ben: exactly, yeah, and um that was muddled a little bit when they added what's called "Transmog" um, that allows you to transform an item to look like any other item that you have, um, so the current level of tier—because you have to have the item to be able to transmog into it, [yeah] most people who still have the current level of gear like I do normally wear it, [yeah] because it's still a signifier of, um, of, you know how powerful you are, but if somebody's wearing something from five years ago, you have to actually look and see what they're wearing cause you don't know

Jake: uh huh, so you can actually click on another character [yeah] and see what all their gear is

Ben: Yeah um, so I'm gonna click on this Death—actually this Death Knight's in my guild, so, that's interesting, oh I remember him, so I'm looking at him right now and I can see everything

Jake: you can see everything, okay

Ben: yeah, so he's wearing—and I have an addon that will show me—so he's probably an average level of 560 [uh huh] so, um, he's probably, he's fairly geared, and you can see all his armor matches as well [yeah] he's not wearing his headpiece—I don't really know why haha uh, [haha] you can see the headslot is blank

Jake: hm, comfort?

Ben: uh, haha, he's not wearing it, so whatever, not my fault [yup] um, but yeah, so I can, if somebody has their armor transmoged so that you, so that it's different, you actually have to inspect them and see what's going on. And my friend just asked why my sister unfriended him on Facebook, cause he wanted to be my brother in law [hahaha] hehehea, but

Jake: So, since you started playing, um,

Ben: Well, I just, AFKing is a staple of WoW, I don't know if anyone else—I play in windows mode specifically so I can, kinda

Jake: oh no no no, I was asking, um, like, since when you began playing

Ben: oh, I thought you meant because I was playing

Jake: Yeah, I didn't mean um

Ben: No problem

Jake: that. Uh, so what been your pattern—I mean I'm sure you played different amounts a different points, obviously [oh yeah] have you played, like, straight through the five years, have you gone through periods of playing a lot

Ben: There's probably about 9 months that I haven't played in the last five years, it's mostly, it's school-related, I'll stop for school [yeah] um, graduating summa cum laude I probably couldn't have done that with WoW hahahah I'm being honest [yeah yeah] um, but, it really kind of evolved, um, when I first leveled. You know, in every character you can type “played” and it will show you how long you've played that character, so total time played on this character, so total time played on this character is 40 days—and this is real time

Jake: yeah, 40 24 hour days

Ben: how long I've been logged in, yeah, and then time played at this level. So my first time to level my warrior, I took it slow, I adventured, I saw the world of Warcraft, I did all the quests, and I talked to people, and I read the quests [oh yeah] and I was invested in the lore and everything else, and that probably took, I would say like 11 or 12 days played, to get to the maximum level at that point, which was 80, this was during Wrath of the Lich King

Jake: Okay, 11 or 12 days—over how much time did that take?

Ben: Three months, four months, um

Jake: Okay

Ben: And, it was, but it was an experience and it was fun, and, I was in a guild, and I remember I was level 56—how I remember this 5 years ago knows, god. [haha] I mean, I guess it must have been psychologically important to me, I'm guessing haha, the fact that I even remember [yeah] Cause I was in Molten Core, I remember exactly where I was and I was talking to um a person who ended up being my guildmate and now real life friend, um, Birdsy, who's actually on my Facebook, Brad Birdsy, [mhmm] um, and I was talking to him and he's just someone I had met while questing and he was like “hey, join the guild” and I hadn't been in a guild at that point, and I was like, “okay, sure, whatever” and through that guild I met a lot of people, people who, a lot of them I have on Facebook now, and I would, and I played with them and we were all leveling [yeah] but it was, it was um, what would be called now a casual guild where we just, we leveled, we had fun, we did old content that wasn't relevant anymore, we just had a lot of talking, we even, we even did things like play hide-and-seek in World of Warcraft [uh huh] um, which was actually a lot of fun *both laugh* um, there's a lot of places to hide, if you can

imagine, um, and we knew each other's real lives, we knew each other's personal problems, we helped each other with our person problems, blah blah blah

Jake: So you knew about each other's real lives [oh yeah] but had you met in real life?

Ben: Um, of these people I've only met, as of now I've only met three of them in real life [okay] but there probably, but we knew, we knew all about

Jake: You talked about to each other about

Ben: Oh yeah. Because we played together for probably a year and a half, and we played a lot together and we did things together, and it really, one thing about WoW is it's not unusual I think, to know something about your guildmate. Now, you're random stranger that you meet in party, you not going to [yeah] the most intimate thing you probably know is "hold on, the oven's beeping" *both laugh* you know? That's the most intimate thing details you know about their real life. But as far as being in your guild, once you're in a guild um

Jake: And do you guys use the voice chat?

Ben: Yeah, actually in fact I have it pulled up right now, um

Jake: okay

Ben: Ventrillo

Jake: oh, okay

Ben: So

Jake: So you guys were just chatting all along while you were doing things

Ben: Yeah, just talking, chatting, doing things, laughing, having fun. Um, normally the more relaxed you are with the content, the more the topic strays towards real life, it strays towards actual, you know, you might as well picture a group of people sitting in a room just, you know, having a couple beers, chatting, because that's really what it is. In fact, some of them were having a couple beers *both laugh* ummm, I mean we would even have parties, because, um , it actually ended up that the guild leader and one of the officers—they had known each other in real life—and they ended up getting married. And they had their real life marriage [uh huh] and then we had an in-game marriage, and we actually went to one of the chapels and [yeah] and people would trade out virtual alcohol and stuff, which actually makes your screen blurry hahahaha [haha cool] and we sat up till like 3 in the morning . [wow] you know, they were happy, obviously, they had just gotten married and everyone who knew them in the game was laughing and happy and [wow] and it was a casual guild

Jake: That seems like a really happy memory

Ben: Oh yeah, it's great, and, but, um, I'll say after probably about a year and a half of that—and I can talk more about each, any of these in depth later on if you have any specific questions about them—but as far as my playing history goes, probably after about a year and a half of being with them, um, we had been playing with one of the top 2 or 3 rated players of the server, [mhmm] um, whenever he wasn't raiding, he would come and he would chill with us. Now, he stayed in his guild, but we knew him familiar because he would come and then talk and then—we were honestly, it was, to me, and to two, well really three other players in the guild, um, the casual guild—the Raiders of Renown was the name, um, it was kind of embarrassing to play with him, because we would do a dungeon with him which was, a five-man, and he would do it all himself, could do it all himself. He would do—um there's and add on here, Recount, which shows your amount of damage done, and he would do, you know, 7000 damage, 7000 DPS, damage per second, uh, and us, we were, even when we were in our DPS specs, specs that were designed to do damage, would do 1000, 2000 maybe, and would have no idea why he was doing, you know, 3, 4 times what we were doing. To a couple of us that was very irritating haha [yeah] um, “hey, you know, I'd like to consider myself good at this game, why is he so much better? [yeah] What is going on here” [yeah] and that is the point it went from, for some of us, I guess four of us in particular, and those four people are kind of a mainstay in my play in WoW [mhmm] um, four of us in Raiders of Renown kinda started getting irritated, you know, “we don't want be that bad, we don't want to get shown up by this guy.” And he wasn't mean about it, [yeah] it was just that we knew, we knew he was that much better. Why? What were we going to do. Now we start paying attention to the damage meters, now we start paying attention to what abilities we are using, whether or not we were optimizing our rotations, which, I don't know if anyone's covered that with you, is basically what order of skill usage will do the most damage [yeah] started paying attention to that, started paying attention to whether we had the right stats on our gear, like “agility's good but strength is better, okay, so I need to make sure I have as much strength as possible on this guy”, started paying attention to that. And that is when it went from logging on every day to have fun with my friends and...be better, but only, I only had to be good enough to do what they were doing, which wasn't really anything serious, um, to now, “okay, I gotta make sure this gear's right, I gotta make sure my rotation's right, I gotta make sure damage is up, why is my damage low? what can I do to make it better, um, Googling online, you know: hey, how do I warrior DPS? What am I doing wrong? [yeah] How is, you know, I see, okay I was doing this and I should be doing this. Building up gear and it, it kinda led to a, a little bit of dissent in the guild, because for four of us it became important that we were doing well, and doing high numbers, and for the rest of the guild, it was still very unimportant, [yeah] so when we did things together now you started to see a disparity between the four of us [yeah] and the rest of the guild, and it started to cause a little bit of a rift as far as, we wanted to do good and we started to want them to want to do good. Like, the one girl, the guild leader, “Sonya” was her character name, uh, and, it was like “Sonya, come on, you're only doing like 1000 DPS, you should be doing like 2000 with that gear, come on.” But she didn't care, it wasn't what she was interested in [yeah] and it started to cause a problem, so what ended up happening after about two months of the rift starting to form, is um, we ended up, the four of us, while we were still very good friends, we were like “alright, look, we want to be friends, we can stay friends, when we play

casually, we'll play with you guys, but for now, we need to, we're going to move up, we're going to move into higher ranking guilds" [yeah] um, three of them went to a guild to a guild called Myrmidons, I personally went to a guild called Goof Troop, [okay] *both laugh* um, reason being, I had played, I had done some raiding, a pick up group, basically they needed another player and I was like "hey I'll go with you" and I went with them, so I knew them a little bit [yeah]. So I went with them the other three went into Myrmidons [okay]. Myrmidons, I didn't know it at the time, because I wasn't aware of how to actually research the literal guild rankings, because there are actual statistical guild rankings, mmmm, I didn't know that. Myrmidons was a higher ranking guild, but I went to the Goof Troop and kinda started off an average Goof Troop player, but quickly, once I got some gear, because I was very badly under-gear'd then when I went from being a more casual player, um, the thing you'll find is that to be able to raid you need to be in a guild and you need to be in a guild that's raiding, [okay] otherwise you're never going to get anywhere fast, you're going to be a tier or two behind no matter what [m hmm] So now I got into a guild that was kinda raiding current tier, and they weren't very good, but they were still killing stuff that mattered, like newer things [yeah] So I got some gear, and, cause I had showed promise, cause I was doing very good damage for my gear, so they gave me gear, and I shot up quickly to the top DPS in the guild, at which point they made me an officer. Well, now I'm really invested, because now I'm an officer, now I'm in control of talking to people and doing things with people [uh huh] and uh, I stayed an officer in that guild for probably six to seven months [mhhh] and uh, the issue was that I knew I could do better, because I was, by this point, far and beyond the top damage dealer in the guild and um, a few people I had ended up kicking out of the guild for bad attitudes had went on to higher ranking guilds than Goof Troop [yeah] and succeeded [yeah] when I'm like "hey, I know I'm a better player than them" [right] I know I'm so much of a better player than them I kicked them out *laughs*

Jake: Right, right *laughs*

Ben: So, now I see them in the city, and they're wearing better gear than I am

Jake: Right, so what impact did that have?

Ben: Yeah, it was frustrating, it was very frustrating, because I knew they were not a nice person and not a good player *both laugh*

Jake: And they had better gear

Ben: And they had better gear than I did

Jake: Yeah

Ben: So a stranger walking around, they're going to look at him and be envious of, more envious of him than of me, and I mean it was just like, it was grating. [hm] Um, and that was actually when I ended up taking my first break for school. That was when I started um, you know I really needed some time for school, so I took that break [mhhh] and uh, came back, and was like

“hey,” I told the guild leader, “hey, I’ve already been gone for three months, so my gear was behind, because it had been three months where everyone else was getting gear and I hadn’t been, um, my gear’s behind, but at the same time, I know you still want me to be an officer, but I think I’m going to try to shoot for something higher, because you lived for three months without me, you know it’s not going to be the end of the world if I move on ,” [yeah] and at that point I had contacted the four people, the, or the three who had moved into Myrmidons, which was um, their character names were Birdsy, Grimberg, and MamaPajama, [mhmm], their real names are Brad, Matt, and Cassandra, but anyways, they moved on to Myrmidons, and I was like “hey, I want to move up, I know Myrmidons is higher” Myrmidons I think was like a number 4 rank on the server [mhmm] and Goof Troop was like 17th , so it was a big jump up, but I’m like “hey, look, I want to move up, we played together for a year and a half, you guys know me” All three of them vouched for me , so all four of us were together again [uh huh] And uh, I joined the guild, and like two minutes later, they’re like, “hey, look, we’re going to test you out, put on your gear, we’re going into Icy Sea,” which was, at the point, the current raid tier, like *smacks hands together*that was the current thing, that was the hardest, that was what everyone was good was doing, and they threw me in there [*haha*] to a boss I had never done and then they made me tank, so I was on the front line , [oh yeah haha] and I was completely confused, I had no idea what I was doing, but we killed the boss in one shot, and they gave me gear, and I was like “well I guess I’m here now” hahahaha [yeah] They were like “no, you did alright for your gear, so here, take these bracers, we’re going to get you geared up, we’ll see how you do.” And I stayed with them all the way up through the end of um, Wrath of the Liche King [mhmm] which was another couple months, and uh, through them I quickly geared up, um, I started the legendary quest where I got that legendary mount I mentioned, [mhmm] um, I became probably the third ranking tank , which is—um, at the point there were two different raid difficulties, there were 10-man and 25-man [mhmm] uh, 10-mean you needed two tanks per 10-man group, 25-mean you wanted three tanks total. So, I would tank, I would main tank one of the 10-man’s and then I would be the third tank in the 25-man, and I was also one of the top three or four DPS, when I would switch, because I would either do, because there wasn’t always a third tank required, so sometimes I would switch to DPS on the fights where only two tanks were required [mhmm] So I was one of the top tanks and one of the top DPS, but not the top [okay] which um, I thought was important because I whenever, I kind of figured out after playing that when you’re the absolute top in your guild, that’s, when you’re top one or two, that’s when the pressure to move up a step really starts to show, cause you feel like you’re kinda carrying people through things, you’re like “ugh, look at these guys, they’re doing terrible, like, oh my god, I wish I was with players that could keep up with me” [mhmm] And eventually that grates on you enough that you bounce, and you go with players that can keep up with you. Um, but that wasn’t happening [mhmm] cause you know , there were a few players, there were a lot of players I was better than, but there were a few that were very good in my guild and we kinda stayed with each other, including, um, the three players that had moved up from . And, you know, we had fun, we got through some heroic content. I remember that I got very badly yelled at by one of my neighbors when we killed the final boss in the expansion, [uh huh] because we killed the final boss in the expansion [haha], because it was like two in the morning and we had been working on it for like two months, and, actually, I might, I have a picture of it, I think it’s on facebook actually, maybe not though, but there’s a picture of us on the internet having killed that boss, we did a group

picture, [mhmm] we were like “hey, group up, let’s get around this body, of this dead boss and take a picture,” and we were so happy, it was like, it was really fun.

Jake: so two months of work

Ben: yeah

Jake: so what does that work consist of? what are you doing the whole time?

Ben: Dying. Dying, wiping.

Jake: So you’re running that same [yup] instance

Ben: Every week, every Tuesday it resets. Every Tuesday it reset, and we come back in there and we’d kill the same bosses we did before to get the gear to help gear up, cause, there’s loot tables . [mhmm] I wish I knew how skilled the other players you were talking to, so I wouldn’t cover things three times for you but

Jake: No, it’s okay, it’s actually, I think hearing stuff again is still helpful even if I have some idea of what you’re talking about

Ben: Okay, so this is an addon called Atlas Loot, it’s an addon that I downloaded that helps tell me all the loot that every boss drops

Jake: So, when you say it resets, that means, you can [every boss] do each boss again [yes] so you can only do each boss once a week [once a week, yes] So every week you would go through [yes] and do all the bosses [yup]

Ben: In fact I’m going to pull it up right now, so, this was Wrath of the Liche King, so, I came in during the very beginning of Wrath of the Liche King, and Wrath of Liche King was I think a three year expansion [okay] and then there was Cataclysm, and then the expansion that’s ending right now is Mists of Pandaria [mhm] So this was at the very end of Wrath of the Liche King, and the raid that I’m talking about was Ice Crown Citadel, ICC, so, this is the list of bosses from ICC, Lord Marrowgar, Lady Deathwhisper, blah blah blah blah, there’s 12 of them [okay] So, the Liche King is the final boss, and this is his loot table, but you can see the loot tables for all of these bosses is fairly extensive [yup] um, some of them have more, some of them have less [mhmm] but um, the thing is only 2 items on ten-man and four items on 25-man would drop, so

Jake: For everyone to share

Ben: Yes, so here’s your loot table, well only these four items dropped this week [uh huh] oh, and don’t forget, this cloak, there’s six people who need it, so hahaha

Jake: So you need to

Ben: Do it, a lot

Jake: Yeah several times

Ben: As many bosses as you can every week that you can. [mhmm] the thing is, these bosses are hard [yeah]. Now the world firsts guilds, they'll clear the whole raid on normal mode. The, there's, there's four modes now, but back then there was normal and heroic. They would clear the whole normal mode in a week or two [mhmm]. Normally the top hardcore guilds in the world would clear it in one week. But then heroic is significantly harder, and that's when they might only kill one heroic boss in a week

Jake: So what is actually different in heroic

Ben: There's added abilities, the hit point pools increase, damage done increases. And those are the main ones, but the added ability, there's normally one very difficult to execute um, added ability, so

Jake: Meaning the boss has an ability

Ben: that he didn't have before

Jake: That he didn't have before, and

Ben: Exactly, so a good example would be, Dragonsoul. Okay, so the first boss here is Morcock, he's a big giant golem dude [mhmm] and he has 4 abilities, nothing, 4-5 abilities, nothing too difficult to deal with, um, this is another addon that I have that explains each of the boss's abilities, so, um, here's a picture of Morcock, just a big golum dude [yup] uh, he's got a reasonably sized loot table, and he's got these abilities. He's got a stomp, um, he puts a debuff on the tank that basically makes the tank take more damage, so you have to swap tanks [oh okay] because the debuff is specific to him, he's gonna do, after like three stacks you're taking 30% more damage, the healers have to work 30% harder, so you switch and the debuff might have a 24 second timer, [okay] so after 24 seconds it falls off, yeah, the other guy probably has three stacks at this point so you switch back [uh huh] Not too hard to deal with, all it requires is a taunt, which is to change the bosses attention from one tank to the other [okay] uh, Resontating Crystal, so he drops a crystal on the ground, um that explodes after 12 seconds doing massive shadow damage, and it's split between three random players, but if there's no players there, it hits everyone, so what you do is you'll put three players in there and put a shield on them, and they'll tank that damage, [okay] it'll hit them hard but it won't kill them, mhmm, meanwhile like say if those three players weren't there it might kill everyone hahaha [yeah] so you specify, "you three people go over here, you three people go over here, grab these crystals" all good. Um, Furious, just at 20% remaining health he gets stronger [mhmm] and uh he does like an earthquake thing every 25 seconds, which you have to run away from him because he's going to stomp on the ground and do big earthquake damage. That's normal mode. [okay] Heroic mode,

after, at 90% health, so after you've done 10% of his health in damage, he splits into two [haha] which do exactly the same thing as normal mode, so now you have to do the normal mode fight twice at the same time [oh man] which requires the tanks switching with each other without getting them too close, because if they got too close, they would do a large amount of additional damage because they were close together [mhmm] so you had to spread each other out so far that the healers could barely heal both groups, so you had to split the healers too [okay] and then, so you'd have five men on this guy, five men on this guy, and then they would have to switch, which you could imagine would cause some problems [yeah, yeah] that's the, that's the difference between normal and heroic mode [yeah] and they all do more damage and have higher health pools. [right] So it's a lot harder. [a lot harder, yeah]. Now, do that for every single boss in the raid. Some bosses even have completely additional modes, like the final boss especially in the one raid, you would do the fight, the heroic version of the fight had two additional abilities during the fight, and then when you killed it, he came back haha, [yeah] as a completely different fight with like 6 new abilities [whoa] So heroic is significantly harder [yeah] so you might go through your normal mode and kill all 12 bosses, but on heroic, that takes some time, you know. some people have this misconception that if you go into WoW you can pretty much just kill whatever's in there once you get like, "oh, you're level 90? okay now you can kill everything that's level 90" Even with an extremely coordinated group of extremely skilled people, your chance of success is fairly low hahaha [yeah] until you really know what you're doing, until you've memorized every aspect of the boss's abilities, until you've memorized every way you have to deal with the boss's abilities [mhmm] so for instance, going into to that heroic mode where it spawns two of them if you weren't expecting that, first of all, now you're panicking cause you have no idea what's going on [yeah. right] so, and then, okay so you probably dies that time. Alright. Everyone rezes, comes back into the raid. Alright, let's do this again. Do it again. Now you're expecting there to be two of them [yeah] except that you don't know that you have to split them apart. Well, it might take you three or four more deaths to figure that out. So now that's an hour and a half of your time [mhmm] just spent dying and coming back [mhmm]. Alright, now you figure out that you have to spread them apart, oh got they still have all the same abilities, [mhmm] and then you start dying to this or dying to that, because oh wait, now this healer can't keep up with five people at once, how do we deal with that? hahaha

Jake: Yeah, so it's kind of like a problem solving [it is], awareness

Ben: Which is why, I think the biggest misconception is that a lot of people who play WoW are the nerds that are hiding in their closet, and there are a ton of people who fit that description that play WoW, but as far as your high ranking players go. *dad walks though* what's up dad? *dad says hello* As far as your high ranking players go, you'll find they're not those people. The most successful group I was ever with had two doctors—like medical doctors—three engineers, a dentist, um, a war vet who was an engineer in the military. You know, these are intelligent people [yeah] because in order to figure out these strategies and to execute them repeatedly, you're not going to find your twelve-year-old kids—they're not going to be able to do it. Your highest ranking guilds are extremely intelligent people who are skilled in real life and out, and they have careers that, you know they make good money, [yeah] this happens to be their hobby ha [yeah] and they're very good at it. yeah so that's what you'll find with the heroic bosses,

they're difficult, they a lot of strategy, a lot of coordination, you will not find a raiding guild that is not using some type of voice over internet protocol type thing [mhmm]

Jake: Cause you just need that

Ben: You need it, if you can't talk to somebody, you're dead. [yeah]. Even the highest ranking guilds in the world, they cannot do a fight without being able to talk. [yeah] For stuff like, like the tank debuffs I was taking about, he's going to get hit, you know after he gets three stacks he needs to call, he says, "Hey! taunt, I need to get out of here" Okay, not the other tank knows he has to taunt and he comes in [yeah]. Especially when things go wrong—if things are going, if everything's going right, everything's going as planned, you can kind of, you can of half-ass your way through it without talking [yeah] but if you're doing a new fight, or you're doing something where things can go wrong really quickly you can not do it without being able to talk to everyone in the raid.

Jake: Yeah. So when you're in a raid like that and all that's going on, what does it feel like?

Ben: It's really intense, because these fights—that's another thing—these fights, the longest one's with go 15-16 minuets [yeah] and you're a hundred percent concentrated [yeah] for those 15-16 minutes, you cannot think of anything other than spell, spell, spell, do this, do this, do that, oh go this is happening, okay next part of the fight, now I've gotta go over here, um, absolutely insane [mhm] having to focus on everything that you're doing, making sure you're using the right spells for the right situation, and this point, a lot of people consider that damage dealing is the easiest of the professions, or of the roles, there's tanking, healing, and damage dealing or damage per second, DPS. DPS is the easiest because you have a set rotation: do these abilities in this order, repeat. [yeah]. Um *starts typing* sorry they are yelling at me. [oh] haha. Do these abilities in this order, repeat. [yeah] And how good you are as a DPS is purely based on how well you repeat that list of abilities when things are going crazy around you. [yeah] The people assigned to deal with the crazy stuff are generally the tanks, who have to control the MOBs that are running around, and the healers who have to make sure nobody dies from it [right] um, hahaha, so yeah, that's

Jake: So you've done tanking and DPS?

Ben: I've done all three of them. I've actually done all three of them at a high level [okay] That's what I was saying to you, like if you need to talk to someone about pretty much anything in WoW, I'm probably your guy.

Jake: You've seen all the angles.

Ben: I've played every class to a high level on a high level basis, and I've done every role on a high level basis, because healing for a priest and healing for a paladin are totally different. [huh]. No spells are the same. [uh huh] So you have to play them completely differently. That's why I'm such a good player and why I personally am in high demand because all the best players

have played all the classes [mm] have played all the roles, which means, and they've also done PvE and PvP—I've only talked to you about PvE which is players versus environment, is verse a pre-programmed fight, [right] PvP, player verse player *makes gesture*

Jake: It's like a whole other game?

Ben: Oh yeah. There's strategy involved, but it's not a repetitive, predictable strategy, it's not like you can go "okay what is the boss going to do when we do this." [yeah] "K, now I know what I do and don't do" [right] PvP, what is player going to do when I do this? It's *put's hands in air in gesture of not-knowing*

Jake: You don't know

Ben: I have no idea hahahaha
J Right, yeah, it's very different.

Ben: It's completely different. So I've done every role, every class, both PvP and PvE. [mhmm] To do that at a maximum level is going to take, probably *voices of party members start coming through his headphones (?) *I suppose I can set this so that, well no, I won't, actually I'll avoid setting this to my speakers cause right now they're probably all just going to jump on and troll me. [okay] But, eventually I will. So, to do all that, you're looking at at least probably 200 days played [mhmm] so, someone has to play five thousand hours of WoW minimum, to be that good [mhmm] hahaha

Jake: That's a lot yeah

Ben: So, if you can say that you've done that, now you're in high demand, cause people know that no matter what role they put you in, whatever situation they put you in, your gear maybe might not be quite up to spec

Jake: but you know what to do

Ben: But you're gonna know what to do, you're going to be able to pick up fights, you're going to be able to pick up strategies, pick up roles, [mhmm] and run with it [yeah] So, that's kinda where that all comes in [yeah] and uh, it's just, haha, I dunno, it's a lot of fun, but when you're in there with that fight, and honestly on this character I have 12, 24, 36, 48, probably 50 useful abilities [wow] so any moment in a fight, I have to know which one of these 50 things *laughing while he says this* [wow] is the best one for that moment, [yeah] Now as a DPS, it's probably limited to we'll say...depending on your class. A lot of arcane mages get a lot of shit, their rotation's only three abilities, it only takes three buttons to do the best damage as a mage. [mhm] My warrior has a 38 priority, list, a 38 step priority list

Jake: Wow, so you would go through all

Ben: Yeah, it's not even, and because I say priority

Jake: It's not just an order, it's depending on

Ben: It's depending on the situation, it's depending on whether this has proc'd, its depending on whether I have this buff or not, I have to do this, I have to do this, there's thirty eight different situations I could be in hahahaha.

Jake: Yeah, so you're keeping track of—

Ben: Yeah, I have to keep track of them. And the global cooldown is, you know, say a second long, it's actually a second and a half but with haste it'll decrease the global cooldown down to a minimum of a second, so if you have a lot of haste, you have to analyze the situation, read your buffs, read your debuffs, read what you're doing, and then use the right ability every second. [mhmm] Once a second.

Jake: So once a second you are making a decision.

Ben: Yeah. Okay, so I'm reading it, alright I got this buff up, I got, you know a Raging Blow proc, and I have Colossal Smash debuff on the boss. [uh huh]. Raging Blow just came off cooldown, okay, this oh, and I'm rolling, I have three buffs up that are increasing my strength, so I really, this is a great time, I'm going to use Raging Blow, it's a hard hitting ability, I'm going to use it right now. K, Raging Blow, good, okay, but that used one of my buffs, and now two of my debuffs are running out, should I use, I have, should I use Raging Blow again because I still have one more proc of it, or should I wait until I can get Colossal Smash back up and use Blood Thirst to build my rage so that I can use Raging Blow, because Raging Blow takes 10 rage to use. So should I pool my resources and wait until I have a better time that's going to do more damage, or should I just go ahead and dump it all into this next attack and then hope that before I have full resources I can get another Raging Blow proc and use it again. So basically is it best to use it right now, is the situation optimal? The first Raging Blow proc situation was optimal, absolutely, very clear [yeah] I needed to use it. Second one I can use it, the situation is not optimal [okay]. So the question is whether I wait for an optimal situation, or I use it and hope that it comes back up before the next optimal situation [mhmm] hahahahaha

Jake: And you make that decision in a second

Ben: And I have one second to make that decision [yeah] across eight abilities [yeah]. Every single one of those abilities I have to decide whether that's the right one to use for that situation or not, and I only have a second to do that decision in total haha

Jake: Uh huh, so you're just making decision after decision

Ben: Yeah, decision, decision for 16 minutes. Once a second for 16 minutes

Jake: wow

Ben: hahahahaha So, and that's why I hate people who think that you can just come in here and

Jake: mash keys

Ben: Because to be good, you have to be, you have to have a very quick, very quick thinking, think quick on your feet, you have to know what's going on, you have to understand the fight, [mhmm]. Um, so for instance, I might, cause not only do I have all the abilities to worry about. Same exact situation: first hit's optimal, second hit's not optimal...but I know that there's going to be a 10 second down period in the fight, in the next second or two, [mhmm] like the boss is either going to run to this side of the room or something else is going to happen that I have to go take care of, [yeah] like some adds might spawn and I might have to go kill those before I get back on the boss [mhm] um, so it's going to be, the whole, for doing damage I know the next 10 seconds are not going to be optimal. Even if I know that if I could have stayed on the boss it was a bad idea to use raging blow because it's not optimal, now it's a good idea to use it because I'm not going to have any chance to use it for the next ten seconds

Jake: Yeah, okay.

Ben: So, use it, again.

Jake: And that's the awareness of what's happening.

Ben: Yeah, yeah. So you have to have awareness of all your abilities, awareness of all your buffs, awareness of all your debuffs, awareness of what the boss is doing, [mhmm] awareness of what people around you are doing, because other people can cast buffs on you or debuff the boss [right] heh heh heh [right] And again, spread it over eight abilities once a second

Jake: And spread over a 16 minute fight, that's going to be the difference between someone with a high DPS and someone with a lower DPS, [exactly] is the person who's making really optimal decisions every time [yep] versus someone who's sometimes making the best decisions sometimes making substandard decisions

Ben: And you'll see that, it is huge *starts typing* They're asking me, I'll kind of read it so you can hear,

Jake: sure

Ben: they're asking me if I can tank this, basically, this is not my main character, at least it wasn't, it's going to be now, um, they're asking me if I can tank it, my basic answer is: no. There's no way. Regardless of skill, I do not have a gear level that will make me capable of tanking this content. The boss will hit me way too hard [uh huh]. So basically what I told them is "no, there's no way I can tank it, um I can DPS it and you guys can carry me because my gear

is still way too low” [yeah] but they have enough DPS to overcome my lacking DPS [yeah] that way, I’ll be able to be in the raid, and I’ll get experience with the bosses, and I’ll get gear that drops from the bosses, but I’m telling them, if they try to make me tank, we’re not going to be able to kill bosses hahahaha

Jake: Yeah. So are you still in the Myrmidons now?

Ben: No, this, at the end of, at the end of Wrath, we started up in Cataclysm, and Myrmidons was, we had *typing to guild* they’re being dicks right now haha. Um, we lost our raid leader, real name Johnny, um, in fact I still have him on here, he was online just a half hour ago. Um, 38 minutes ago he was online. Oh my god stop asking me questions *typing* You need to ask me not them haha

Jake: *laughs*

Ben: Um, he left. He went to uh this server that I’m on right now. He left because the server was not very high ranking [mhmm] You kinda have your guild that are high ranking or not high ranking, and then your servers which are high ranking or not high ranking. Your high ranking servers have on average a higher skilled player base. So he said “Look, this isn’t, this isn’t gonna work” [mhmm] *typing* “This isn’t going to work because I’m not going to be able to reach the skill level that I want to reach without, um, moving to a different server, so I’m going to move to a different server, and sorry guys, but uh,” Dude I know more than you about this game, stop telling me what to do” *types* haha, um. He’s telling me to change from fury to arms, ever class has three specs, they can be arms, fury—for warrior it’s arms, fury, or prot, arms is DPS, fury is DPS, protection is tanking. Right now I’m fury which does well at higher gear levels but does poorly at low gear levels. He’s telling me that my gear level is too low to do fury, and that I should back arms to do more DPS. I’m telling him that I know what I’m doing, and that right now I know my gear level’s right on the edge, and I could pick either or, [mhmm] knowing that as I get higher gear fury is going to become better, I want to, if I’m going to get back in the groove, I’m going to get back in the groove with the spec that’s going to be what

Jake: what you’re going to use

Ben: What I’m going to be using. So I’m telling him to shut up and let me do what I’m doing hahah [yeah] Because he doesn’t know nearly as much as I do about warriors. [uh huh]. Anyways, so he left, he was what held, he was a very skilled player both PvP and PvE, the thing was, even if you were kind of equal to someone in PvP, it’s hard for you to be, to have that feeling I talked about, like “I’m better than these guys, I want to move forward”. Very hard to have that around with him, because if you dueled him, he would wipe the floor with you haha, so you knew that in at least some regard that he was better than you and that it was probably still a good idea to follow this guy, into battle kind of [yeah]. But he left, he changed servers. With him gone, the guild leader tried to become the raid leader—normally those are different people. The guild leader might take care of guild affairs, but the raid leader is the guy who’s talking and telling people what to do during a fight [okay]. He comes up with the strategies, he comes up and

says okay—like when I was telling you that crystal, you need three people to stack there—he’s going to make the decision, the raid leader will make the decision which three people [okay] Guild leader is probably just one of the people . [yeah] Um, yeah, so raid leader left, we started trying to do the early Cataclysm raids, the first level of raids in Cataclysm, couldn’t do it [mm] having a lot of problems, weren’t able to do damage, you know enough damage, our healing it was just...another thing that you’ll find with WoW is that when things just aren’t working, it’s very hard to put a finger on what’s not working, it just doesn’t, it just doesn’t, you don’t know why, it just doesn’t. [huh]. And you could do it again with different people, and all of the numbers will look the same, but for some reason this time it worked [hm] hahahah

Jake: That’s interesting

Ben: And I haven’t been able to figure it out. And this guy’s playing a guitar. now this is interesting. This guitar was only available—sorry to go off track

Jake: That’s okay

Ben: That guitar that he was playing there was only available for people who played Burning Crusade, so that tells me that he’s been playing at least 6 years. [mm] You can’t get it anymore. You couldn’t get it five years ago. So, like, that’s, like I was talking to you about gear

Jake: yeah, as little markers of

Ben: Yeah, that, as soon as I heard that noise and saw it I was like “oh, okay, this guy’s been playing for six years, so he’s probably pretty good” hahaha

Jake: Yeah, interesting

Ben: Little markers like that.

Jake: Yeah

Ben: hahaha, [haha] anyways, so it wasn’t falling apart, so what ended up happening was the few people that were in that guild Myrmidons that were keeping up with me, really. Think of it kind of like cream of the crop, we, like the top ten or so of us who had decided, who had always kind of stayed in Myrmidons because the raid leader was there and the raid leader was really good [mhmm] ended up saying look, this isn’t working, we’re gonna follow him, [yeah]. We followed him, we made our own guild, he was the raid leader and the guild leader, [uh huh] and I played with that guild all the way through Cataclysm. That guild, we had very skilled players, we had the top 10 players from Myrmidons, we ended up being a 10 man guild, so we didn’t do 25-mans, which hurt us because it meant we couldn’t get the extra gear, [mhmm] but still we were very good players, we were top 2 or 3 on the server, um top 1% of the player base.

Jake: How are players ranked? Like how do you know who’s the top

Ben: Um mostly it's

Jake: Does the game it's self calculate that?

Ben: No, but mostly you go to WoW progress .com . *he pulls up the site* So you can see that the top guild in the world right now is Method, and uh, and actually this is the top guild on my current server, 16, Whatever We're Awesome [yeah]. But they were actually, they were top 3 really, they're top three in the U.S. they're top 16 in the world.

Jake: Okay, so how is this list compiled? Like who does it and what is it based on?

Ben: You submit it, and trust me, all of the high ranking guilds in the world, any guild who actually does serious raiding is gonna submit their information and they're gonna, cause they want the credit, they want to attract players

Jake: So they are kinda submitting raw data that is then kinda

Ben: Pretty much, um, think of it almost like a uh, a resume. Like, he look at all these bosses we killed, and here's the time that, look, see, this is the top guild in the world, they have videos of every one of their kills, [mhmm] um rankings, so they were first in the West, first in the EU, first in the Realm

Jake: Okay, so you're sort of, everyone's making a submission and then someone else is basically looking at all the information and ranking them

Ben: Yeah, it's all automated, but yeah, it all looks at it and ranks it, so, um, so the thing was realms. Okay, so here's some of the realms I play on. I play on Bleeding Hollow, second ranked in the world, I play on Tichondrius, 19th ranked in the world, top in PvP though, and Magtheridon 22nd ranked in the world. Um, the reason I play on these guilds is because they're in the top 25 in the world and they fit my timezone , so I'm not going to have people asking if I can raid at like two in the morning [yeah] you know if that's a California server that's a problem.

Jake: So wait a realm is a server or a guild?

Ben: Realm is a server [okay] so these are all different servers [okay] um, the server that I used to play on, it has been coming up on rankings, 77, [mhmm] but when I played on it, this was my first server, when I played on it was like 200 something in ranking, yeah, so it was bad [yeah] there were not good players on there, it did not have a good reputation, [ye ah] so we all server transferred to a new server that had a good reputation, good players, good guilds, and we were one of the top, um, so Magtheridon is 22nd ranked, and see even right now, the guild I'm in right now, even without me they're still 6th ranked on the server, [yeah] so they're 6th ranked on a 22nd ranked server, honestly that pretty much means they're probably, they're about top 2% [mm] but when I was with that guild of players in Cataclysm, which included the three players

that left for Raiders of Renown with me, all three of them we with that 10-man that sectioned off [yeah] we were top 2 or 3 on the server and we were, basically we had, not only, we had credit, we didn't have to recruit, we had people, like if we needed one spot, like a guy had to quit for school or something, we would have people come to us [yeah] people would come to our— and also all these high ranking guilds also have websites, um even Ecstatic Strike has a website [yeah] um, so they would come to us, they would email us, they'd say “hey, I'm looking to transfer—I will transfer servers, I will pay \$25 [mhm] for the right to be with your guild and kill bosses with you” hahaha [right, right]. Um, cause we were high ranking, and, but we were friends too. We had, most guilds have a loot system, which is some kind of system for who gets what loot [right]. We didn't have one. We were all friends, we played with each other for a long, at this point, by the end of Cataclysm we had played with each other somewhere between 3, or like 2 and 3 years. We just talked about it “oh look, this stuff dropped, did you need that? Did you need that? Okay here” [yeah] you know, and um, that worked all the way through Cataclysm . Unfortunately the last raid in Cataclysm was very bland. [mm] It was boring, it wasn't that interesting, it was hard just for the sake of being hard. Like it wasn't, um—there's two kinds of difficult bosses in WoW. There's bosses that are difficult because they're difficult to do right [mhmm] and there's bosses that are difficult because their numbers are so big [yeah] they hit you so hard, [yeah] they have such high health [uh huh], they're boring [yeah] but still hard just because of raw numbers [right]. Most of that raid was boring because of raw numbers haha [okay] And it was the last raid in the expansion, and the last raid in an expansion normally has to last the longest. So there's patches throughout an expansion, [mhmm] probably somewhere in the neighborhood of ten to a dozen patches, we'll say somewhere between 3 and 5 content patches which introduce new raids [okay] the last patch in an expansion has to be good, because the, the difference between the last patch and then the next expansion is usually a substantial amount of time, somewhere in the neighborhood of

Jake: Because they stop coming out with

Ben: Yeah, somewhere in the neighborhood of 8 months to a year [okay]. Eight months of a boring raid—it didn't happen, [yeah]to be frank. Um, essentially people logged, you know, like “hey, I'll come back for the next expansion, but I'm not re-running this stupid boring raid every week, for 8 months [right haha] There's no point [yeah] We'd already beat it [yeah] uh, we hit a wall on a fight that was badly done, we had already done all the normal content and we'd got through most of the heroic content, there were two fights left. The one that we were stuck on was one that um, in its original form, was literally mathematically impossible[hm] was proven to be mathematically impossible

Jake: Wow, haha

Ben: You'd think that testing would prevent something like this, but you have to realize that Blizzard doesn't have players good enough [uh huh] to beat the highest level heroic content [yeah]. The only people who are good enough to beat it are the top guilds in the world [right] So, and that's another thing—WoW is hard at the highest levels hahaha so they can't test it. It, the original version of it was proven to be mathematically impossible. [hm] You could not ,

theoretically, beat that fight. So they nerfed it and re-tuned it a little bit, but it still required you to have a very very specific group of classes because the issue you'll see—there's balance, which um, every, um, every class, you can't get the balance on the damage to be absolutely perfect, you're going to have classes that do more and less damage [mm] so like right now the current DPS rankings, *shows a graph online* maximum DPS rankings, so you can see the highest: Frost Mage does the most DPS in the game right now. Theoretically their highest DPS would be um, 456,000 [mhmm]. Unholy does the least, their theoretical highest DPS would be 360,000. So, even with the nerf, even with the changes, [mhmm] you might have had to, if you were going to beat that fight, you might have only been able to take the top five or six specs [uh huh] If you didn't have those, you couldn't beat the fight,

Jake: You just wouldn't

Ben: it wasn't possible [mhmm] We didn't have em, because we were just 10 guys who were friends, [yeah] so we basically said "Well, I'll see you next expansion guys [hahaha] it's time for a break, because this isn't happening" [yeah] and most of the guys didn't come back [mm] so, that was when I changed to my guild that I'm currently in . This expansion I've been very hit or miss. I've taken off for school

Jake: So is, so Mists of Pandaria is the new expansion. So that was

Ben: yeah, Mists of Pandaeria

Jake: So people stopped playing, and when this came out you started playing again

Ben: I started playing

Jake: A lot of other people didn't

Ben: A lot of other people didn't

Jake: Okay. And it's been more on and off you said?

Ben: For me it's been more on and off because I've been kind of searching for a group that, you know, finding and being with a guild, and spending, you know, you're spending, if you're raiding with someone between 12 and I've seen people raid up to 40 hours a week, so you're spending a lot of time with these people

Jake: How much time have you spent a different points in your

Ben: Um, I've spent between 9 and 24 hours a week *starts talking to someone over voice chat*

Ben: This is, that's Grimberg, as you might remember, is the only remaining of the 4 of us who came out to play [okay] So, in fact he's in my group right now.

Jake: So are you guys getting ready to do a

Ben: Yeah, the problem we're running into right now is we're missing a lot of people

Jake: Okay

Ben: But we have 9, we need one more. So they're talking about boss stuff [mhmm] They're talking about one of the fights that's a little bit difficult hahaha um, as you can see hahah

Jake: yeah yeah hahah

Ben: He's a tank, so he gets hit especially hard

Jake: So he gets the most fun, yeah

Ben: hahaha um, but yeah, so, I've been on and off, I would quit for three months for school, I'd come back, I kinda like mrrrr, I'd half ass it, but [yeah] but really it wasn't until, uh, oh actually this expansion 2 years old, that's right, because I started dating Beth two years ago hruuuh...okay, um...hahahaha

Jake: Mists of Pandaria's two years old?

Ben: And there's a new expansion coming out.

Jake: Okay

Ben: It should be two years old

Jake: So for the last two years you really haven't gotten in a groove, like a guild that's really been

Ben: Not until, not until the last um, after, over the summer, I got with this group, which is Ecstatic Strike, [okay] and I quickly, I was healing actually, on my paladin for that, and I quickly became one of their high ranking people, and there are people who are in this guild who are better than me. Honestly, uh, two or three of the top ranking players in this guild are uh world first quality players, like they're absolutely insane, they're doing retarded amounts of damage that I cannot fathom how they manage to do haha, [okay] but because of that, I am comfortable in this guild [yeah], because there's that

Jake: You don't have an itch to get into a better guild

Ben: Yeah, because I know there are players here who are better than me [yeah] um, so basically this is where I've been, and I feel bad, really bad, because they relied on me really heavily as a

healer, but I had to quit for school [yeah haha] haha, ummm, soooo I'm just coming back now after schools over and...yeaaaah I feel really bad heh heh heh [haha] but, they'll deal with it heheeh [yeah]

Jake: So it seems like you, you tend to have a pretty comfortable, clear sense of when you need to stop for school [oh yeah] and when you can play, and it just doesn't seem like that has been a conflict for you.

Ben: No, and I can see it being a conflict for other people haha I don't know if you've run into that or not but, in your, all I'm doing right now is clearing out my inventory a little bit

Jake: You mentioned right at the beginning that you said that you thought that this game has addicting qualities and I was wondering what you meant by that, or what qualities you were referring to.

Ben: When you first log on, um, you kinda, you don't really know what to do [mm]. Well, I could do daily quests, but, those are boring, [mm] you know. Yeah you get gold for em, you get little tokens, but the reality is you don't really need them, gold's pretty easy to get [yeah] so, naw that sounds boring, I don't want to do that. We'll I could PvP, but my gear sucks, so I don't want to PvP I'll just get my butt kicked. [mhmm] I can't really raid because I'm not in a guild or because my gear sucks, and blah ba blah blah blah. But once you get into it, you're like, you're there, you're there every day, you're, um, hah, you're spending money, you're getting your character ready for raid and um, you know you'll spend a couple hours getting ready for raid. Because I've been talking to you I'm now behind hahah because I need to go buy these flasks for raid

Jake: So what else getting ready for raid involve?

Ben: Um, mostly just buying things that are temporary buffs. Like right now I am buying flasks, they are 62, 68 each [yup]

Jake: So these are sold by other players?

Ben: Yup. Sold by, I'm buying right now Braystil's flacks hahaha [okay haha] so he's gonna get this gold [yup] don't really care because I have a ridiculously absolutely asinine amount of gold so I'm just going to buy these from him, and I'll buy enough for a couple days to that I don't have to heal with it hahahah *yells "I said nothing*" to family members talking in the other room* I'm about to get blamed for something

Jake: You're aware of so many things at once

Ben: You have to. It's, that's actually, remember how we were talking about awareness?

Jake: Yeah, yeah, that's what I was referring to haha. So you said, that, you were just making a comparison, like when you just started playing

Ben: Look, the whole guild, everyone who was in the raid just got owned *points to screen where party member portraits are displayed*

Jake: Oh no haha

Ben: haha Don't really know what they did, but it was a bad idea hahaha

Jake: So you just said something about when you start playing there's not much you can do an it's a lot of choices aren't that exciting

Ben: Well, when you log onto a level 90 character, a max level character [yeah] the choices are basically raid or PvP . If your gear sucks, neither one of those is that enticing, cause you either aren't going to be able to raid or you're going to get your butt kicked in PvP [mm] If you're leveling, that's fun, because you get the excitement of leveling up but um, you know with me, someone who has mostly max level characters, and I've leveled so many characters, so I'm not really interested in leveling another one , immediately, uh, it can be very boring when you just log on , but once you start raiding, you'll all a sudden find, like, not only are you getting ready for raid, but you're also on four hours before raid doing dailys, doing this, doing that, doing EVERYTHING for no reason other than, heh, um, that, you know, you're now invested in the game again , and you just get stuck in that , and even, once you're raiding hardcore and things, you find that even if your raid group, you know even if your raid groups stops you'll go find another one [yeah] rather than quitting [yeah] haha . And it's just, you know, it's hard not to say that it has addictive qualities when you consider how much I've played, I mean , I've played and absolutely insane amount of time, you know, a quarter of my life, when I have WoW available to me I spend about a quarter of my life playing it, so [mhm] I mean I would think, I'm not sure what the clinical definition of addictive is, but I would say that's haha

Jake: There's no agreement on it so haha

Ben: I would that's, that's following in the realm of it

Jake: Well one thing, one sort of um, uh, criterion that sometimes people include in the list is that you know, distress when you stop playing—it sounds like—does that happen to you?

Ben: Oh it's very stressful.

Jake: It is.

Ben: at first, at first, for like two weeks, [okay] then you're like "oh wait, I have real life to deal with" hahah

Jake: What does the distress feel like?

Ben: Just like, “Ahhh, I should be doing my dailys to get my tokens, I should be raiding right now, I’m gonna fall behind on my gear, I don’t want to fall behind on my gear, cause then it’s a pain to get caught up, I don’t want to fall behind on players, I don’t want to fall behind on boss strategies, like uhhhh god it’s going to be so hard to get caught up again “ I’m getting my butt kicked right now. Please stop killing me. Oh I’m dead. *sigh* well I died *both laugh* It’s just the urge to stay caught up on everything [yeah] is really important . [mhmm]. I don’t know, that’s what I would say is probably the most addicting, the most, at least if you’re looking at it like that, that’s probably the most obvious sign of addiction I would say, that the game presents [mhmm]. Oh god, die die, people, die. And my screen, I guarantee, looks different than the other screens you’ve seen, [mhmm] because of my addons that are installed, and it’s going to be like that for every person, every single person is going to have a different [yeah] they have a different feel, different things that they are comfortable with. I’m fairly comfortable with having a lot of things on my screen [mhm] probably a leftover of um being a tank, which required the highest amount of awareness [yeah] so after tanking I’m, you know, fairly comfortable with my raid awareness and comfortable with having lots of things on my screen [mhmm] at the same time. So right here I have my incoming heals, so I can see Call of Nature is healing me right now

Jake: So are you doing, are you doing the raid right now?

Ben: Yup, no I’m doing

Jake: Not just doing stuff to prepare

Ben: No, it’s kind of um, well, it depends if you want to call it preparing, it’s probably not a bad idea to call it preparing, because what we’re doing right now is clearing out the, trash MOBs is what they’re called, [mm mhmm] basically just clearing out all the little guys that hand around the boss [mhmm] and almost every boss is going to have these [okay] Okay so they got up to Dark Shaman, so this is the trash before Dark Shaman, so they killed a couple bosses last night without me, which I expected [mhmm] Oh god, I’m getting raped, I’m dying, I’m dying, don’t die, alright we’re good. Safety has been achieved. [haha] But yeah , this, this is kinda getting ready. We gotta clear that side of the room, basically all this garbage we’ve got to kill. And I say garbage, um, they can still easily kill you alone [mhmm] but because I’m in the group of right now 9, it’s supposed to be 10 haha people, [yeah] I’m fairly secure in my ability to just go ahead and go balls out on these guys [yeah] And you can see, you’ll see actually on the DPS meter, which I have right up, right over here, that, this is me right here, this character, [mhmm] um, the effects of having poor gear. [mm] It’s really, it’s really hard to explain to someone who hasn’t played it how bad it is having poor gear. I’m, I have gear which is actually on, up to date with this patch, it’s just not up to date, I just don’t have any gear from this patch, so I have gear from the last patch, up to date, so far, and still, you can see this guy is doing um an enor—he’s doing 5 times my damage [yeah] because he has gear from this patch.

Jake: so as soon as you drop behind the curve a little bit you’re not even close to

Ben: Not even remotely close to being able to keep up [uh huh] So the fact that they're bringing me along right now, I'm probably not going to do the whole raid with them, because eventually my gear is going to become an issue regardless of how well I do in mechanics [yeah] so in this carry situation, if you're carrying someone who knows the fights, but has very low DPS, you'll normally assign them to do , to do the parts of the fights that require, um, some people will call them "warm body" basically—"just run over there, go hit that lever, go do this stupid this over here" not something that necessarily requires any damage, it just requires somebody to go over and do it [right] so this way I won't hurt their damage much because instead of sending someone who does 130,00 or 330,000 DPS over there they're going to send somebody that does 100,000 [right] and uh, you know , that doesn't cause them any problems [right, right] but eventually they're just not going to be able to deal with it, they're going to have to have somebody who does more damage than me [mhmm] so

Jake: So I want to go back to something you said a minute ago, you were talking about like once you start raiding, you get engaged, there's a point where you cross over into some, some different level of engagement, and you're, you're doing your 4 hours of prep, and um, I wondering what that shift is, like what that's about

Ben: It's about keeping up. Like I said, you fall behind so quickly. [mhmm] So as soon as you are caught up, so as soon as you are caught up, you have that desire not only to stay caught up but get to the very bleeding edge [mm]. *starts concentrating on the game* um

Jake: Yeah, tell me if there are hairy moments where you need to just stop , or just stop talking, don't

Ben: No, honestly, the issue, the biggest issue that I have right now is that I have the event chat muted, [okay] so... *turns on voice chat, starts talking to party, tells them he has to mute his mic* So, um, basically, that's, you'll hear all kinds of shenanigans, [yeah] but I want to answer as many questions as possible for you before I actually have to talk to them

Jake: Okay, well let me see, I'm just going to look over my, you've told me a lot of stuff so

Ben: there's just trash between the bosses, it's really only on the bosses that I'm going to need to

Jake: Yeah that's fine, no problem. So which character are you playing right now?

Ben: Luka, it's a warrior, yeah. typically, apparently there's all kinds of studies on gender and age and stuff of who...oooooh my god I will totally take that cloak. *typing to party* hahaha alright hold on. Yeah I guess if I'm going to be tanking that's off spec, but I can totally use it as main spec to because it's got mastery on it. But it's a huge upgrade compared to my jankey 502. Although did roll an 8. *long pause* Well they just gave it to me, so I just got a new cloak, so that's cool. I like new cloaks, new cloaks make me happy. heh heh. So they gave me a new cloak over a guy, a guy rolled higher than me, but because they expect me to play more often they

game it to me. [mhmm] They're talking about getting rid of me so they don't have to stop later hehe [hahaha]

Jake: so what race is your character?

Ben: Undead.

Jake: Undead, okay.

Ben: You can see it better up here *displays character on screen*

Jake: Oh yeah okay

Ben: He's wearing a mohawk right now. I've always wanted a Mohawk not really sure why [hmhm]

Jake: So do you have a sense of your character as having a story or a personality or is it really just you're playing the game through that character strategically

Ben: Kind of, a little bit, not as much, in fact actually can I move these over here *wants to move recorders*

Jake: oh yeah move them wherever you want, that's your movement area

Ben: yeah

Jake: want me to move this up here

Ben: let me bundle my cables. If you can't tell, I have one side of the desk clear but not the other *there are stacks of items on the left side of the desk* hahah

Jake: yeah

Ben: yeah, he kinda does. I mean not as much as, um, people who are on RP servers, I don't know if you've talked to anyone who's on an RP server

Jake: I haven't

Ben: Um, they're obviously, they're going to have their, their answer to that question is going to be yes, haha, you know? [right] that's the whole reason that they're on that server is that they have a, their character has an identity [mm] *pause* I would say yes he does, but it's, um, it's hard to explain it. I just, you kind of, I think you play a little differently depending on who you're, what character you're on, just because, um, maybe something about how you as a person developed while you were playing that character, I'm not really sure, but [hm] I'd say I do play

all my characters a little differently, I might be a little more snarky on this character or something haha but [huh] um it's kind of hard to put a finger on exactly why

Jake: Huh, but, you have a, you have an experience of being a little different when you're on different characters

Ben: Yeah, because there's, there's really no tangible reason why I might like one character over another sometimes [mm] but I find that I do [mhm] . I really enjoy—and it's a combination I found a lot of race and class and everything, and sometimes it just feels right. I had a mage that I got all the way to level 90, so I had a max level mage [mhm] and uh, I hated it, and I kept playing it thinking I was going to enjoy it, and I was gonna have fun, cause it was a really combination as far as, it was going to do a lot of damage because goblins have a racial bonus, and, um, you know I thought it was going to be a lot of fun and I, I just, I finally had to change it, I paid twenty dollars to change it to undead [yeah] and uh, now I love it, that's one of my favorites [huh] just the race change, it totally—well I did a name change with the race change, so I changed the name, changed the race, [mhmm] and it went from one of my, probably my least favorite character to pry my favorite character, almost overnight [yeah] just cause it just felt right [huh] and I don't know why [yeah] umm, but, just something to do with the animations, cause every race has different animations, and something to do just how the character played out. I had a lot more fun [hm] so, hahaha.

Jake: Interesting

Ben: I don't know

Jake: So what's your experience of this character? Like how would you characterize what it feels like to play this one?

Ben: Um, it's intense, it's my, I mean warriors are always melee, they're always up in the fight, so it's, I think I probably get the most intense, as far as really pumped up playing this character, because warriors, um, they have abilities called charge, so you literally charge across the battlefield really quickly, and all their abilities are physical, they have no magical abilities, so I just, I kinda get this feeling/image that when you're in a fight, when you're doing a boss, when you're doing really well. And for some reason knowing that you're not doing a lot of damage kind of nullifies that, like I don't really feel very [hm] I don't feel it as strongly. But when I'm top DPS and I'm banging things out [hahaha] and I'm, you know, I'm on top of my game, and, you know, a new add spawns and I'll turn and charge, and hit a Raging Blow, and it crits, and it completely destroys his health [mhm] and you just get really, really into it, and you feel really, you know, an intense kind of satisfaction and it's very visceral when I'm on this character doing damage or as a tank really, because you can still, you still do damage as a tank just not as much [yeah] um. It's really just a strong, visceral feeling. It really kinda pumps you up. But it's completely different on my healer, because at that point my focus is on what abilities I'm using. Like I was telling you, that priority system, like should I use it now, should I use it, [mhm] when's my dead time, blah blah blah. Totally different on healer [mm] because a healer,

you have to save people. I'm watching, on a healer I'd be more watching this little box with everyone's life, and these colors, the reason they're colored is because I have them colored by class, so I know he's a warrior, warlock, warrior, mage, hunter, death knight, paladin, paladin, monk, and a druid, but those, you'll see them go up and down during a fight, [mm] and that's their health, so, I'm watching these real intense, I know, by muscle memory, you pry haven't seen this, *holds up mouse to show other side, which has 12 thumb buttons*

Jake: oh, no

Ben: So I have 12 abilities macroed straight to my thumb [okay] so, I know by feel what I'm doing for healing [yeah] *refers to each button* Holy Light, Divine Light, Holy Shock, you know, I can name it all out for you. So I know what I'm doing for healing, so instead I'm looking, and I'm analyzing, okay, he's not missing a lot, or it's not a dangerous part of the fight, so I'm going to use a smaller, slower heal, kinda save some mana, save some magic power [yeah], or you know, "oh my god, he's gonna die!" and this is a really bad time for him to be low on health, so now I have to use a cooldown and I have to heal him very quickly [uh huh] but at that point, as a damage dealer, I'm not responsible for my health, other than not doing anything immediately stupid [right] um, so it's not a big, not a big deal for me. But as a healer, it's almost more panicked, kind of, like oh my god [hahah], like. holy crap, I have to save this guy, what is going on with my life [yeah] so I just popped all my cooldowns, and popped my Blade Storm, and my

Jake: So is this the actual boss?

Ben: This is the actual boss, yes, so we wanted to kill DarkFang first, and he was marked with an X, and we did, we successfully killed him, so now I'm going to go ahead and go on —my mouse is bugging out, there we go— go on BloodClaw here. And we're going to kill him and get him dead. And you can see again, I'm so far behind in DPS compared to these guys.

Jake: So the guys behind you are like the tank and the healers?

Ben: Yeah

Jake: Okay *both start laughing*

Ben: All the people that you definitely want to be in front of [haha yeah]. If you're getting passed up by them, you're probably, you're no longer getting carried, you might as well just be, not even there heh. [yup] So there, they used on of their first abilities, there's a big cloud of poison on the ground. Obviously not something you want to stand on [mhmm] Um, so right now some of my cooldowns are coming off, so I'm going to use them and then I'm going to pop another one of my DPS cooldowns to try and buff my damage up as much as I can. It's really, it's pretty, oh god, I really messed that up, heh heh, they've been playing so long, I feel so bad [haha] Um, really just trying to do my best, so I backed off, used my charge, to get in close, charge will give me rage, which lets me use more abilities, so it was important for me there to,

see right here I coulda, I shoulda used this right as it came off, well I could have used it right as it came off, but I waited 2 seconds for one of my other abilities to come off cooldown, so it would combine to do more damage. [mm hmm] And this is um, Kor'kron Dark Shaman, so if you end up looking it up. I can't, I personally can't go over and attack those, because they do a large AoE explosion [mhmm] when they die, so if I try and go over there and deal with those, what's going to happen is I'm going to get, I'm going to hurt myself, I'm going to probably die [mhmm] so instead I'm going to stay over here and just go ahead and do damage to these guys. Um, probably what I'll do next time, now that I think about it, is I'll probably go ahead over and...yeah, I'm going to go ahead and do it...oh god no there's an Ash ooze in the way don't actually do it! Get out of the way, die, okay, because now the ranged DPS should have had enough time to get the attention of the oozes, I'm going to go over here and use my Blade Storm on them and do some AoE damage, um, that's, um, I did that as much because of, I did that for two reasons. First, it will help kill the oozes, which is an important thing, they melee very hard, they hit you very very very hard. And the second reason is to buff my damage so I don't look so useless *both laugh* because right now that's extremely important to me staying in this raid and getting gear [yeah haha]

Jake: So you are hoping to good enough to not kicked out any sooner than you have to

Ben: Yeah, because I need to, I need this gear, and this is going to be, they're helping me by doing this, I could do it the hard way [yeah] and the hard way, um, heh, the less favorable way, is to go ahead and actually build up from where I left off and kill those raids, and go through the easier levels of this raid. The easier levels drop less good gear [right] um, it drops gear of lower quality, so I might be able to level my to do those levels, but um, of course the gear that I get would be not as good as—oh god, I'm dead! See what I told you about not attacking the them haha [yeah].

Jake: So it would be a really gradual build up instead of

Ben: yeah, instead of right now I'm saying "hey, plunge me into this"

Jake: yeah

Ben: So, slimes, they really, they kinda hurt [yup]

Jake: So are you going to be dead for a while?

Ben: I'm going to be dead until

Jake: Until they kill the boss and then they can

Ben: yeah, so right now the boss is at 13%, there's a, 12%, there's the boss right here. So, there's also battle rez's in the middle of the fight, but what you, normally you can't rez in the middle of

combat...so, what they just said, “get him up”, was basically someone who is worthy of the battle rez died, so they said get him up [yeah] cause you can only rez one person per fight

Jake: And they didn't choose you?

Ben: No they didn't choose me *both laugh* There, now everyone died.

Jake: So when you play nowadays, is your typical gaming session sort of like this, where you log on, prepare for raids, do raids with people you know, is that kind of your standard

Ben: I always raid with people I know *turns up volume on party chat* they're talking about why they wiped. [yeah] Basically, it's, I guess there was a tank issue, and he dropped an Ashen Wall, which, the, one of the bosses will drop an Ashen Wall, it's a wall of elemental guys that do an enormous amount of damage if you get near them [mhmm] apparently, so, here's you tank, and your boss is facing the tank, he'll drop the wall parallel, well, perpendicular, to him [okay] across a line where the tank is standing, so they're saying that the tank um, dropped that wall in a bad spot, and, so, assuming, say that's the raid over there doing damage, so if he faces it this way there's no issue, but if he for some reason turns, [yeah]

Jake: He'll split up the group

Ben: The wall will run right through the group and it can kill them in one or two shots, so that was the issue that they're talking about

Jake: Okay

Ben: But yeah, normally I'd say that's fairly accurate as to what I do. I'll come on and I'll get ready but, it probably only takes about half an hour to get ready for raid. I'll do stuff for dailies though, and that's unrelated. *father needed his help for something, he briefly leaves to help him* “BRB pouring Coke” “BRB snorting coke” [hahaha] no you're not, Papi you're not allowed to raid high, I'm sorry. Oh I might be getting ejected. *jokes with group on chat about group member getting high* So we have two older guys in the raid, one, Grimberg, known as Papi, he's who I was saying was one of the three guys, and he's probably 68, 69

Jake: Oh wow

Ben: He's old. So he always says things that none of us understand *both laugh* Papi what are you talking about dude? But yeah.

Jake: so what parts do you enjoy the least about playing. Like are there things about it that you don't enjoy?

Ben: Yeah, wiping.

Jake: wiping haha

Ben: Which is what we just did.

Jake: Yeah

Ben: It's not fun. Not a favorite, not a fan man, not a fan.

Jake: That sounds like it's a pretty big part of it

Ben: I don't, I shouldn't say that. I don't like wiping when it's not my fault. Um, at that point I could attribute that at least partially to my fault because if I had been doing the damage level that I should have been doing, then it's possible that we could have killed it [mhmm] *says something to party* They're summoning in the ?? guy, I don't know who we dropped, we dropped the other paladin. Oh heck yeah, okay, I didn't get dropped, because there was a guy doing even lower DPS than me [oh wow]. If it's set on damage done, set it to DPS, see the Sideway guy? [yeah] that's the guy who got dropped [haha]. That's a ret paladin, oh yeah that's definitely a ret paladin . So, now, because I want to stroke my ego, I want to see what kind of, what kind of gear he was in *both laugh* to see if

Jake: To see if he had better gear but was doing worse?

Ben: Yeah hahaha

Jake: Well if nothing else you know he wasn't in the middle of an interview.

Ben: Oh yeah! He's got way better gear, he's 531.

Jake: Oh, so you can look up just a player online

Ben: oh yeah, yup

Jake: Is that through Blizzard?

Ben: Yup

Jake: Oh, okay, so that's, you can actually, that's cool

Ben: So he had 20 more ilevel than me, so he should have been doing somewhere in the neighborhood, given his gear he should have been doing about 200,000 DPS [mhmm] and he was only doing 83. [wow] So *both laugh* he is a worse player than I am [yeah] Me, here, this is what I'm talking about with a good player, um, the top theoretical DPS for me right now is about 130, and I was doing 100. [okay] So this is theoretical, perfect [yeah] like you're standing there, not moving, doing everything absolutely perfect, and then realistic, even, this is still, standing

there, not moving, doing absolutely everything perfect, they're saying, a human, the highest you could maybe get as a human is about 120, and I was doing 100 [yeah] while not having played in three months, I'm missing, I'm missing some gems and enchants, so [right] given that information, I'd say I'm pretty much on track. [yeah] But he was [way way] waaaaay off track yeah hahahaha

Jake: definitely haha

Ben: So, that tells me, okay, yeah, I need to fix my gear up a little bit, [mhm] and I need to maybe work on my rotation a little bit, which is expectable, expected, because it's been three months [right] but on the whole, that tells me that my problem is gear related [yeah] get the gear, I should do pretty close to what I am expected to do, which, with the best gear right now is 400,000. [mhmm] so there's 300,000 I'm going to multiply my DPS by four times

Jake: when you get gear

Ben: when I get gear

Jake: wow. so right now is everyone just getting reorganized

Ben: yeah, cause they kicked someone out of the raid and they're trying to figure out, everything out. Actually though, *asks party who they are waiting for*

Jake: so it seems like, does the game tend to go through like, there's the intense concentration you described during a raid, and then there's sort of this down time where people are chatting and waiting and [mhmm, yeah] so is that kind of the way it cycles?

Ben: mhmm, you'll normally chat and BS and just, whatever goes on during the trash fights, and it's not super, you know every once and a while you have people doing a ton of damage during trash just to kind of show off [yeah] but the reality is that it really doesn't mean anything [yeah] and then people will be more serious in the boss fights, although if you have a fight on farm, basically it's so easy that it's just farming, all you're doing is just the same motions, kinda grinding gear out [yeah] um, you'll get the BS, and the joking, and the playing around during the fight too

Jake: Cause everyone, it's just so easy

Ben: Yeah, but on a fight that actually takes some um, takes some time, or on a fight that actually takes some effort, it's better to just stay straight-faced about it [yeah] Okay so right now we're raiding. So he just ran a ready check, so he's just trying to make sure everyone's here, there's two people missing right now, uh, a mage and a rouge, [mm] so yeah, go ahead, we still have a little time.

Jake: Yeah, I'm just sort of, you've told me so much, that I'm sort of looking through my questions and seeing that most of them have been answered so I'm just checking through to

Ben: Well there's still so much I haven't even told you

Jake: Yeah, I mean I have that sense that haha

Ben: For instance one thing that you might be interested in psychologically is, for a year I actually dated a girl that I met in WoW , [mhmm] um, I can't believe how it ended, it ended absolutely ridiculous, but, um, basically it ended due to a misconception on her part and by the time she realized it was too late, but that was us, so.

Jake: Mm, so you met her in WoW but she was in the area?

Ben: No, she was in Texas haha

Jake: Okay, so you were just sort of long distance

Ben: No, she moved here hahah

Jake: Oh wow

Ben: Um, again, dispelling the notion that if a girl plays WoW she's unattractive , um, *pulls up pictures of her on Facebook* I personally at least would not say she's unattractive haha

Jake: haha yeah. I'd agree. So how long did you know each other before she moved?

Ben: Three years. We knew each other for three years. and then we started dating when I went down to Texas to meet my guild. I actually flew to Texas to meet my guild and we just hit it off really well [yeah] and we started dating, after a couple months of us dating she moved up here because she had an aunt in the area anyways and was trying, it was a combination of me and also her trying to get out of Texas [mhmm] but, yeah. But that, and another girl that I dated played WoW, not necessarily, Beth I met on WoW, Jess I did not meet on WoW, I met her and then found out she played WoW, and we played WoW together, so [yeah]

Jake: So the one that you, sorry what was the one from Texas's name?

Ben: The one from Texas, that's Beth

Jake: Okay, so what was it like shifting relationships, like going from being in-game friends to meeting her in real life?

Ben: Absolutely no effort

Jake: So just transitioned really

Ben: Cause we played together, raided together for three years, knew each other, talked, knew of each other's personal problems, bla bla blah, and that was kind of how we started progressing from just friends to more than friends was that she had just broken up with her boyfriend and for like two months, and I kind of like helped her right after that and then after that we talked more personally for like a month and a half, but as far as knowing each other, knowing our personal lives, we'd known that for like, [yeah] you know same thing as any friend you might know, but that was when it transitioned from being friends to being more than friends [mhmm] was because we were already friends, we were helping each other out with problems in our lives [yeah] and getting closer, but it was super effortless, there was no effort, I mean I met her and that was the first time I had seen her in real life, but as far as talking to her it was, just picking up, it was just another day, [huh] it just happened to be that we saw each other in person this time [wow] so

Jake: That's interesting

Ben: There's was no, I mean, I think we...yeah. She pulled up, cause she actually game me a ride from the one guy's house that I had been staying with that was the guild leader [mhmm] and literally the first thing I think I did was make fun of her after I saw her. [hahaha] But it was cool, because we were friends, like [yeah] I think I made some joke about her being a typical Cali girl because she pulled up in this bright yellow car and these huge sunglasses [hahahaha] and was fiddling around with her iPod and I'm like, with you know her blonde hair, and was like...[haha] Just making fun of her, but because we felt so comfortable with each other you know [yeah]. I think the first thing she said to me in real life was "oh shut the fuck up" heh [hahahaha] hahaha now that I think about it heh heh heh

Jake: So did you two continue to like play in the same guild together once you were, she was here and you were dating

Ben: Yeah, oh yeah we did. Definitely.

Jake: And what about when it ended?

Ben: Nope, I quit WoW, I couldn't play WoW anymore after that ended . It was really, it was a terrible misconception, because of, basically because of how everything went down it was weird [hm] um heh. She had basically thought that I didn't care for her for some reason, but I, because of that she ended the relationship and moved on, [mhmm] and nothing was further from the truth, I was actually already starting to think about possibly marrying her, so like, it was a really good relationship , it was actually by far the best relationship I've ever been in [mm] which is, um, odd to say maybe, because I've been in five relationships that all lasted more than a year, so I'm not unfamiliar with relationships, it's not like I latched onto the first person that I met. [yeah] No, like I've been in relationships before that, I've been in relationships after that [mhmm] easily the best relationship I've ever been with was the girl who I met on WoW hahaha

Jake: Yeah, you're just breaking all the misconceptions tonight

Ben: I'm trying. [haha] But that's because I, I, that's why I hate them so much, because they're not true of everyone [yeah] um, and like I said, I don't know the quality, I don't know the kind of people that you've um done any kind of research with so far but I would say, I'd be surprised if they might have fit all of what you thought going into it because what I've found, at least in the high ranking players, you find a lot of girls, [mhmm], you find a lot of attractive women, you find a lot of intelligent men, a lot of intelligent women, a lot of successful people who just happen to play WoW [mhmm] hahaha [yeah] um, and there's nothing wrong with that, there's nothing weird about that, until you go and tell somebody haha that [yeah] that that's what you happen to do in your free time [yeah] um

Jake: So when you said you couldn't play WoW anymore it was just too upsetting to be

Ben: Because that was the world that I met her in and that was the world that everything like, you know where I first spent all those years of my time with her was in this game [uh huh] and I couldn't, I couldn't play, I quit for a while. When I came back it was different. It's actually been different ever since then, um, that was right at the beginning of—well it was part of the way through um Mists of Pandaria [mm] so, every since then I've been kind of hit and miss on whether or not I play a lot [mhmm]

Jake: So does it still have a sense of feeling different since then?

Ben: It's been, pretty—oop, that's what I was talking about with that Ashen Wall. That Ashen Wall hit me, it hit me for 440,000 [oh yeah] Absolutely wiped the floor with me. See that time, with a little bit of practice I was doing better, I was doing 107,000 instead of 100, so getting closer [mhmm] Um, *sigh* where was I. Yeah it's, it's been tied really closely to how I felt about her [mhmm] um, I don't know much you know, psychologically with relationships, but basically it hit me reaaally hard, it was a very very difficult relationship to get over [mhmm] I would say my...from how I felt about WoW before her to how I felt about WoW after her the longer, the better I felt about my current relationships that is, and the more over her I was, the closer it got back towards feeling [mmm] um, just like another day playing WoW hahaha [yeah] but for a while there, no it was pretty [mhmm] why is he? Does anyone else know why Disney gave Hercules red hair? *starts typing* To appeal to the gingers haha [haha] ummm haha. But yeah, no, that, I'd say that's pretty much how it worked as far as [mhmm] as far as my feelings for that went [yeah] But it's been a long road. And it, on a, for a long time there I'd actually play DotA more than WoW. WoW is something, DotA I could play a little more on my own. If you want to do anything at an advanced level in WoW you need at least 5 people, more like 10 to 25 people [mhmm] so, it's definitely a social game, it's something that you need to rely on people for

Jake: Yeah. So what, at this point what are your kind of, when you look to the future in WoW, what are you hoping for, do you see yourself getting caught back up, do you see yourself

wanting to get really involved with a guild again, I mean what's your sense of what you want in the future?

Ben: Um, I'm kind of, I don't want to get as caught up in it as I was [mhmm] um, for multiple reasons . Oh god that's the staff I wanted...nooooo, and I would have got it too if it weren't for ? Heck yeah that's a huge upgrade. *someone asks if a item is needed* I do, I'm only wearing a 496. *talks to group about item, why he needs it, how he'll use it* *turns to me and whispers* Just give it to me *both laugh* I understand, I already know what you're saying, just give me the item. *continues to talk to group about getting the item and his performance* So they're asking the other warrior if he needs it [mhmm] *continues talking to group* Finally, finally got the belt [haha] Oh, god, instantly equip that. Even without, you see these sockets, they're sockets to put gems in it to make it stronger, and you can also enchant it, [mhm] even without gemming it and enchanting it, it's so much better that, just put it on [yea h haha] hahaha

Jake: So if you just got a slightly better piece you pry have to, [you would not put it on] you would not put it on right away because you'd have to

Ben: You'd have to gem it and enchant it

Jake: Yeah, okay

Ben: But, that was an enormous upgrade [okay] That alone is probably going to make, maybe not in a specific fight, but, it would make a noticeable upgrade [mhmm] you know, it I did a, what they like to do is if you're checking your damage to check upgrades you'll do something called a parse, um, it's basically a DPS parse, you'll run you're um, you'll go up to a training dummy, [mhmm] and you'll say you'll do a six minute parse, you'll fight a training dummy that doesn't do anything, it just sits there on a post, for six minutes, to check your DPS increases, so you, if I was, you know, in a fight, it's hard to check those little DPS increases, but I could run, if I ran a couple parses

Jake: You'd see the difference

Ben: I would definitely see a noticeable difference with that upgrade [yeah] no question , um RNG, which is random number generator, kind of like luck, [yeah] a lot of people blame the RNG gods if they're having terrible luck [uh huh] hahahah. Um, RNG won't make that difference, that's a huge noticeable difference.

Jake: Because different attacks have a range of possible damage they could do, so there's a random

Ben: Kind of. Um, so say, like the Mortal Strike here, it's a, it says "mighty blow that does 228% weapon damage from both melee weapons" uh, so it's base is to do 228% of your weapon damage, so upgrading your weapon damage is going to give you a huge increase in DPS. As a melee, that's the absolute best way to increase your damage, as you might expect. [yeah].

Changing the thing that you're hitting things with, [yeah] is a really good way to hit them harder haahaha [haha]. Um, but, with um, with every single item , really, really, really?

Jake: What happened?

Ben: I just got Mindspiked for, I only got one shot. *to party* It's not my fault if he one shots me, like, blame the gear bro. I could *sigh* you know what, I'm not dealing with you people right now, I'm undergeared, I'm just going to shut up and be the kid in the back of the classroom. *comments from party* So what were we talking about? Oh yeah, so, every ability, like strength, you see all these items have strength on it, [mhmm] and they also have crit and haste. Haste improves how quickly your melee attacks hit, so you'll get more melee attacks [mhmm]. Crit improves your percentage chance to—so these are all my stats—so crit improves my percentage chance to do double damage on the attack. Hit improves your hit chance, blah bla bla bla balh, you know it makes, it's pretty logical [yeah] but um, so that item had a lot of hit and a lot of mastery, so my attacks are going to have a higher chance to hit things and the mastery for a fury warrior gives me a higher chance to become enraged which increases my damage by 50% so I'm going to have a higher change to become enraged and I'm going to have a higher chance to hit things, as well, with the strength increases something called attack power, [yeah] which, there's an attack power—basically it adds onto the damage of every weapon [okay] so I got such a huge strength increase from that weapon, from that belt that it's going to noticeably increase the damage that every single one of my attacks does. *long pause* See this is trash for the next boss, which is maybe not to you, because I don't know if you've ever played any game like this, but this is significantly noticeably different kind of creatures. Normally the trash leading up to a boss is um related to the boss [uh huh] so it might share some abilities, and it, they do that in order to help people um get an idea of what is going to be coming up [mm hmm] Ahh, that was my glit ah, he got killed, that's so cute. So, um, see, he had more haste, so he got the rouge off before me. So that my heroic leap, you'll see Intervene right here, so I'm standing here and I'm going to use intervene and it's gonna shoot me over to that character. That's a protective spell, I intercept the next melee or ranged attack within ten seconds [mhmm] so, that's something you'll use a lot as a tank but not so much as DPS [right]. This next fight, like even this trash, trash has specific strategies at times too, um these shamans they do a healing ability, so you have to separate them, otherwise the heal will bounce around and it will be impossible to kill them [mhmm]. *banter with party* They're trying to basically say that I have no idea what I'm doing by saying that I never got past the last fight, which I definitely did [hmm] *continues bantering with party* so what I just did there, the reason they said I couldn't go Bladestorm, there's a very specific reason, mostly it's because they're doing Bladestorms right now [mhmm] and they would kill me but what I did was I popped Die by the Sword which increases my parry chance by 100%, so basically any physical attacks, I'm going to reflect them [mhmm] for 8 seconds, and then the next thing I did was um pop Bladestorm. So basically I made myself invulnerable to their attacks and then used my attack. [yeah] That's the kind of stuff, that you're gonna have to think though [yeah] like, how can I, like normally I wouldn't be able to go in there and fight those, so what am I gonna do to change that [mhmm] . PvP is all about those kind of decisions—how am I gonna wreck this guy [yeah]. I gotta use 7 different abilities in this perfect combinations . This is the next boss, General Naszgrim. Fairly easy fight, it's reliant on people killing adds in the back,

including the War Shamans that we just saw that do healing, they can heal the boss for an absolutely insurmountable amount so you have to kill them before they get the heal off [okay]. That's the main thing in this one. Can I have stats and master please? There's mastery, where's stats—come on druid. Why? He said no, he's not going to buff me. [hahaha] Basically I'm asking for buffs here, these are all different buffs —there we go, now I got it. *listens to party discuss fight* I was talking to stacks on bosses, so he was saying make sure it goes to four but don't taunt too early otherwise it's a wipe because if you taunt too early and your stacks get refreshed, now both tanks have to stack, and neither one of them can

Jake: So what is a stack?

Ben: Oh, a stack is a debuff, so if I say a stack, it's literally, it's a debuff that will stack or build up [okay] so you could say every 10 seconds he's going to do a heroic strike that decreases your armor by 10% for 20 seconds. So every 10 seconds he does that, and it lasts for 20 seconds. [yeah] So at the 10 second mark he's going to do it again, and now you're going to have 2 stacks, now your armor's going to be decreased by 20% [okay] and then 30%. So you have to step out and let another guy tank for 20 seconds [ah okay] until it falls off. But if you jump back in too quickly, if you have like 2 seconds left,

Jake: Then it'll be at 20

Ben: Yeah, then it'll go, it's still at 20, now it's going to jump to 30 [okay] Now you have 30 and he has 20, now you're both

Jake: It's going downhill

Ben: Yeah, that's what I was saying, you knew you need to be on Vent to be able to communicate and like if that happens, it's not, it's not absolutely a wipe, because you could have a paladin put Hand of Protection on him and it'll wipe the stacks off [mhmm] but that's what the difference is between a decent raid group and a good raid group and a great raid group is how can you handle stuff not going right. How do you handle, "oh god, something that I didn't expect to happen just happened" [yeah] "what do I do" hahaha

Jake: Yeah, it's how quickly everyone can come up with a new plan [yeah] and carry it out

Ben: Because a great paladin, a really good paladin is going to notice that, hand of protection, right away and fix the problem before it becomes a problem [yeah] and then you go on your merry way [mhmm] an okay paladin, you'll have to ask him to do that [mhmm] and if you don't have voice chat you'll never be able to ask him [right] assuming anyone thinks of that. That's another thing that I was saying. That's a paladin ability, I'm playing a warrior, how do I know that a paladin can do that and that it'll wipe the stack? Because I've played a paladin. So, playing all ten, or now all 11 classes

Jake: You sort of know all the tools that are available across the whole group

Ben: Which is why I became a valuable player. He's going to pull this boss in 10 seconds. So I'm going to stack all damage all on the front end to do as much damage as I can right away. And they're going to do the same thing. Okay, so that's stuff on the ground, I've gotta avoid that. Otherwise I would probably wash out, so, I avoided that successfully. Switch targets to this?? Warbanner because that's going to buff the boss if I leave it up. See, big crits, I have my crits show up down here with the amount of damage they do and that's kind of—oh, I'm going to show you a video! Hahaha. I just had a great idea, remind me to show you a video

Jake: Okay

Ben: It's a couple minutes long, but it's a PvP video from Wrath of the Lichking and I think it'll fairly perfectly capture what PvP as a warrior feels like, [okay] and it also makes me laugh hysterically because it reminds me of PvP as a warrior [yeah] But anyways, oh god, okay, dodged that one, no big deal, nothing too complicated going on, boss is at 62%. He hasn't started doing anything too scary yet. [mhmm] Oh god, I just got absolutely destroyed by something, Warsong, so this is a problem. So, I just used a defensive spell because I knew that Warsong—knowing the fight, I know that when he does that Warsong, what it's going to do is it's going to um create a major shockwave of sorts [mhmm] and um, it could kill me if I wasn't prepared for it, especially with my low life, because increased gear not only increases your strength on all of your abilities but it also increases the amount of stamina you have on all of your abilities, so I have, that's why he was saying “you get killed too quickly” [yeah] was because my gear is so bad I only have, we'll say two thirds of the health of someone who should be in this raid [yeah] so something that won't kill them will kill me, so what I had to do when I saw that that Warsong was going off, is I had about half a second to pop something to save my life, and since I'm still alive [yeah haha] you can go ahead and say that I definitely did that. Big crit! I just hit that guy for a million damage. Big crits, big crits! Um, big numbers, that is actually what reminded me of the video, is me thinking “big numbers”, um [yeah] because big number make me happy, [yhea] they make everyone happy [haha]. Big numbers—the bigger your gear, the better your gear gets, the are, and the happier you are because your numbers are huge .

Jake: Hahah, so why, why is that?

Ben: It's the same thing I was saying. The numbers, it's just, the, a print out kind of version of the amount of damage you're doing, so if I do, um, big numbers basically means that I am doing a lot of damage, so as my gear gets better, as I was saying before, you're going to do more damage per hit and your numbers are going to get bigger. [mhmm] So say originally, before a big gear upgrade I might have been doing 200 damage a hit, now I got a nice big gear upgrade, so I'm doing 400 damage a hit [mhmm] Well, a crit is double damage, so originally my crit was 400, now my crit is 800 [yeah] when I crit, so, it really makes you feel good, like “aw heck yeah I just did 800 damage to that dude” [yeah]

Jake: So as the game goes along, and goes through patches, and goes through expansions, like, there's just, numbers are climbing and climbing and climbing

Ben: In fact, there's something that's happening next expansion that uh has never happened before, which is that they're resetting all of the gear numbers above a certain level because things are getting too insane [yeah] you have bosses with a billion health haha [yeah] and um, you're, you know, like I said that ability hit for 1.2 million [mhmm] so basically what they're going to do is take everything down by a factor of just like, we'll say like [mhmm] and that's going to allow everything to go much more smoothly

Jake: Yeah. Is it going to feel weird to see all these much smaller numbers?

Ben: Oh yeah [haha] It's gonna make me really sad. Okay, some I'm trying to get away from this guy who blade stormed me but I don't think I'm going to be able to do it. Alright, someone stunned him so I got away. Alright, so the boss is now getting low on health. So what I did was come out here to deal with this Dark Shaman, or I mean Archweaver, so he's casting spells, so I'm going to use abilities that can stop him from casting his spells [mhmm] Same thing I just did there, I saw that he was casting, even though I wasn't close to him [mhmm] I had the wherewithal—and this is, again, something a lesser player wouldn't do—to charge over to him an interrupt him before he can do anything [mhmm] It's also really important—a lot of players will eventually kind of devolve into just spamming their highest hardest-hitting ability when you get really low, to, when a player gets really low on health . *lots of yelling over chat* So we just died at 1%

Jake: Oh man

Ben: So Papi died to *references log*

Jake: Is this a log of what happened?

Ben: Yeah. Papi died to Bonecracker, actually. Uh, they just, they really messed up, they basically just let him slowly die hahahaha.

Jake: Was he the tank?

Ben: No. *to group* Yeah, Grimberg did get hit with Aftershock, um, about 2.7 seconds before he died. I'm sorry, 1.7 seconds before he died . *to me* Basically he messed up. Remember the thing that I said I had to make sure not to stand in?

Jake: Yeah

Ben: He stood in it and got killed hahaha

Jake: That's all it takes, huh, for the whole raid to fall apart

Ben: Right now he's telling me to tell the paladin how to heal better because they know that I'm a good paladin healer, but there's not a whole lot I can tell him because unfortunately this is a bad fight for paladin healers to begin with [yeah] and the other thing is, the little things that like, the little things like recharging over there, that take a half second, you have a half second to decide, you know I saved myself, I saved myself twice that fight [mhmm] and saved the fight from collapsing three times doing little things that they're never going to notice, other than the fact that the right keeps going [yeah] I can't teach him those things [yeah] haha like, I can tell him kind of what to do

Jake: yeah, those little moments of situational awareness

Ben: Yeah, I can't tell him, "in this exact situation when you have a half second to decide do this. Oh but if you have a second to decide to this" like, it's trying to tell someone how to live there life kind of thing [you just can't] like, "man you're so successful, what should I do?" [right] well, I spent, I can't give you a guide on how to be a good engineer, I can give you some tips but [yeah] the little things I do to make me a good engineer are little stuff that you kind of just have to do and feel, it's the same way on the game [mhmm] That's why I'm trying to put emphasis on the fact that the top rated players are intelligent, sophisticated, strategic, capable people [mhmm] because the little tiny things that make you a top rated player are not things that you can just learn from a guide [yeah]. They're ready to go. So this guy, that's not—he's doing more DPS than me but not a ton more. I say his average I-level is probably 540, so he should be doing more damage than me . I'm gonna pop my cooldowns, hit him as hard as I can in the face. Do my bladestorm, I don't really know why , probably just because I felt like it. Oh god, death on the ground, death on the ground. And that's, I'd say more mechanics in WoW come down to two or three things, It's either something on the ground, an add, or something, well really it just comes down to that, something on the ground or an add.

Jake: An add is an additional monster?

Ben: So, let's just click on this one. So, yeah, you just hear him call add, cause there's adds in the back. So that's an add. Um, it's something that's added to the fight [mhmm] And it refers to, um, people..uhh...it refers to creatures, not necessarily spells, so if he starts throwing out an additional spell you're not going to call adds [yeah]. It's pretty simple, I'm just running through my rotation here. Skull Banner comes out, and it's easiest for melee's to switch over to it cause they're already standing right there, so I'll switch over to that and kill it. Um, the priority system, like the 38-step priority system is not difficult for me because I, it's almost like studying for a test, if you study a lot it's not, you don't find the test difficult [mhmm]

Jake: So you are just going through all these things and it's just a natural flow for you almost?

Ben: Yeah, cause I've played so much. So, I'm watching all my buffs up here. So there goes the Warsong so I've just saved myself again. *long pause* Just saved myself again by popping Shield Wall . *long pause* *to party* that was my bad I was talking to someone, sorry about that *long pause* So, I messed up because during defensive stance you shouldn't attack the boss, it

gives him more rage [uh huh] this particular fight, it gives him more rage, and that will make him do more dangerous spells [uh huh] I got distracted and attacked him when I shouldn't have, and he got off two Warsongs, which is why I needed to save myself twice. Okay, defensive stance ended so I'm going to run back in here and start attacking. So he was just talking about outgearing this boss, the gear that they have, and this is true, the gear that they have is unnecessary to do the amount of damage required to kill this boss. Their peak damage is significantly higher than this boss was tuned to do [mhmm] um, so with that in mind you could say that's why they're able to carry me, someone who has less gear than the boss was tuned for [yeah] but that's also why, every single boss in a raid gets progressively harder, so the next boss, they're going to be less overgeared for, and the fact that I'm in the raid will be more of a hindrance, until eventually they have to kick me out hahaha [yeah haha]. Although occasionally you'll have bosses that are referred to as "loot piñatas" um which is that for some reason they are very undertuned, they are tuned very easy [yeah] um whether that's because of a lack of testing or whatever—Blizzard is always really hesitant to ever increase the difficulty of a fight, they very rarely increase the difficulty of a fight, so you'll end up with specific fights that are loot piñatas basically, you just hit it till it gives you gear haha [yeah] um, one of those was, one of the most well know of those is um known as the loot ship, because it's a boat fight, where you have to kill the other, the Alliance things—cause I'm on Horde, what's called the Horde

Jake: Yeah I know about the WoW kind of mythology

Ben: Okay, so I'm on Horde. If you're on alliance you kill the Horde ship and if you're on Horde you kill the Alliance ship[mhmm] so it was one of the most infamous, because you literally could go in there, it didn't matter what kind of gear you had, you were fully capable to killing that boss, so it was known as the loot ship [haha]. It was basically just a ship that brought you gear haha [haha]. I love the loot ship, the loot ship made me happy

Jake: Yeah, good memories of the loot ship?

Ben: good memories of the loot ship. Cause it was such—again, I was saying about easy fights, is um typically an easy fight will be a much more relaxed fight [yeah] so it was fun for me, you know, it's fun for everyone, cause you're just sitting there like "haha, your mom's fat" kinda like, as you, and then loot rains down from the sky and everyone's happy hahaha [right hahaha]. Okay, so he just called—basically you can't attack him during defensive stance, and we're near the end of the fight and he does this thing at 10% that will basically make it so he will, will being to wipe the raid by, he just summons add after add after add, including the healing adds, so basically the issue is at 10% you have to burn it, that's why he's asking if we're ready. So at 10%, he just did something called a Bloodlust, so we're all gonna pop all of our cooldowns, like you just saw me go ahead and click through all of my cooldowns, and we're just going to try to do as much damage as possible, we're gonna try to blow him up before he can do anything too dangerous. So I just popped my defensive cooldown to save myself from Warsong, um, popping all of our offensive cooldowns and the boss is dead

Jake: Sweet

Ben: So, it dropped tier gear, and mail feet, so this is nothing that I can use so I'm just going to pass on it [mhmm] but they're obviously pretty happy about it. [yeah]. But I'm going to use my bonus roll here and I didn't get anything. *joking and discussion with party, including possibility of him playing a paladin, leader wants to see who else is available* Right now we have 21 people online in the guild [mhm] We're all in the Siege of Orgrimmar which is the current raid [okay] and the guild has 213 people in it.

Jake: How well do you know

Ben: Depends on the person

Jake: Yeah

Ben: some of them I know very well, some of them I do not know at all. [yeah] And that's mostly because of the three month break I took, so, before the three month break, I knew everyone very well or at least as well as anyone in the guild knew them. [mhmm] Grimberg I obviously know very well because he's the guy that I've been playing with for four or 5 years. But we're going to have some downtime here, so I don't know

Jake: Yeah, well, I think we've kind of gone through most of the topic areas

Ben: Yeah I figured that

Jake: Is there anything else that you feel like is important for me to know that you haven't [um] talked about

Ben: You know I've tried to cover most of the stuff. I think the most important, the biggest part of MMO gaming that I haven't really covered is the research, and I don't, if you're doing a raid, a hardcore raid especially, [yeah] um, you're going to research fights, strategies, you're going to research your gear, you're going to—I know—not right now, but right before I quit I knew every single upgrade I wanted for my paladin, I knew where it dropped from, I know what it's drop chance was, I knew everything about the gear that I needed [mhmm] I knew everything about the bosses, I looked up the bosses, I watched videos on the bosses, I watched other people fight the bosses, I did everything that I could possibly do so that when I got there, it was less strenuous. I talk about learning the fights, and you do have to learn, there's a little bit to learn as far as just being there, but as far as actually becoming familiar with the strategy, that's something a high level of raiding that you're expected to know before the fight, before you even get there.

Jake: Yeah, but you've already watched video, you know what it will look like

Ben: Yup, and that's something that a lot of players, that, any lower-lever players are not going to do, they're not going to research it, they're not going to know, um it's only the higher level players that are going to do that [mhmm] oh god the tank died and I just died right after. So he

just ran ahead with one healer and got absolutely annihilated. Oh, here's another MMO, I got invited to come do the Beta testing. But, yeah, there's not really a whole lot that I can think of that I haven't at least touched on.

Jake: Yeah, yeah I feel like we've gone through a lot, so

Ben: The, daily quests were a big point of contention because—oh! I know!

Jake: oh the video?

Ben: Yeah. Um, gearbreaker. *starts video, some commentary during video* So, obviously, I'm not gonna watch the whole thing, but the whole concept is just very energetic, very like, especially as a warrior you feel that, just screw it, numbers everywhere, like I love playing fury because it just feels so awesome to charge around the battlefield you know busting people's faces up [yeah] and obviously that's not anything like anything that you could ever do in real life hahaha [haha certainly not] But PvP, as you can see there PvP's totally different, it's hectic, just running in circles,

Jake: yeah more of a free for all sort of feeling

Ben: Yeah, exactly, and there's, battlegrounds go anywhere from 10 people up to 40 people, so [yeah] but, anyway, there's not a whole lot more to cover I mean

Jake: Yeah, I mean, I'm getting tired for one but I feel like we've covered a lot of ground too so

Ben: Like I said, if you have any questions to get a hold of me, you have my phone number, so

Jake: Yeah, I appreciate that, and I really appreciate the interview.

Appendix 5: Jeff's Interview Transcript

Jake: The first thing I want to ask, is, just to get a general sense of your life in general, and just who you are, what else you do, and then get into how gaming fits into the larger picture

Jeff: anything Specific?

Jake: Just, you know, your work life, your social life, your background, whatever...

Jeff: Um, I'm 28 years old, I'm originally from the midwest. where I went to college for a little bit, focusing in computer animation and then transferred to a different school to do video production. Graduated from there in 2008. Um, then moved to NY for the next five years. I got a job after a while working at a TV network, and [pause] did that for a while, and then in January moved to Pittsburgh to get out of NY...it's a very weird place, just moved back to Pittsburgh, closer to family, and, you know, it's not New York so it's automatically better. And I work full time now, when I first moved I was freelance for a while, but I work fulltime now and still do freelance stuff, so I work a lot...

Jake: Yeah, so, how much do you work?

Jeff: Um, well for a long time I was working 6:00 in the morning to 5:00 at night on M-Th, and then I would come home and, work at home until about 10:00, you know, have dinner, hang out for a little bit, till 10 or 11, and then, you know, do that 4 days a week, and then on Fridays—I work 4 10-hour days instead of 5 8-hour days—so Friday is the day I didn't have to go to my full time job, I was just working here all day, so Friday nights I would just hang out with my fiancée or some friends, or go out and do some stuff, whatever. And sometimes work a few hours on the weekends too, some video editing stuff. But now the video editing stuff is winding down, because it is no longer the busy season for weddings [oh right]. So, I've had more free time, but I'm still working on stuff. When you came in here, that's what was on the screen.

Jake: So you are still doing the 4 10-hour days, but there is less of the nightly work and stuff.

Jeff: Yeah, it's manageable to just Fridays now. I can do that during the day on Fridays now and have a pretty normal evening, weekday/evening life, with relaxing and doing whatever.

Jake: So the wedding season has been going since the spring?

Jeff: Yeah I started doing the wedding stuff since the end of June, which is the same time I accepted the full-time job, so I went from doing freelance stuff maybe three times a month doing a different project here and there for different people to working 80 hours a week non-stop [wow yeah] since the end of June.

Jake: So that must have been a pretty big shift haha

Jeff: That was nuts

Jake: And you have been engaged for how long?

Jeff: Since last Christmas. [okay] Christmas day, so we're getting married in May

Jake: Great. So any other big life things going on?

Jeff: That's, that's about it, we've been together for 8...7...I don't want to say it too loud because she's over there *both laugh*

Jake: Great, well that's, congratulations.

Jeff: Thanks

Jake: So, tell me the story of how you, you got engaged with playing, uh, it's WoW that you play, right? [Yeah] So tell me the story of how that started.

Jeff: Um, I've never been too too much into video games, but when I did get into them, I realized that I would just play one game a lot all the time. When I was younger me and my friends would play this MUD game—text based, no images—[yeah] it was based on Lord of the Rings, pretty much the nerdiest thing you could ever do

Jake: haha what was it called?

Jeff: The Two Towers. [okay] So we would play that all the time, and we would just go over to my friends house and sleep over and we would just like stay up all night and just play, I mean it was pretty fun. but then that just faded off after a while.

Jake: So you were how old?

Jeff: Oh god, this was, I was like in 7th grade, eight grade, something like that. Um, so we played that game a lot and then other games here and there, anything my friends were playing I would play [mhm] and then when I first moved to Columbus to go to Ohio State I lived by myself in a studio apartment, and I was work...taking classes from 8 in the morning to 3 in the afternoon and then working from 3-11, so I was just as busy then as I am now, [yeah] but in my free time there too I did play that game quite a bit, and like some other games here and there and this and stuff like that. But when I moved to NY I didn't really do either of those, too much. Until, we moved, we lived in two apartments when we were in NY. The first one we lived in had the computer in the bedroom because the is the only place where it would fit, because NY apartments are tiny. [right] Um, but then when we moved to our apartment in Estoria, in Queens,

the computer was out in the living room, so I could be on the computer and still be around her, so that's when I started playing WoW. My friends used to play it and they all stopped by then, but I never played, I never got into it, just thought I'd try it out, and it was fun and I like it, and I think I'm pretty good at it [yeah], so

Jake: so you knew about it for a while [yeah I knew about it for a while] but you started playing at that point

Jeff: Yeah I had tried playing it before when I lived by myself in Columbus, but I just didn't get into it [hm] Um, but then when I moved, I got into it on my own...I had a couple friends who played, but they don't play as often as they used to [yeah]

Jake: Do you have a sense of what it was that grabbed you that, when you did get into it? That worked?

Jeff: I think, there was, well one thing was that it was on the computer because she would be watching some stupid TV show, you know, Bachelor and Teen Mom, whatever, that I just wasn't into, so I wouldn't want to sit on the couch and watch that with her, and she never wanted to watch the same kind of TV shows that I would want to watch, [mhmm] so I was able to be at the computer and still be engaged, you know, in talking to her and half-watching this show, and she would be like "oh my god can you believe that just happened?" [yeah] and I can, you know, I know what's going on [yeah] in these shows, but at the same time I'm not really watching them, so I was able to focus on that, which is better than a consol game because she can still watch TV while I was on the computer [mhmm] and I would just sit there, you know, for a while and just play it, and you can kind go at your own pace, it wasn't like , you know Call of Duty or something like that where you have to be fully invested for these few minutes [right] at a time. I mean that's kind of what it is now if you're raiding but, you know, it's a little bit different...at least, I think it is [mhmm]

Jake: So, it really just fit into your life [yeah] even, even the concrete things like your living room setup and where the TV was and

Jeff: I mean it was really easy to, cause I mean, I'm sitting here like this—this is the same desk that I had—but the TV was like right there *points* [mhmm] you know [yeah] So, it was just easy to sit here, if I was like going like doing some kind of questing in the game or something like that by myself I could just stop playing and it's not, you know nothing happens [right] it's totally fine [yeah] so, it just was easy to do and fun, and there was a ton of stuff to do so I could do it often without it being too repetitive or too boring, even though sometimes it can be repetitive, but

Jake: yeah , what were all of the different things to do?

Jeff: Just different things within the game, if you wanted to make a different character and play as a different class you could go and do that [mhm] play different things out, and do, and do different dungeons, and do different things that they have in the game, like seasonal things, and stuff like that...”oh it’s Halloween, let’s go do all those fun, different Halloween things they put in the game” you know [yeah] and stuff like that, so, that’s just the kind of stuff I would do, half involved in that and half involved in whatever else was going on

Jake: So it was a nice way for you to, to kinda be in two worlds at once [yeah] and have two kinds of

Jeff: Yeah, we always called it separate but together time [yeah laughter] because we’re doing two different things but we’re right there you know [yeah] so...it made sense [uh huh]. But then when we moved here, a two-bedroom apartment for less than we were playing for a tiny one-bedroom in NY, um, the computer came back here and when I was freelance I would be back at the computer all the time working on stuff or trying to find new jobs or trying to find different things and applying to different positions or contacting people about um different projects or different gigs or whatever. Um, but then I would play sometimes during the day too but when I was focusing on work I was focusing on work [yeah]. And, then when I started working a couple months ago and everything, the amount of time that I played just kind of decreased because I have a lot of other responsibilities [right, right] you know

Jake: So going back..how, how long ago was it when you started? When was that?

Jeff: Uh, I moved to my apartment in Queens—which was when I started—2000...probably February, 2010

Jake: And you’ve kind of remained playing consistently, even with varying times, but you’ve kept playing [yup, pretty much] and what’s the variation in terms of the most you’ve played during certain points and the least you’ve played and

Jeff: Probably the most I’ve played was when I could play and also be involved in what else was going on around me. So I would be on the game but 50% paying attention to the game. Now when I’m playing the game I’m back here to to do that, so I’m 100% paying attention to the game. You know, so, it’s a different, play-style I guess.

Jake: Yeah. Yeah, yeah, so even though, if the time is different, that has to be taken into consideration.

Jeff: Yeah, if I sit back here for, cause when we do our raid now it goes from 8-11, or, you know, try getting on a little early just sitting there ready to do, but the raid time is from 8-11, so that’s 3 hours of being, at least, you know, 95% involved in what’s going on in the game. Whereas

before I'd sit down and be on from you know 5:30 to 11 but I'm only 25% involved [right] in what I'm doing

Jake: So during that time, with that like, low level of involvement, that was kind of like a nightly thing, so you were pry playing like, I don't know, what would that add up to a week [uh, probably...] 20-30 hours or [something like that] something like that, yeah.

Jeff: 20-30 hours of being 20%, 25% involved, maybe up to 50% or whatever, but not like, "shut up, go away, I'm busy" [right right] But now like, if I'm 95% to 100% involved, that's like 6 hours, and you know it's just something that I like to do and, she gets that. If I play on a day that's not like a Tuesday or a Thursday or whatever she's like "why are you playing the game" [laughter] "I know, I know"

Jake: So it's kind of, kind of, um, you have a pretty set schedule right now.

Jeff: Yeah, I mean it's, it gives me something to look forward to because it's fun to play, and if I did it all the time, it's not as exciting to get on and play, because it's just another thing to do every day. Since I don't play as much as I used to, it's gives me something to look forward to and something to you know, try to accomplish, because we are always doing different stuff in the game, trying to make progression through some of the harder, more difficult things that are happening, so it gives me like, a goal, even if it's pointless, which I totally understand, but it's still fun to do.

Jake: What do you mean that it's pointless?

Jeff: It's just a game, I mean, I used to play that Two Towers game all the time, and, since that was a typing game, I can type pretty fast now, [laughter] but that's all I got out of it, you know, that and lord of the rings lore, which I already knew a little about, so [So you're not playing for some...] yeah, I'm not, even, there was this article I read a while ago about somebody who was like "yeah I'd love to hire WoW players to work for my company because they have these certain skills that hardcore raiders have and stuff" and I'm like "yeah, that's true I guess, but you're also in an environment that is meant to be beaten, so it's not like you're all that awesome if you can do it—good job you did what you're supposed to, you know [yeah] So, it's nothing that I'm gaining any skills from that I can use outside of the game [yeah] you know [so it's a pursuit within] yeah, but then again, it's the same thing with any video game, even if it's not an online RPG game, if it's, anything. Even Scrabble doesn't help you with anything because you're using words you already know, you're not learning anything [yeah, true].

Jake: Um, so, take me through just like a typical gaming session—it sounds like right now your typical session is a raid session [yeah, that's pretty much all that I do] yeah, so what does that, from start to finish, what does that involve?

Jeff: Um, well today for example, when you got here, we were having dinner, um, we had just finished, we were just hanging out, talking about whatever, and normally if you weren't here right now we'd probably still be hanging out, maybe would have watched an hour show, you know Homeland or something that we didn't watch, Walking Dead—that's over now, but something like that [yeah] we follow those shows and everything, so we would watch one of those either while eating or maybe after eating dinner, and then I would come back here and try to get on at like, 7, because if I don't play outside of the raid, there are other things in the game to do that can benefit you during that raid, um

Jake: What kinds of things?

Jeff: Just different things in the game like getting valor points to make your gear better so that when you go raid, you're more powerful—stuff like that. Um, things like that that I used to do more often, that I used to do the different daily quests for things, but I don't do any more. And that's one of the things that the people in the group I play with, they're like: "make sure you're doing this every week, make sure you're doing that every week" And I told them—It's a pretty, from what I've seen and what other friends have said—the group that I play with is extremely laid back, everybody's really cool and I really like these 9 other people that I have met before, you know? [yeah] They're pretty good friends. You know, so, that's, so I try to get on 7:15, 7:30 or something like that. And usually in the game we get our invites to group up around 7:30, 7:45 if you're on, then get into the raid, and take a 5 minute break every hour, and if you need to get up and go to the bathroom, or grab a drink, or whatever, he my house is burning down I'll be right back [laughter] they're like "oh, okay" and they'll just wait for you, it's not like, it's not like, I guess there's a lot of groups out there that are like "aw you were gone for 2 minutes, you're kicked out" you know, if it was that kind of stressful environment I would not be doing what I do. But it's very laid back, and when I get on later you'll be able to hear the people talking and [oh cool] and stuff like that. It's always fun, the people in the group, which I'll probably cover later, there's, I don't know how old she is, we have a grandma in the group—she has a 4yo grandson, we have uh, 2 ppl from Wales, I think they are engaged, I don't know if they're just bf and gf or what, but, 2 ppl from Wales that play so it's always fun making fun of their accents, and they make fun of us in the states say, so it's always interesting. So then that's the game, I mean we'll, get into the raid at 8:00, and we take a 5-min break every hour, and then 11:00, we're like "well, it's 11, see you later" [so it's a pretty set end time?] yeah, I mean the people in Wales are on this server, because it's more populated than a server that's there, and it works better for their schedule too, because it's 4:00 in the morning when we're done, but that works out for them [that works for them, hm]. That works for them so..

Jake: Okay, so what, I'm curious to like know more of the details of the, the minutiae, the little things you do, like you mentioned getting valor points [yeah] and what is, what are all of the little errands that you kind of have to do? [Um] And like why? How do they contribute?

Jeff: The way I play the game—I mean there's a lot of different ways to play WoW—and the way I like to play the game to be challenged with things. A lot of people that I play with are like “I got this new sword to transmog” and all it does is make the sword you have look like the sword that you just got. And I'm like “I wouldn't care about that, like that doesn't benefit anybody” When I play I want, I want to get on and I want to leave...when I log on I want to—what am I trying to say—when I log off I want to be, I want to have made progress during that time. So if I get on, I'm going to do something useful, within the game, such as getting valor points or getting these tokens which can give you bonus rolls on gear, or talking to people about different strategies to set up the gear that you have, and figuring out stuff like that, and going online—you see I have two monitors—I'll have the game on one and sometimes I'll have, like, hey what upgrades can I get from this box over here and what, how should I reforge my gear for all the stats [mhmm] and strategic things like that, so, pretty much, if I get on, I'm trying to get valor points by running scenarios or doing quests, which I pretty much never do, it's pretty much just scenarios.

Jake: what's the difference between a scenario and a quest?

Jeff: Uh, questing is you go out into the world and you find someone who says “do this for me” and then you go run a stupid errand for them and then you come back and they give you five valor points [okay] If you run a scenario, it cues you up with two other people, or you find two other people to do it with, and you go and you do this mini-dungeon thing where it teleports you to the beginning, you have a goal, you have to do it, and if you do it faster you get more points, and, um, since our characters are pretty powerful in there, we can pretty much always do the faster one and get more points. Um, you can do those for bonus valor points daily, but I can only do them 2x a week, because that's all I play anymore, um, and then, since I get on at 7:30 sometimes and it starts at 8, sometimes I can't even do that. [yeah] so, there is a weekly cap for how much valor you can get, and it's been weeks, I think last week was the first time I met that cap, and got full use of doing that stuff that week. And the other thing that you can do is you get these tokens that allow you to get a bonus roll when getting loot from a boss. [okay] You can do that once a week too and every week you can get three tokens [mhmm] and when I say every week, it resets on Tuesdays, so, if I got on now, I could do any of that stuff, um, but I have tokens saved up from last week that I didn't use so I don't need to do it right now, so maybe I'll do it on Thursday, maybe I'll do it *shrug* [yeah] *both laugh*

Jake: So, what are valor points?

Jeff: Um, just like and in-game currency.

Jake: Okay, so, and there's different currencies, is that right? [yeah] there's just sort of standard gold and...

Jeff: there's gold, the currencies in the game, there's gold, then there's different kinds of points, there's justice points, valor points, honor points, conquest points, honor and conquest are for player vs. player gaming, and valor and justice points are for player vs. environment and I pretty much only do player vs. environment. Player vs. player is...I don't like it as much. Um, so you can just go and do different things around dungeons, or around scenarios, do quests, to get those points, and then use those points to buy items or upgrade the items that you have, so [okay], that's

Jake: So you would use valor points instead of gold and stuff? Or where does that?

Jeff: Yeah, well valor points are, I mean you can get gold from doing anything, I probably have a total of 100,000 gold which is a decent amount, it's not ridiculous, but that's between like all my characters, there's like 100,000, and, you can use gold to repair your gear after you die, to buy materials to make things, such as new gear, which isn't worth it for where my character is in the game, cause I have better stuff than the things you can make, you can buy gems and enchantments to upgrade the gear that you do have, and valor points are used to upgrade the overall piece of gear as a whole. like you can put an enchantment on something where it says "every time you do a damage, you deal and extra 5%" [yeah] you know, but if you just upgrade the gear, instead of it saying +2000 intellect, or whatever it says, you know, +25, you know,

Jake: so it'll just be, so the valor points you're spending to increase, all sorts of attributes?

Jeff: Yeah, and it kinda goes by item level, kind of, um, so if you have an item level 553, I think it is, and if you use some valor points to upgrade it, it'll be 553-557 to 561, so it's just like these jumps.

Jake: So all gear has a number?

Jeff: yeah, um, and then in the game too, sometimes a thing might be a higher item level, but it won't be as good for your class specifically, because of the secondary stats that are on there [mhhh] the character that I play benefits a lot from the haste stat and not so much from a spirit stat [yeah] yeah, so if there's a higher item level that has spirit I'm not going to want that, I'm going to want haste [even if it's a little less] yeah [it's still more beneficial] yeah

Jake: So, you used the word "useful" before, like you want to do useful things [yeah] in contrast to just getting a sword that looks different even though it's not actually different [yeah] so it

sounds like this sort of, um, like figuring out what's useful is what you're talking about now...like what would most benefit...

Jeff: I mean, you can go online and you can, there's a website called "Ask Mr. Robot" and it analyzes different gear for different classes and you can hit a button that says "best in slot" and it tells you the best in slot in gear, and there are different variables that you can change, but it's pretty generally a decent thing to look at if you want to know what is good for you or not good for you. So, doing something useful to me means getting a new piece of gear, or getting valor to make the gear better, or getting tokens to get a bonus roll, which would in turn give you more gear, which you would use valor points to upgrade, so it's this spiral kind of thing.

Jake: Yeah, and your time is pretty limited, so you're trying to decide what's the most, what's the best bang for your buck.

Jeff: Yeah, cause some of the gear—like everybody who I play with that play more, all of their gear is upgraded as high as they can upgrade it, which is two times for a total of eight item levels. My gear is not. [yeah] And they know that, and they're like "hey why didn't you upgrade this?" And I'm like, "I don't have the Valor for it" "why not?" "cause I only raid with you on Tuesdays and Thursdays" and they're like, "oh, you should get more!" and I'm like "uhh—mmm, okay, well I can't, so" yeah.

Jake: So it sounds like you don't have a sense of urgency to play more

Jeff: Um, I think I used to...but, not anymore. I don't know what changed. I think a lot, I think of the things that changed was that the sense of urgency that I had was when the new expansion came out, it's called Mists of Pandaria, when that came out there was a whole new island that you were exploring, there were, they increased the level cap from 85 to 90, there were all new dungeons and raids and scenarios, and different classes and different races, and different talents, and everything, everytime there's an expansion the kind of, at least slightly, overhaul something, I mean everything, and sometimes there's major overhauls and stuff. So there was more of a sense of urgency to play then just because it was all different, and I wanted to learn it, and I wanted to experience that, but now, that was version 5 that came out, the version 5.1 came out that was minor upgrade, and then 5.2, 5.3, and it's on 5.4 right now, and then they announced the next expansion, which will be 6, you know [yeah] so, maybe when 6 comes out I will be more urgent about things. Because there were all these different factions that if you would do the quests for those factions you gain reputation, and then you use your, you gain the reputation and use the valor points, or gold or whatever, to buy new gear that was better than what you had before, because, your old gear was made for level 85s and now you're level 90, and it was like, all of this like, big change

Jake: so it was like this whole new world of possibilities that were introduced

Jeff: Yeah and now that that's kinda old news, it doesn't really matter anymore

Jake: Uh-huh, but all those new possibilities were really exciting [yeah] to sort of have all these new

Jeff: Just to wander around in a new place in the game and check out the new art that was in there pretty much, and you know, I said before I went to school for animation for a little while, and even though that's not what I ended up doing I've always really liked it [yeah] and when I'm walking around in this 3D world and see really cool stuff I'm like "oh, that's, that's pretty cool!" [yeah] It'd be awesome to do that kind of stuff, you know, make that kind of stuff, or, I can't do that so, at least I can hop on a dragons back and fly around it, you know *laughs* [laughter, yeah yeah]

Jake: So it sounds like that's a whole different level of how you enjoy it

Jeff: Some people level just for that, yeah, some people play just for that, but when I was playing when these games first came out I was doing it to make my character, to develop my character more in the game

Jake: I'll ask you more about your character when we actually get it going, because I would be curious to know more details about what you've done

Jeff: I'm going to use the restroom real quick

Jake: go for it

Jake:: So what, tell me about a, um, a really satisfying experience that you've had playing. Something that stands out as just like a good memory or a good...something that just typifies what you like about playing

Jeff: Probably, it probably happens pretty often, because I'm happy every time we make new progress in the raid, because the raids...to me, as somebody who does the PvE instead of the PvP stuff, raids are what you strive to do. And, the raids are split up into different versions, you know easier and harder versions, right now our group is pushing the harder, the hardest version, the heroic versions of a lot of the bosses, so we'll spend hours trying to kill the same boss over and over and over, and then we'll die, and then we're like "hey, maybe we should try this instead" and then we die and then it's like "hey, maybe don't stand in that fire" and then we get past that part and then we die on something else so [yeah] everyone's learning, everyone's adapting, and then when you think back to when you first "alright here it goes, we're going to pull this boss in like three seconds" and you die in the first three seconds of the fight, going from that point to

“alright we’re going to pull the boss in three seconds” and then you kill it, that, to me that’s what it’s, that’s why I play it, because there’s a challenge in front of me and it’s not easy to do, sometimes, and even if it is easy for me, maybe someone else is struggling with it, and if they’re struggling with it, I don’t succeed, so, a lot of the things I do too, I do to benefit the group, like if a certain piece of gear drops—which actually, the opposite happened last week, a certain piece of gear dropped and somebody else got it and I was like “ah, I really needed that” and he was like “oh, you can have it” and I was like “cool! thanks” you know? [yeah, yeah] and I’ve done that before too, where I’ve gotten a piece of gear and the person was like “ah man I really needed that piece” and I’m like “here, take it, you need it more than I do, I mean it’s going to help the group more if you have this one thing, so you take it.” so me, that, working with the group is, that’s why I like the group I’m with because it’s been fairly consistent, and when people did leave, the group, and we got new people the people we got were better than the people who left, so, so it’s always been a pretty good experience in that regard. And then when we can, like I said, when we can accomplish those things that we set out to do that’s the satisfying moment

Jake: so how long does it take, like right now you’re, you said you have to try multiple times, and you get one step further each time, maybe, or, what’s the

Jeff: Um, well the group does have a raid leader, who’s kind of in charge or organizing everything, and, I pretty much leave it up to him. I mean, he’s, he’s the guy who’s like “alright we’re going to start doing heroics next week, so read up on new mechanics of the fight, and what you can do, and what’s going to be different than what you already know, and the new requirements” and stuff like that, so people will do their research, or not, there’s been a lot of times where they’re like “alright we’re doing heroics” and I’m like “I have no idea what to do and I’m going to make these 9 other people spread out across the world fail because I didn’t look at this picture on how to, where to stand” you know? [*laughter*, yeah]

Jake: So part of preparing is doing research, part of it is the team learning to, for everyone to synchronize and do the right things together [yeah] yeah, how long does that usually take to happen? Or does it just vary?

Jeff: It varies, it varies on, quite a few different things. Um, when we were first doing the normal version of this, the bosses in the newest raid, we died on the first time, maybe 7 or 8 times, cause we all knew what to do from watching videos of people who have already done it or looking up the strategy guide, and stuff like that, and if you didn’t, there’s always one person’s always just like “okay, here’s what we do” and they’ll kind of explain it, um, but then you know, once we finally did that, we’re like “yeah that was awesome” but we know it’s the first boss of the normal version of the raid [uh huh] so we’re not too pumped about it, we’re like kind of expecting to be successful on that, but then the next time, on the second boss, so this is the first night that we can do this raid, we get to the second boss and one of our healers disconnects and we’re like “well I

guess we'll just do this anyways to see some of these mechanics in action" and then we ended up beating it [wow] with 9 people on the first night, and that was pretty exciting, because no one was expecting to do that [right] the first pull of the boss with a healer missing, so we were like "oh, that was interesting, cool!" So everyone was really excited about that, so the first boss who's technically supposed to be easier took us nine times to do and the second boss who's supposed to be harder we were missing a person and we did it on the first time [yeah] so, it really varies. [uh huh] And then, you know, as thing, different mechanics happen and different things happen you'll find that like one person struggles with one thing, and you do what you can to help that person out [mhmm] whether it's having them do it a different way, where maybe like, "oh, you won't be able to attack the boss if you stand over here but then again, you won't get hit by that tornado" [mhmm] so, yeah, you try to figure stuff out to have the whole team work together a little bit better, or have one person change up one thing, so you can succeed.

Jake: yeah, so a lot of collaborative problem solving

Jeff: Yeah, but we're at the point now where everybody knows what to do, for most of the fights that we're doing, most of these boss fights and stuff, that, that's not really an issue anymore. It's like, everybody knows what to do, but then maybe somebody will mess up and and it kills everybody in the whole group and it's just like "hey don't screw up anymore"

Jake: So what does messing, what would messing up be, what would that look like?

Jeff: Just something, when you do something that you're not supposed to do you could really screw over the nine other people that you are playing with. Just an example of that, like the first boss, when you're doing him on heroic, there's one boss in the middle and you're attacking him, and once you get him down to zero life, he's still alive, but he explodes into these drops of water, and you have to kill these drops of water or heal them depending on what they are, as they go back towards the middle, and once they get to the middle, the boss reforms, and then you do it again. When you're doing the heroic version of that, there are these other things that he summons, I don't even know what they're called, but all I know is that if I attack them too soon, to kill them, they all come running over to me, because the tank was supposed to attack them first, and hold them, because, you know, he's the tank, these things can beat on him and nothing happens, but if I attack them first, they come over to me and they kill me super fast. And if they kill me, they go to someone else, and they kill them, if they kill them, they go to somebody else and then everybody dies [so it sets off a chain reaction] yeah, I'm sure you'll see that happen later [*laughter*] um, but if you do it the right way—well that's the thing, if you do it too soon, that happens, if you end up doing it too late, you're going to end up dying because the more you attack the boss during that phase the more damage you take, because you're supposed to switch to these other little guys, but if you switch to them too soon they attack you, if you switch to them too late, then you die from the boss, so it's very important to do it at the right time, or, just not

attack the boss, but then you're wasting time. I mean, when you're doing, when you're in these fights, and your damage is calculated as DPS—damage per second—so if you stop attacking for 10 seconds, you just missed out on doing 3 million damage to the boss, and there have been times where everybody in the whole group dies and the boss has 50 thousand life left out of, you know, 500 millions

Jake: So if someone would have closed that margin, then that would have been the difference between winning and losing.

Jeff: Yeah that's why I said before "go stand over here so you don't get hit by that tornado, but when that tornado is gone, you can run back over" because if you get hit by the tornado and die, you can't run back.

Jake: Right. So it sounds like a lot of timing, a lot of precision, [yeah] in terms of when you're attacking, when you're not attacking, and other elements, but

Jeff: Yeah, it's a lot of little things like that impact more than just yourself [yeah]

Jake: So, I'm just getting this picture, it sounds like when you're successful, it's when you are really functioning as a well oiled machine [yes] everyone's doing what they should, when they should [yeah] and everything's flowing smoothly, and part of the challenge is figuring out what that has to be—

Jeff: And people have been replaced in the group for not doing that. Um, there was one person that we replaced—well there's actually two good examples—we replaced this one person in the group because, we all have headsets and microphones and everybody communicates, um I generally don't say too much because there's nothing for me to say that's beneficial that the raid leader isn't already going to say if it needs to be said, so I really don't talk a lot. But there was one person who just would not shut up, and she's trying to be funny, and she's, girls in video games—I don't want to make sexist generalizations— but sometimes girls in video games are like "I'm a girl playing a video game! Everybody look at me!" And the one girl from Wales and the grandma are not like that at all, but this girl was very much like that, and we were just like, "you are really annoying, and you make it miserable to be here, for these nine other people, we're going to replace you with somebody else" [yeah] So we replaced that person with somebody else. And then we replaced the person who came in. There were a couple of times that he just didn't show up, and we're relying on people to be there, you know? There're counting on me being there tonight, so we're relying on these people that have gotta be here, and there were like three times in a row where he just didn't show up. And he would have said like—cause when I was working all the time I was like "I'm not going to be here for the next three or four weeks" and they were like "yeah okay thanks for letting me know" and I'm still in the group.

And this guy didn't show up for three days in a row and they were like "you're out" you know, you need to let us know so we can make arrangements with somebody else to show up because you need ten people to do this. So he was just, he was good at what he needed to do, but he didn't show up three times in a row, and they were like "alright, well, there's not going to be a fourth time so, sorry—but if you would have let us know it would have been fine." [yeah] So then the people that we have in there now are a lot better at that. [yeah...um] So that's kind of fine tuning that machine, that well oiled machine.

Jake: Yeah, and it sounds like familiarity with each other is obviously really helpful.

Jeff: Yeah, and then like I said, a lot of these people, I won't talk to them in their character name, I'll use their real name. I've never met the guy from Wales, but if I'm like "hey Dave, do this" you know [yeah] so it's, but then some of the other people only go by their character names, like I pretty much only go by my character name, nobody ever calls me Jeff, I mean they have, but it's pretty much just my character name. But then some of the other people, like one guy, his character's name is "Broster" and everyone just calls him "Bro", you know, I don't know what his real name is. [yeah] Everyone just calls him Bro, but then the other guy, everybody calls him Matt, calls the other guy Dave, calls the other girl Jodi, so

Jake: So are a lot of these people played with since, roughly since you got into it, or

Jeff: No, not at all, um, three of the people that are in the group, when I used to play with a different group before, the one grandma that's in the group, she played in that group, and then that group kind of fell apart because the guy who was the raid leader was trying to change things around, trying to take it from a 10-person raid to a 25 person raid, and then it just kind of fell apart, and so she went with this other group, and I stayed with the group that was kind of falling apart. But once that group totally fell apart I talked to the raid leader Dave, and I was like "hey I want to be in your group instead" and he was like "well we have ten people and it's working out, so, sorry" [yeah] but then as soon as they were having problems with somebody that they removed from the group, they're like, "okay, if you still want to be in our group, we have an opening now and we know you're good—, so you can just start playing with us, we don't want to talk to anyone else about it, you can just come and join our group" and I was like "okay, that's cool" um and then I've been playing with those people ever since

Jake: And how long has that been?

Jeff: Probably since, April, something like that. I've been playing with that group, since then. But I mean, we were all in the same guild so even if I wasn't playing with them during their raids, they were still like "hey we're doing this scenario, we're doing this dungeon—who wants to come?" I would play with them then [okay] so we would just chat about whatever

Jake: So the two groups you were in, the first group you were in that fell apart and this group were part of the same guild? [yeah] So the guild was a much larger

Jeff: The guild is like a big group, there's actually like—a lot of guilds that run a certain way, there's one main group and maybe one, like, off group, something like that. The way that our guild runs is that there's so many people in it that there's one main group that does really well, then there's my group that does decently well, then there's like two or three other groups that don't do as well as we do. And that's just cause they have a hard time finding steady people (yeah)

Jake: So I asked you about something satisfying that happened, so I kinda got a picture of that, what's, what's, an unsatisfying session, like when things aren't...

Jeff: The, the times that are the worst—that's an easy question to answer—because the times that are the worst are when we are trying to do different stuff, the more complicated stuff, the heroic bosses, and then somebody starts to get frustrated, and then it turns into people just blaming other people for losing, like “Why'd you do that it was all your fault!!”—like whoa, chill out, when it gets like that. And when it gets like that early in the game, early in the raid, everybody gets real quiet—it's like when you're with a couple and they start to fight [yeah *laughter*] and it's like ooooo and it turns into that, and it's very awkward. And then you have these two people that start fighting and then instead of having a third wheel you have a 3rd, 4th, 5th, 10th wheel, you know? *laughter*

Jake: So yeah, you're kind of feeling the tension

Jeff: It's very, it's very unpleasant then, I mean nobody wants to be there anymore. and you can tell too because he get's frustrated because nobody's doing their job and then he gets frustrated and then it gets awkward and then everybody starts to do worse [yeah] so it makes it extremely unpleasant

Jake: hm, but people hang in there?

Jeff: yeah, people hang in there. Sometimes if it's really bad it's like “let's just call it, we're done, see ya later” [uh-huh] and then everybody comes back and they are like “sorry I was being a bastard” [haha yeah] you know? They know. That's the worst [yeah]. the best is when everybody works together and it's a well oiled machine and is a team and does what they came to do and the worst is when it falls apart. Then it, you know, personal attacks start happening, like “If you weren't so stupid standing in that fire and killing yourself”—it's like “whoa, sorry..just chill” [*laughter*] It's kind of awkward [yeah]

Jake: so when things do go really well, um, what does it feel like? Like what is the feeling?

Jeff: it's a, it's exciting. A lot of the things that we've been doing recently, it's become very easy to do those complicated things. So it's just like "alright, cool we did it" you know, and it's moderately satisfying (mhhh) um, but then when you get really close to doing something you haven't done before and you're about to kill a boss—I find it to be pretty exciting. I mean, sometimes when we do it you'll hear some of the people start screaming over the microphone, like "yeah! awesome! yeah!" and I'm just like "yesssss" [both laugh]

Jake: So the, so the size of the challenge and the degree of the excitement are related

Jeff: Yeah, yeah it's a big impact on it. If you're trying to do something easy and you do it, it's like "cool", I would be disappointed if I didn't do it [mhhh] But then when you do something that you either weren't expecting to do, which could be anything from, just for example, in the last raid, from the last um, from 5.3, it's called "Throne of Thunder" and there's this one part where you walk across this bridge and this bridge has um, there's wind blowing across this bridge, so if you stand still it's going to push you off the side, but then there's also things that are walking on the bridge too and if you go underneath those things they're gonna knock you off [okay] so you have to maneuver around um, not die, but then as a priest in the game one of my abilities is call "Leap of Faith" where you select a character and I hit the button for leap of faith and it pulls them to right where I'm standing, so if, for example, if we're on that bridge and I'm standing in a safe spot and I notice that somebody's about to get knocked off or blown off I won't use that ability right away because I can't use that ability for two minutes after I use it, but if they get hit, I'll hit that button and I'll already have them selected or whatever and I'll hit that button and I'll pull them back right to where I was standing where it's safe, even though they were inevitably on their way to death, because there was no way they could save themselves. [right] you know? So that's always really fun to do. And then people, some of the people, record the video of the raids, and everytime that happens they're like "ah, that was so cool!" [*laughter*] So that's always really fun [yeah] That's always really fun to do, because no one's expecting that to happen, they're like "aw crap I died!" and then [suddenly they're] bring them back to life, they're like "that was so epic" [*laughter*] I'm like "I guess so." But that's, that's always exciting to do. [yeah] Um but, so the things that weren't expecting, things like that, are always fun, and then the things that are challenging which you overcome, that's what's exciting.

Jake: So the unexpected, that's an example of an unexpected thing

Jeff: Yeah, I mean it's nothing, I mean if that person would have fallen off the edge it would have wasted 30 seconds of time for them to come back in, or for us to resurrect or whatever. [right] But, just doing it, and doing something like that, that's funny to watch happen, cause you're like "aw, no, she fell off...no she didn't fall off!!"

Jake: Haha, yeah, it sounds like it's the surprise and the, and yeah, the, that makes it really satisfying

Jeff: yeah, so that's always fun. [yup] There's not a lot of surprises, not too many surprises [hm] cause you always know what you're getting into.

Jake: Cause it sounds like you research ahead of time?

Jeff: yeah for like the boss fights and stuff

Jake: so it's not generally going to be like "What's behind this door?" [yeah] because that's not really the point

Jeff: No. But the only, there is, there are random, once you kill a boss and you're gonna get the loot from it so you can get better gear and stuff like that, it's always exciting to see what drops, because you want to get the better gear to make your player better, which in turn makes everything else easier, or then so you can progress into the harder stuff, [uh huh] you know, so that's exciting, that few seconds of anticipation between "yeah the boss is dead!" "Whatdoweget whatdoweget whatdoweget whatdoweget" [*laughter*] you know, especially if you need something specific. Like the first boss that we're going to do tonight, there's something very specific that I need to get off that boss, and I've seen it a couple times, but I didn't win it, because it's a group, you know, everyone can roll on it if they need it [uh huh] If it drops tonight I'll be excited because it's a pretty big upgrade for me.

Jake: Yeah, so it's, so it works that people can opt to roll for whatever drops and [yeah] and then it randomizes it [yeah] okay

Jeff: It randomizes it, or in the case where it randomizes it and someone else got it, and I was like "that's an enormous upgrade for me" he's like "okay, take it." He's like, "it's a mild upgrade for me—I have this that I can use, but you have, you know, this other old item from the last expansion, you know, this is going to definitely help the group more if you take this so here you go" and stuff like that. And then also in the game too, my character is an enchanter, so anytime anybody gets a new piece of gear, I just do it for them for free, but then I also use that as a way to make money in the game on the auction house or whatever [mhmm] Like I said I have 100,000 gold on my character which I guess we'll talk about later, but, it's, I don't care about that really so [the amount of gold you have?] huh? [the amount of gold you don't care about?] yeah I just want enough to buy things I need to buy, which would be things like, you know, different enchantments that I can't make, or the gems I need to put into the gear to make it more powerful. Um but at the same time there's also gemcrafters that are in the guild where I'm like "hey I don't have any money, and I need this" and they're like "here you go" [yeah] you know, it's stuff like that, because they do the same thing I do and they use it to make money on the

auction house, but at the same time they'll do whatever they can do to benefit their group. [right] you know? So that's pretty fun [cool]

Jake: Is it time for you to log in? I haven't been looking.

Jeff: Yeah, is it 7:30?

Jake: Yeah, it's 7:30

Jeff: sure, I'll log on. I always log in this way through Curse Client—this manages addons, so I always see if there's any new addons. I'll update this one. Not that one cause im not even using it. and then play. And then also Mumble, which is the voice chat program. here I'll unplug the headset but leave the microphone plugged in.

(can hear guild talking over voice chat)

Jake: [57:10]: Do you want to start telling me about your character?

Jeff: Sure what do you want to know?

Jake: Just, whatever's important I guess

Jeff: Um, My character is a shadow priest, priests have multiple roles, they can be healers or deal damage, and a shadow priest deals damage. I'm not a very good healer. Um, so I deal damage and, my item level I think is 562, which is decent, I think the highest you can have right now, like if you did all heroics and got the best of the best gear you'd be like 580 or something like that, so 562 is not too bad, and that's pretty much the cutoff point that I can't get any better gear upgrades by killing any of the normal bosses [okay] so that's why he, someone just said "what heroics are we doing tonight" cause you can kind of pick and choose which you do heroic and which you do normal, because some are a lot harder than others. So the first boss we'll do heroic, and he also drops the biggest item upgrade I can get, so I'm really hoping that happens.

I'm an enchanter and a tailor—you have professions in the game—so I'm and enchanter and tailor so I can make certain item upgrades with enchanting and then I can craft certain items, and also make different kinds of upgrades with tailoring skill, um, that's just a different way to be useful to your group and to make money at the auction house.

Jake: And how long have you been playing this character?

Jeff: Umm, I don't know....since...I probably made the character when I was living in Queens. My first character was a hunter, then I made a warrior, and then I made the priest. And I have other characters too but, the priest is pretty much the only one I ever play.

Jake: So why did you settle on the priest, like compared to the other options?

Jeff: Uh, every character has a different style to it, and that's why I did the hunter first, and it was decent, I did the warrior and I didn't really like doing the melee damage [yeah] and I know I didn't want to be a healer, so I tried being a tank with the warrior a little bit but I really didn't like that too much so I made another ranged DPS, something different than a hunter, so I made a caster—someone that uses magic instead of a bow—and just the way that works is just a little different, you know it's different for every character. There's a certain rotation or priority list that you can stick to to use different abilities to deal damage and stuff like that [mhmm] um, I just liked the priest, I'm sure there's other good ones

Jake: So what about the priest's style and the priest's that just suit you?

Jeff: Uh, I really like the Leap of Faith ability—the one that allows me to grab people, because it's fun to save people at the last second, and it's also fun that when everybody dies and you're running back to a boss and somebody's ahead of you you can pull them back to right in front of you and pass them up [haha oh yeah] and they're like “you're such an asshole” and it's just funny to do sometimes. [yeah] so, that's, there are other casters and there are other roles I could play and I'm sure some of them are good, but our group needs the benefits that a priest can give. [mhmm] And when the next expansion comes out, you actually automatically get a level 90 of any class that you want, so I was like “do you want me to do something else besides priest?” and he's like “no, priest is good” and I'm like “okay” cause I'll do something different, I can learn it, I'd like to learn something different, that's why I have a bunch of different characters, but I don't play them as much just because, multiple reasons I guess, one would be that I'm used to playing a priest and I know what to do. And another one is I have spent more time on the priest, so the gear is better, and I can do, I'm in this group to do these things [yeah] and I can do it on my priest and I can't do the other characters

Jake: so you've kind of specialized both in terms of the materials you've gathered and your expertise

Jeff: yeah, that and the benefit I can provide too, because when you're in a group you get different buffs from different classes and stuff and the priest provides two buffs that none of the other classes will provide [mhmm] but then again there are, you know if you had a warlock or something like that, they would provide different buffs that the priest can't provide, so, different things like that [yeah] so this is just what works for us. [yeah] and I wouldn't mind switching to another class, cause I know if I did switch to another class, they would help me get the gear that I needed to be comparable to where they are now, because that would benefit everybody.

Jake: Right. So do you have a sense of um, I mean you're mostly talked about your character's role functionally, like do you have a sense of your character as like, I don't know, um, having, some kind of significance as a character in the more traditional sense like as having a personality or as having [no] some kind of story or

Jeff: I don't see it like that, and I've never really seen it like that in games, even back in the Two Towers text based game, that was very archy role-playing, very *snaps* a lot of stuff like that um...see these are all the characters *shows screen displaying all of his characters* that's the priest, that's the monk, hunter, death knight, warrior, paladin, with a really big umbrella, warlock, another priest that I made as like a bank character, cause I have a bunch of junk, and then a mage that I made and never played past level 2 [okay] so, there's that.

Jake: So to you, the character, it's pretty much a functional sort of concept

Jeff: Yeah, I don't see it as a role-playing thing, if I'm playing, I'm not a priest, I'm just me playing hah, you know?

Jake: And is that sort of how your whole group plays?

Jeff: Pretty much. Yeah there's not anyone who does too much role-playing in that sense [mhmm] there are RP servers that are like that and you go on there and that's what all those people do [yeah]

Jake: It seems like that's less common—is that true?

Jeff: It's less common [yeah] yeah. But people who get into it, they really get into it. I mean if you're and dwarf, and you're going up to the bar in the game and opening up the vendor menu and buying a drink and drinking it and walking around drunk because that is just what a dwarf would do [right] you know? [yeah] But that's not how I... *paying attention to the game* ...but yeah like I said that's how some people play but nobody in the group plays like that [yeah] But they do generalizations sometimes, because like hunters are the characters that new people make, which I didn't know, my first character was a hunter, it just happened to be like that [yeah] you know, so, people are always like "hunters don't know what they're doing cause they all suck" [uh huh] you know, which is funny cause hunters are good classes to play [yeah] all classes are decent classes to play if you know how to play them right [yeah] so, it's just generalizations, it's, I find it just comical, it's just funny, and stuff like that

Jake: So if you want to just describe to me what you're doing

Jeff: Yeah, um, actually, let's do this. there's, to get the valor...um....you can get valor from doing, from killing the raid bosses which we'll do tonight, so I'm not going to do those scenarios or anything like that...we're supposed to start in 15 minutes anyway, [mhmm] but right now I'm

gonna get, so there's these "lesser charm of good fortune" and you get 50 "lesser charm of good fortune" you can turn it in through a quest to get three "war-forged seals" and the "war forged seals" are the tokens that you can use to get a bonus roll after you kill a boss, and you can get three at a time, and I have one right now, [okay] but I have 49 of these lesser charms, so I'm just gonna go get one of these real quick [yeah] actually I could probably do it here, I don't know why I'm going all the way out to the other place, but I already started.

Jake: so those are all currencies?

Jeff: These are all the different currencies, yeah. I mean, this *pointing to different currencies on the screen* is basically pointless now, this is pointless for where I am in the game, these are pretty much pointless, this is still very useful, um these are for cooking things, cause you can get like food buffs in the game so you can use these tokens to get different ingredients to make different food to benefit the group, or just yourself. This is from the last expansion.

Jake: So everything kind of moves forward as they update and old things become obsolete and there's new [yeah] yeah

Jeff: That's why, cause the max you can have, total maximum for justice points is 4,000. There's nothing I can buy that is going to benefit me for justice points [mhmm] The only thing that's left for me to buy with justice points would be heirloom gear, which is gear that you can spend justice points on and you can send to low-level characters and as that character levels up, that gear becomes more powerful [hm] so you can give that gear to a level one character and they can use it all the way to level 90.

Jake: hm, so that's a way you can pass on from like a higher character to a lower character [yeah] some of your achievement.... So where are you going right now?

Jeff: I'm going to the place that um, the place that came out in 5.4 that's called Timeless Isle, [uh huh] um, there's a boss that you can fight here, and then there's different things to kill all throughout here [okay]

Jake: So you're specifically going to that area because you'll get the most benefit

Jeff: yeah I'll get that charm, I'll get one of those charms real easy from there, and then actually after looking at the map [1:09:12] I finished this quest last week, where the reward is 200 valor, so I can go turn those in and get 200 valor points now [okay] So I can do that, I may not use it for anything. the only thing I can use it for is item upgrades and here's my items, um, without going into too much detail, because I don't really even care about that, nothing that isn't already upgraded isn't worth upgrading...except for maybe this, I should probably upgrade that...um...but it's better for me to hold onto it, and then when I do get, if I do get that new thing, which will

replace this, if I do get that new thing from the first boss we kill, I'll upgrade that, cause that will be a much better benefit than upgrading this one.

Jake: Yeah. So you have like, what is that like, 16 or 18 pieces of gear? *both count items on screen* [18, yeah]

Jake: So how much time do you have to spend travelling, like in the game, like you just did?

Jeff: Um, It's pretty annoying, you can get to certain places faster, like that, how long was that? A minute something, maybe [yeah, probably] Um, that's average, from going from one specific place to another, cause there's different, like you can take that flight path. It would have been quicker if I would have flown myself, but then I would have to be controlling it [oh, so you were just, it was automatic] it was just automatic, yeah [okay] Uh, so, we can go over here and kill this boss. I can't really get anything from it, cause I already have better things, or I already have the same things that it will give me...return that quest and get that 200 valor.

Jake: So right now there's lots of players attacking this thing? And you could join in?

Jeff: I am, this is a world raid boss, all you gotta do is attack it and you tag it, and when you tag it it'll, you can loot it [mhmm] um, if it was an elite you would need to be in the same group, but you don't need to be in the same group to do this.

Jake: So is this boss being here, is this something that would always be around for you to come and [yeah] do if you wanted to?

Jeff: There's these other things in the corners here, one of those will always be in the middle for you to kill [okay]. Doing it on Tuesday is the best time to do it though because that's when the server resets, cause you can only collect loot off of it once a week. See I just killed it and I got a Celestial Treasure Box, which probably just contains gold. Yup. 29 gold, not a lot. I can use one of my bonus rolls on it, but like i said there's nothing really useful I can get from it so I'll just pass. here's all the quests that i have in my book, I don't know what half of them are. But what I'm going to do now is...oh, this, what I'm riding right now is called a Grand Expedition Yak [haha] It's 108,000 gold to buy it, which is a lot, but the reason I bought it is it actually has a use because you can buy and sell things right from it [oh wow] and reforge the gear you have..."oh, I don't need spirit, haste is more beneficial to me so I can reforge out of spirit and into haste" [hm] so, well not on that one cause it already has haste, but that's what that's for. So before we go into the boss fight, one of the healers, he plays one spec, he's a discipline priest most of the time, but then when he goes in to fight one boss it's better to be a holy priest for that, so he'll reforge all of his gear to be more suited towards a holy priest. so they just sent out the group invites. But I want to go kill the boss that's up here first. And I also want to get one more of those tokens. [mhmm] I can get a token from this things if I can kill it. At least someone else is attacking this,

which is good, cause i don't think I would be able to kill it myself. They're dead—any charms? No. that's weird.

Jake: So you just know though experience what things may drop what, or?

Jeff: Well, elites, if it says elite, they have a chance of dropping a charm. So there's a lot of elites on this island. [okay, so it's sort of by category] yeah....Um, but they're going to start soon, they're gonna start in 5 minutes, actually they're probably getting ready to start right now, they're waiting on one other person to join —B.K.—the shaman. It's funny sometimes you'll this of, "who's missing?" and you'll see everybody's name there and you're like, "it's the same 10 people all the time and I cannot think of who's not here right now!" [*laughter*] *long pause* there should be this big fire looking guy up here...burn, they're already killing him so I need to get there fast so I don't have to wait to kill him [so they're up there now?] People are up there now, um, yeah so it's going to be quick because it's already at 30% health. Wow, laggy, too many people here. *long pause* 18%

Jake: So do you have too many interactions people not in your immediate group?

Jeff: Sometimes people in the guild, but for how much I play, I don't even talk to them too much. [right] Um, but I am in one of the better raiding groups in the guild, so sometimes people will ask me questions about the class, or whatever: "hey I made a shadow priest, I can't really do good DPS, what am I doing wrong" you know, something like that. And I'll answer whatever questions they have. But besides that not a whole lot. *jumps off a cliff* Because I'm a priest I can make myself levitate [oh cool] and not die from jumping. [*laughter* awesome] I still need to get one more charm so I need to find an elite to kill, and it's Tuesday, which means that lots of people are running around killing elites, so chances are it will pop up right in front of me because it will just have respawned. There's some elites up here but they're too hard to kill. this one has 8.3 million health. I have 540,000.

Jake: So it seems like, I have kind of gotten the sense that, it seems like the driving force of playing is this project of improving your character [mhmm] more so than getting through a linear story [yeah] or getting to some point in the game—is that true?

Jeff: Yes, because, a lot of other games that i've played, Grand Theft Auto for example, there comes a point in the game where you're pretty much done, [mhmm] you know. But games like Skyrim too, you really don't get done, they kind of have so much stuff to them that you can do something different from them all the time and benefit from it, and you know what I mean by benefit by now, um, and that's what this is too, cause you can keep doing different stuff.

Jake: yeah, so part, one of the questions I was going to ask is what's kept you engaged in WoW for so long?

Jeff: The fact that you can't win, is good. By the time you've got to a point where you can't get anything else, the new expansion is coming out, and then things are just totally changing [yeah]*long pause* no, no lesser charm, usually you get one off each elite you kill. So they're probably all in the instance already and they're going to be like "why aren't you here?" *long pause* *turns up volume on chat* I don't know if you're easily offended, but things can get pretty intense in these chats. [not really haha]

Jake: I'm curious, I'm curious about the, more generally just being sort of, really in a long term friendships I guess [yeah] with people that you never really meet. What's different about it?

Jeff: It's um, everybody's nice, everybody's fun or funny, or just, interesting, and [uh huh] I just think it's fun. If I was playing with my friends, we'd be having the exact same conversations that these people are having, you know. *long pause*I just want one more of those stupid charms before they start ragging on me. *long pause**explains to group that he is trying to get one more token**long pause*[*goes to bathroom*]

Jake: Did you get the thing?

Jeff: No, I realized that the last two I killed, I couldn't even loot them because I'm in a raid group [oh] and the loot rolls and raid groups, you can't do that.

Jake: So it seems like there's just a lot to know, there's just so much information

Jeff: There is, there's a lot, um, you kinda get it all pretty quickly for raids and stuff like that*long pause*that was leap of faith [both laugh]

Jake: so you can just kind of jerk people around for fun

Jeff: Here's the food buff guy, he sells noodles, I can only hold 5 at a time, oh I already have 5.

Jake: So you guys are just gathering and getting ready?

Jeff: Nah, they're waiting for me hahah, cause I wasn't there [oh you're not] I'm there now, but I'm eating the food, so you eat for 10 seconds you get a food buff. And then I will buy the 5th one back because you can only hold 5 at a time.[Mhmm.] And then I will put out my buff that I provide to everybody, and then I'll make sure all of the skills I want to use for this fight are in effect, which they are now.

Jake: So this guy in the background is who you're going to fight?

Jeff: Yeah, this guy. *long pause* So that was my fault I wasn't paying attention. I kept attacking this guy, and dispelled myself but not quick enough. But I died because like I said if you don't switch off the boss you take more damage, which is exactly what just happened. Now I

have to run over here and kill all these little drop things. And I did a bad job because I tried to kill too many when i could have just focused on a few and actually killed them*long pause*Can't stand in these puddles. *long pause* incoming adds, so those are the things that you gotta to switch too, so I'm clicking on the green ones, because that means that he already has them attacking him, oh god, I died again, that thing really hurts. And it starts—this is a big circle—and so it starts somewhere, and it happened to start right where I was standing

Jake: So it sounds like, you guys already know what the approach is, you're just trying to get the rhythm of doing it right

Jeff: Right. *some discussion with group about what happened* *turning down volume on chat, up on game*

Jeff: [1:36:56] so before the fight starts you do these things, certain things to give you a good burst of damage at the beginning, this button is bound to drink a potion, and attack with that, attack with that, attack with that, attack with this, and this and this [uh huh] so you do all these things [so you have a routine of attacks that you] yeah [cycle through] *long pause* so this is a really decent one, and i did 328,000 damage per second and I was in 5th place

Jake: out of your group?

Jeff: yeah

Jake: so that's tracked somewhere?

Jeff: over here *pointing to add on indicating groups DPS* um, there's different ways to track that, this add on right now is looking at all the damage that I'm seeing everybody do, um, another way to track is to actually look at the game data, but that takes more computer resources to calculate that, so this is a lighter weight version of that. The raid leader, he runs something on his computer that actually looks at the game data, so it's a much more accurate representation of that information. And then that gets posted online and all these different analytical things...to see how long... these things here are DOTs, damage over time, so they just sit on there and just tick for different amounts of damage every so often [uh huh]

Jake: So there's a lot of data that gets crunched after this that

Jeff: Yeah, I mean you can go on and look at it, I have no idea how to read any of it. I just know how to look at one specific thing, and that's how did I do compared to every other person of my class. And if I'm over 50%, I'm happy [yeah haha] I mean I've been over 100% before they track like the top 250 in the world or whatever, and I've been in that, but it's usually only lasted a day until somebody else knocked me out, you know [yeah]

Jake: So your guild leader is really the one who does the most with the data, what kind of stuff ?

Jeff: He just tracks it and puts it up there, and then if we start to do really bad for some reason he'll go and look at it and just be like "healers aren't doing what they need to do, either we need to have one of the other people switch into their healing specs, or get a new healer in the group, and it's usually that first one, we have, generally have two people healing, depending on the fight, but we can have a third if we need to, so it's usually that option.

Jake: So how the composition of the group—is that a pretty set thing then? Like, you mentioned having a tank, healers

Jeff: Yeah, we have multiple tanks, multiple healers, and multiple DPS damage dealers

Jake: So out of a group of 10, you usually have 2 healers

Jeff: Usually have 2 or 3 healers, 1 or 2 tanks, depending on the fight, mostly 2, um, and the rest are DPS.

Jake: And is that something that's kind of like what your group does, or is that pretty standard?

Jeff: It's pretty standard, sometimes depending on the class you can have one tank for a fight or two healers instead of three but generally these fights are made to have two tanks, two or three healers, and the rest DPS. That's how they're tuned. [okay] one of the bosses in heroic requires three tanks, which is like pretty unique, they've never done that before. [huh] and some of them, once you start to do really good, like, if we were going to do this on normal, we could use one tank, one healer, and the rest DPS, and it would go super fast [yeah] but we wouldn't do that, because we would have a higher chance of failing, so we would rather just take an extra 15 seconds, cause that's all it really takes, and do it in a way that we know we would win. [right] Let's see if I can not die this time *raid attempt begins* *long pause*

Jeff: So I can walk right into that now, because I used this ability called Dispersion, where it reduces the damage I take by 90%, so what would normally kill me does barely anything. *long pause* See every time he comes back up he stays up for less. [yeah] That's one of the reasons it gets easier. But see some of them need to be healed and some of them need to be attacked , it's always more difficult to heal them because there's only two healers, and there's like 5 DPS.

boss killed

Jeff: I'll go and open that chest and see if I got that thing I need...nope, so I need my bonus roll...I don't need any of that. So there's this, -Item Name- which is actually really good for me, but I already have the heroic war-forged version which is the best version you can get of it [okay] So I don't need that. *long pause* So we need to get to the next phase and get up there

and hit that button that pops up, but that guy was running up faster than me, so just for fun I grabbed him and pulled him back, which turned him around to face me, so he kept running forward but actually it was backward [haha] and then I hit the button instead of him

Jake: so that really is your favorite ability haha. So how do you, you have so many different abilities at the bottom, like how, so it seems like you really just have a high degree of awareness of what button is what, and you can really fluidly cycle through them all

Jeff: Yeah, that's pretty much it. Most of them, are situational, a lot of people, if you go online and look, their most common thing is one, their next most common thing is two, their next most common thing is three, but I have mine a little differently, because I can reach farther out than maybe some other people can *shows how far hand can reach* [right] and still stay on key. Like some people can only reach one through five but I have no problem going out to seven, you know [yeah] so i have eight bound to this, I have zero bound to this *indicating mouse buttons* and I have nine, I just hit nine because it's the Leap of Faith, which is very situational at best, [right] so it's not like I'm using it all the time, um, so I can leave one hand on the mouse so I can click on things, bosses, and then, you know, have 1,2,3,4,5,6,7. And then other stuff, I mean none of these are even used a whole lot.

Jake: So pretty much what you would use frequently is key-bound

Jeff: uh huh, it's pretty much 1-5, 7, and 6 is an area of effect, so if i cast 6 it sends out these circles, and then those circles deal damage to everybody, so I don't really, I used it when all those other guys were out there, but I really don't use it too much.

Jake: So you guys are just working your way through a series of bosses basically

Jeff: yeah, *shows a list of the bosses on the raid* here's all the bosses, it's just the dungeon general (?) and this is next, "Fallen Protectors" [uh huh] that's what these ones are. And the story behind these is that they were protectors and that have become corrupted and you're supposed to kill them.

Jake: So the way you're describing it it sounds like what they are isn't that important to you [not to me, it is to some people] It sounds like it's kind of incidental

Jeff: there's the lore behind everything, like it all makes sense in the major, like big grand scheme of things [uh huh] but I don't care about it

Jake: so for you it's about what the challenge involves

Jeff: Yeah. *listens to raid leader on voice chat* He's probably going to tell us the order of who passes this things—this thing comes down and attaches to you, and you have to pass it off to somebody else *long pause* *group discusses the order*

We've never killed this one before. *he shows me the list of bosses, which ones they have killed on heroic, mentions that you don't have to do them in order but there is a 10 min cooldown to switch* here's the things that could drop off of this boss that I could use

Jake: and do you know what the odds are for it to drop?

Jeff: I don't but I could look it up

Jake: So right now is everyone just getting prepared?

Jeff: Well they were just talking about what needs to happen is like “this person on blue throws it to that person on green throws it to that person on blue, so I'm supposed to be on blue and I get it last, unless I get it first.

Jeff: typing focus slash focus like that sets one of these things as my focus, which pops up here, and I have it selected right now and if I were to cast a spell it would go onto this person, but I have it key-bound where if I hit U it targets my focus, so I could easily switch to something else and hit U and switch back to the main boss

J So it lets you always have something that you can switch back easily to

Jeff: I'm just riding on this person's back, because she just turned into a thing

Jake: Haha, right now it just seems like people are antsy to start and are just running around and stuff

Jeff: yeah

Jake: So you guys will just continue to play different bosses until like 11 when you finish [yeah] and that's just kind of

Jeff: There's really two routes to go, one is just spend as much time as we, go to 11 o'clock and just do all heroics, and if we don't kill this person by 11 o'clock we don't [yeah] or, do it until 9:45, switch it to normal, kill it on normal, go to the next boss and either do heroic or normal [yeah] *long pause*

raid begins

One of the bad things about being a priest is that you don't really have any spells that you can cast when you're moving so you can really only move slowly, or don't move which is never really a good option. I mean sometimes it can be the best option, but oftentimes you are required to move [yeah]

Jake: So what's the trade-off for that disadvantage?

Jeff: Um, I don't know, it's probably something but I don't know exactly what it would be. But because of that I probably do more damage than somebody who can cast and move at the same time. [mhmm] *long pause* That's the farthest we have ever got, we never did that (referring to successfully passing the thing around) You just pretty much have to do that whole thing we just did 2 times, and the fight's over.

Jake: So passing around that thing, is it doing damage to you while you have it?

Jeff: yeah, a lot, and it does more the longer it is sitting on you

Jake: So it's a matter of timing to distribute it

Jeff: Yeah that's why I only had it for a certain amount of time because I used that one spell that allows me to take 90% less damage [yeah] I use that while it's on me. So this is the first part, these things come down.

Jake: Is everyone dying? [yeah] I guess that's what the red ...haha yeah. So what happened, you guys lost the...

Jeff: Um, I don't know why everybody started dying. I know one person—we all had to stack up inside that bubble in the middle, cause if you're outside of that you take a lot of damage and if you're inside you don't take a whole lot [yeah] so we stack inside it, when we stack inside it, that one guy starts to spin around and that hurts you, and the other guys start to put poison down and that hurts you, but neither of them hurt you that much while you're in the bubble, but as soon as that bubble went away, we were all standing in a bunch of poison, so that's what killed me and the other girl [yeah]

Jake: It seems like awareness and timing are the two skills that are like the most

Jeff: I always say that being able to adapt is good too because, you all stack in the middle and that's a great plan, cause it needs to happen, but don't stack in the middle if there's poison under you, so it's like, figure out what's going on, you have to know what's happening so you can do what you need to do . [yeah] *long pause*

Jake: So are you just completely uninterested in the story? Like, do you know what things mean to the story at all? Or is it sort of important that it's there even though you're not that into it or is it

Jeff: No, I don't care, I had no idea what that was even about

Jake: so it's really just the mechanics of the game that matter to you?

Jeff: yeah

Jake: So right now are you guys waiting for certain things to cooldown or are you just strategizing

Jeff: Yeah, we're also taking a break now because it's 9 o'clock. So, we were waiting, if he was ready we probably would have pulled it one more time before the break, but he's, his gear is changed up, the secondary things, like reforging it, *indicates something on his screen* he's changing all that stuff on his gear for one reason or another, and since that's one of the things that my mount does, I just kind of sit it on this so he can use it

Jake: Oh cool. Well it's probably a good time for us to stop since the break is happening now, it's been a little over 2 hours. Is there anything else that I didn't ask that you think is important about why you play World of Warcraft and what you enjoy about it

Jeff: No, I mean other than that when I was in New York I was just being here all the time and this was just a way for me to hang out with other people because we really didn't know too many people and if we were going to go out in New York it was going to cost a hundred bucks, you know [yeah] to go out and get a couple beers or something like that, so, that's one of the things

Jake: Mhmm. All right. *turns recorder off*

Appendix 6: Shawn's Transcript

Jake: So really the first thing I want to know is just a little more about you

Shawn: About me? Um *laughter*

Jake: Just a little about your life in general and then we can get into how gaming fits into the overall picture

Shawn: okay, um , well I started playing video games when I was like 3 or 4 years old, and my parents always yelled at me and told me to stop playing, but I never listened to them, and then I ended up making money for it.

Jake: How do you make money for it?

Shawn: Well, I was originally going to study computer science and that was the path that my life was on, and then I decided that this might not be so much for me, and I, I do a lot of writing, I have always kind of been a writer, so I started studying journalism and then I got kind of frustrated with some of the people in that program, but I was writing for the school newspaper as their video game critic [hm] and then I've just kind of continued on from there. Went to, well, through a combination of classes I ended up graduating with a degree in film and then kicked around for several years, just kind of writing off to the side, just some pro bono stuff for some friends' websites and stuff, and then about two and a half years ago I got a gig doing video game reviews professionally for a YouTube channel, as well as, you know, some of the backend stuff—recording footage, digital editing [yeah] So that's what I do these days and a large number of the games I play are for work, and so I'm usually kept kinda busy by it, but every once in a while a game will pass me by where I go “okay, I've already played this, and I've already covered it, but this is for fun, this is for me now” and FFXIV is one of those games that has hit that point.

Jake: So what's the story of how, um, well, let me save that question for a second—so just other stuff about your life, you've been in Pittsburgh for a while?

Shawn: Yeah I started at college in 2002 and then just graduated in '06 and just never left. Made a lot of friends around here and just kind of felt comfortable here.

Jake: And you live here by yourself?

Shawn: Yup

Jake: And are you in a relationship, single?

Shawn: I am single presently.

Jake: Any other important stuff going on in your life that's going on that you would want to mention?

Shawn: Uh, well usually existential crises, frustrations with politics on every level, but other than that, nah, it's just kinda...I, I, as much as I don't want to paint myself as normal [*laughter*] I can't really think of any way that I am abnormal in any of those regards either, except that I play videogames for money

Jake: Okay. And how old are you?

Shawn: 29.

Jake: 29, okay. So what's the story of how FF14, how you started playing that?

Shawn: Well, I got a copy from work, and adjudicated it—14 itself should probably be explained a little bit further [okay] um, it was originally released in 2010—it was 2010 or 2011—and it was bad. I mean, they were calling it one of the worst MMO launchers ever, the game was just not good. [*laughter*] Most of the production staff were sacked and over the course of the next several years, they actually tried to bring new talent in, rebuild it, redo the mechanics, and eventually, I believe it was in November of last year, they actually destroyed the entire game. They just took it completely offline and they actually played it up in-game as “hey they world's ending” and then the world actually ended. And now it came back. They re-released it in August and people who played the first one played the new one and they go “this is 20 times better it's everything that it wanted to be, and it actually pulls it off.” So, I had a number of friends who played it in the original bad version—actually friends from FF11 which was the previous FF MMO—and admittedly they told me to stay away from it, and I was kind of intrigued by the notion of “okay, it's rising like a phoenix from the ashes” and sure enough, it had me hooked.

Jake: Yeah. So was that when you started playing it for the first time, when it got relaunched or were you already playing it?

Shawn: I did not play the original incarnation of it.

Jake: Okay, so when did you say that was? Uh, November?

Shawn: Uh, the relaunch, uh, the relaunch, it came back up late August of this year.

Jake: Okay, so it's pretty recent that you've got, that it's been relaunched. [mhmm] And have there been MMOs that you have played prior to this? You said you played 11...

Shawn: I played 11 for...Jesus...about 9 years [okay] I mean I played the paint off that thing

Jake: So that was like, your game for a long time [mhm] Yeah. So that must have come out...

Shawn: Uh, I started playing it—I believe it originally launched in 2002 in Japan. I started playing it in February 2004 and I've been playing it on and off ever since then.

Jake: Yeah, so that's like even before World of Warcraft. And so that was, you didn't really play other ones because that you're?

Shawn: That was the big one. [that was your big one] I touched with a couple like Korean free to play stuff, but none of it really had...admittedly my friends—that was a big part of it. When I started playing 11 I was attending college, my girlfriend at the time actually bought a copy for me and was like “we should play this”

Jake: hm, so is that how it started? That's how you started playing, was

Shawn: was a group of folks down in the cafeteria area of college, and we're talking about it and uh, as you can tell by a cursory glance around here I've got pretty much every Final Fantasy, usually several copies of most of them, and I'm like “okay, that sounds intriguing enough”

Jake: So you were already into the FF series?

Shawn: Long before then.

Jake: And 11 was the first MMO they made?

Shawn: Yeah, there's a lot of folks who really don't consider..they fact that it was an MMO put a lot of people off, because they're like “I don't want to have to pay a subscription fee and have to deal with other people just to enjoy a FF game”

Jake: Yeah it was a shift in the

Shawn: Yeah, and when they said 14's gonna be another MMO there were heads rolling at that time as well. But, I like it enough.

Jake: So back then, you said there was that was that group of friends—did the idea just come up?

Shawn: Well, they were my friends in college, and we were all gamers ourselves and they had mentioned it and a couple folks had picked up copies and it was a lot of “hey look at this”, “hey cool” and it just kind of spread throughout the whole friend group.

Jake: So you guys were all playing it together.

Shawn: Mhm. I'm probably one of the last ones from that group to—I shouldn't really say that cause I'm not currently playing it , even though I could log on right now and play because

they're doing a "hey, if you've ever owned an account you can come back and play for the rest of the year because it's Christmas" or something. But, people came and went and I found enough there to keep me interested for years and years and way too many years. Way too many years.

Jake: Yeah. So were you playing that up until you started 14? Or was there some down time or did it go on and off?

Shawn: I went on and off with it, usually depending on whether I wanted to pay for it that month, since it's still subscription based. [mhm] I believe I was playing it at the time when 14 released, and I was like "okay, I gotta switch over to this now" [right] and really it's just been a matter of not having enough time for both of them

Jake: Yeah. So you would ideally, in an ideal world

Shawn: In an ideal world where I could sever my corpus callosum [*laughter*] and be able to concentrate on them simultaneously, I totally would. [yeah]

Jake: So that was a big decision to switch, because you're still drawn to 11

Shawn: It is, on the other hand I have been playing 11 for 9 years, and I had most of the classes at maximum level. 11 and 14 operate a little differently than most MMO in that you can switch classes at any time without having to create a new character for it, but just by, you know in 14 literally changing your weapon, that changes your entire class and changes your level.

Jake: Hm, so it's not like you're committing to one path and then you're stuck with it.

Shawn: Nope.

Jake: So, when you play how long do you play for?

Shawn: Well, it largely depends on my workload. If I'm handed you know, like Tales of Xillia which just came down the pipe at work and I've been working on that pretty heavily, but most of the time I'll come home, turn it on, and while I'm doing other stuff, wait for duty finder to say "hey, a raid's just popped up" or you know, work on some stuff with friends who live a couple timezones over so it's usually much later for me.

Jake: So what would your, on average, a week.

Shawn: In an average week, counting weekends, probably 40 hours easy.

Jake: So it just fits into a lot of different times throughout a typical week. [mhmm] And it sounds like there isn't a set schedule that you play by. You're more going off when a raid starts or when you happen to have the time—is that accurate?

Shawn: That's pretty much the size of it. I mean I'll turn it on and I'll have a couple things working in the background or I'll like macro some things to craft or I'll do something kind of passively while I'm watching something on my laptop or writing something else.

Jake: So you really don't have to be 100% focused, [nope] you can actually have it on, be doing some useful things in-game, but also be doing some useful things out of game [mhmm] Okay...So you play a lot of games, you even have this gem of the past *gestures to arcade game*

Shawn: I'd say it's my baby except that machine is actually older than I am [*laughter*] The cabinet at least. That was originally a 1983 Blue Panel Donkey Kong that was converted in 1986 to a Versus Duck Hunt—that's when they added the gun attachment. Then in 1988 to a Playchoice 10. It's that kind of history that I really like in games.

Jake: Yeah. So you clearly have a broad involvement in different types of games, but it sounds like the FF MMOs are the ones that grab you the most [mhmm] Do you have a sense of what it is about your engagement in those games that kind of rises above other games...or how do you see it?

Shawn: One of the things that, especially this re-release of 14 has done is, it's kind of taken itself a little less seriously. I mean there's still definitely a plot, there's still definitely drama, and large scale events that are happening. But at the same time, when you get an achievement in the archer class, you get an achievement called "just talk about shafts" [*laughter*] there's a kind of referentialness to it, that I find entertaining from a humor perspective mostly because it's exactly the kind of stuff that's running through my head as well [mhmm] and they've tried to smash together as many Final Fantasy references as possible. Like you can go through a cut scene and go "okay that's from FF8, they're referencing something from FF7, that's a recurring theme, that's a recurring theme" and they've just tied it up into an MMO that I enjoy playing [hm] I suppose it's my familiarity with everything else in the series and how they're taking another look at it.

Jake: So that's kind of a stylistic way that you like it, it speaks to your aesthetics and your background...

Shawn: It's...lots of...I mean you can play it on one level and just enjoy it for what it is, but it's one of those things where the more you know about the series the more you get it, the more you get the in jokes, the more you get the references, and it feels a little more intimate to you

Jake: Yeah, so it feels like it speaks to you, in that it's what you know about. So, take me through a typical session...or is there such a thing?

Shawn: Really depends on what my priorities are at the time. I mean, right now just getting experience points and leveling up jobs is a little devalued because there's a patch coming out in a couple days that is going to redo how experience points are gained on certain classes. So I'm like "you know, I'm going to hang back and work on my gathering and my crafting levels at this time" while still doing some dungeons, getting stuff to get shinier pieces of armor. [mhm] Um, part of it is hurry up and wait, log on, get some stuff done, and then just wait. Cause there's a duty finder system where you can say "okay I'm this class, I'm looking for a raid in one of these two dungeons" and then it just kind of compiles you ad hoc, adds you to a queue, and so it's a little more passive in that respect, but while that's going on you can still run around and turn some stuff in or go pickax against some rocks if you care too

Jake: Yeah, so there's various different activities that you could be doing to further your cause

Shawn: mmmm, usually it will involve me trying to get into one of these dungeons and queuing up for one of them and then depending on whether or not I have the attention that I can pay to it, doing something in game or out of game.

Jake: So what are the main in game—like say you're waiting for a dungeon—what are the main kind of in-game activities, I mean you mentioned a few, but, so you said working on crafting working on gathering, um, trying to get, I don't know, what are the

Shawn: Um, well at the moment I have done more or less all of the plot I have to do, so I can't really hit new chunks of the story unless you know I'm hitting them through the different quests for each of the jobs, which require leveling up those jobs and like I said experience is bit devalued at this point because we're waiting for this new patch to happen so part of it might be running around trying to assemble materials, trying to do daily turn-ins and stuff [okay] and I feel like this is kind of a weird time to be talking about it because we're kind of at that point—you know how MMOs kind of cycle: okay here's a new patch and a whole lot of content, and then roll roll roll, you get through that, "oh here's a whole bunch of new content," and we are right at the [right at the end] bottom of one of those cycles where we're about to get whole lot more stuff [so it's kind of a lull] yeah, right now it's in a bit of a lull [mhhh]

Jake: So when the new patch comes out, what do you what do you expect, what will happen?

Shawn: Well, they're adding a bunch of stuff like for free companies—basically the equivalent of player-run guilds to be able to purchase housing in these new areas that they're building up and that's going to take a pile of money, so there will probably be plenty of playing the markets trying to make a buck through any ways possible and being able to afford a decent homestead out there

Jake: So what are the possible ways to try to make money?

Shawn: Um, through gathering, through crafting, through pounding down old equipment into a kind of derivative product called “materia”, that then, depending on whether or not you are lucky enough it might turn into something when you convert it that can sell a whole lot more, because it can be used to augment other gear [okay]

Jake: So in kind of a concrete sense, what activities does that involve, to accomplish that?

Shawn: Um, buy armor, wear it while running through dungeons, and once it reaches a certain point of “you’ve worn this enough” you take it off and then *crunch noise* I always picture an aluminum can getting crushed, and then bam, you’re left with this jewel that might give a couple bonus points to a stat or change some other parameter

Jake: So how does wearing it make it get to the point where you can do that?

Shawn: Uh, it just passively occurs as you wear it

Jake: Okay, so it’s gaining some kind of property or something?

Shawn: Yeah it’s called spirit bond and once it hits 100%

Jake: Okay, uh huh, so that would, once you got that materia, then you would sell that in the market place? Or to an in-game vendor?

Shawn: It goes onto the market place, and then someone who needs that particular materia, they buy it off the market boards, and then there’s a 5% cut either way, just to remove some money from the economy cause there’s always, one of those basic MMO things you need a couple money sinks or ways to pull money out of the economy because through NPC quests and whatnot it’s always entering the economy.

Jake: Hm, I guess that makes sense. So when you end up with an item you would list it for a certain price for other players to buy?

Shawn: yeah

Jake: Okay, um. So it sounds like there is an array of different activities that you would do to gain resources I guess in a general sense, for your character?

Shawn: Some of the resources, I believe, they’re gonna require for certain pieces of furniture will require high level drops off of certain monsters. Admittedly until the patch drops there’s a whole lot that we don’t know, so it’s largely speculation where we’re going “okay, how should I prepare for this, how should I prepare for this, aw man what are we gonna do” and so everyone’s kind of theory-crafting

Jake: so everyone wants to come out of the gate ready to buy and take advantage of whatever the new content is, but you don't actually know how to do that

Shawn: Exactly, so a whole lot of it might be people trying to speak authoritatively when, you know, they're really just blowing wind out their backside, some of it might be, I'm going to diversify as much as possible so that whatever happens I'll be prepared

Jake: So it sounds like you're pretty excited about the new house thing, the new, that sounds

Shawn: Yeah, the new content, they're adding a PvP area, they're adding new dungeons, they're adding more difficult versions of dungeons that are already there

Jake: So just, I'm just choosing this arbitrarily, but the I mean the new ability to buy real estate—what, what does that, how does that excite you, when you imagine that possibility, why be excited about that?

Shawn: Well, given that I have a number of crafts leveled to this point there's part of it that's like “okay I can have this place that's for me and show the fruits of labor as it were, since it's basically guild-based, then my friends can come in and see “hey Shawn pounded through enough levels of carpentry to make that thing, isn't that shiny” [huh uh huh] And there's going to be, you know, “my house is nicer than your house” That kind of stuff is always going to be there. [hm]

Jake: So it's a way to display what you've accomplished in the game [mhmm]. So, we're talking about the activities that you're doing to, um, you know gain resources, make your character stronger, sounds like, through skills and other equipment

Shawn: Well, pretty much everything comes through either actually just getting levels in the job or equipment.

Jake: okay, so when you're going through all of these activities, you are increasing one thing or another?

Shawn: Mhmm, bigger numbers are better, that's pretty much the driving force behind every RPG ever made, bigger numbers are better

Jake: Could you more about that, like what that's about?

Shawn: That kind of, sense of increase, and, I suppose there's part of...if it was a bigger thing amongst more people maybe certain games would sell better than others rather than being kind of niche titles but, especially to me there's a certain kind of pride in figuring out how to make big numbers get bigger as efficiently as possible [hm] kind of a “okay I'm going to analyze the logic

behind this, I'm going to read up on some of the mechanics, basically spading it out" I presume you're familiar with the four suits of MMO players?

Jake: Yeah I have read that article

Shawn: uh, I actually used that same article in a piece I wrote about Pokemon once, and I think it really applies to what I'm doing, you know, okay, figure out of all the spade mechanics, you the intricacies of the systems, and then use that as a means by which to get to an endpoint.

Jake: So, you said that there's a, I can't remember the exact wording, but a sense of the increase, that there's some [mhmm] it sounds like there's a feeling that goes along with that?

Shawn: Well, part of it is bigger numbers are bigger, part of it is that for each different job, whether it's, you know, archer, or blacksmith, or everything, there's a story line and a progression of plot, that goes along with you know just gaining levels and making big numbers bigger. So part of it is, okay I want to see the next event that's going to happen here, and a couple of them really sink in, I can think of a couple particularly interesting bits of plot that paid off at certain points and I'll show those later.

Jake: Yeah, is there an example that you could talk about or is it better just to show?

Shawn: Um, I'm trying to think of what's the best example that I could throw down in that situation, um...I'll save it for when I can you know, roll a cut scene and show you in more detail.

Jake: Sounds good. So, in FF14, do those kind of cut scenes and stuff happen as your character levels up or is it more that you are at a certain point in the game world

Shawn: Um, well there's a main plot quest that goes from, it's basically meant to carry along your first job from level one to the current maximum which is level 50. And then, alongside that there's going to be a series of guild quests, where you're coming up through the steps of this particular martial guild, and then they're having you do things and there's a story line associated with that, and then you hit a point where you kind of level up to a prestige class and then there's a story lines that goes along with all of those (okay)

Jake: So the idea is there's always a next thing to do

Shawn: There's always a next thing to do [yeah, and waiting for that because the new patch is about to come out] pushing it off on, on you know the actual go out and pick up a sword and hit things classes, where, you know, you get the uh crafting and the gathering classes function in exactly the same way, where you have a plot for each particular guild and you're just progressing through that as well. [mhm] It really treats the two as pretty much equivalent, in that, the way

they progress, the way they level up is all based on the same basic experience points curve [all the different classes] all the different classes, whether it's fisher or culinarian

Jake: So choosing one or the other doesn't drastically change what the experience is?

Shawn: No, it's just that particular story line is going to be significantly different

Jake: Okay, so the curve is similar but the storyline is unique [mhmm] okay. Um, so you've kind of identified these two different threads. There's this sort of like "making big numbers bigger" [mhmm] and then there's sort of um, getting to experience the unfolding story.

Shawn: Yup, and they're tied together in that these quests unlock every five levels and "okay that was really interesting, that's going to drive me a little bit right after seeing that chunk of plot and making me want to get to the next point.

Jake: Yeah. So you obviously know a lot about a lot of different games. You kind of said that making big numbers bigger sort of common to all RPGs. [it's kind of an underlying factor in all of them] So, so what, so so, given that you could get that out of virtually any game that you picked up, what is it do you think that works for you about the Final Fantasys—like 11 and 14—that really, um, sort of does that in a way that you in particular have gravitated towards.

Shawn: Um, *5 sec pause* admittedly if I had to choose a reason why I'm playing FF 14 and not 7 or not 9 right now, it's because I've already played through those, and 14 has stuff I haven't seen yet.

Jake: So what about other titles, like Rift or WoW, or, I mean all those games would involve you know, the possibility of increasing

Shawn: I think it comes back to, you know, that sense of intimacy that I mentioned before. I mean, I've played a little bit of actual real time strategy Warcraft so I know a couple of the things, but if I tried playing WoW I'd just go "what the heck is any of this supposed to be?" [okay] Whereas, with 11 and 14 I can go "okay those are chocobos, I can see how this is working out, there's going to be a guy named Cid right...good" and it's hitting all of these touchstones and making me feel at home in it.

Jake: Okay, so it really feels like the world you've chosen for yourself. [mhmm] So um...what would happen in a satisfying, what would a session that you finish and feel good about [fires the dopamine receptor?] yeah, what would that game session consist of.

Shawn: Um, it's kind of one of the paradoxes where everything went wrong and then we managed to salvage something, or nothing went wrong and we went through as efficiently as possible. You know, depending on what job I'm on at the time it might involve you know getting

a drop from a particular dungeon, getting a piece of loot that I have been trying to get forever, um, but at least right now I have kind of hit a point where these kind of end game armor sets, I've been doing the last several dungeons so many times just to drum up tokens for you know, really high level upgrades to where all of the stuff that drop I'm like "okay, I actually have 3 of those now" [haha]. I actually made a chart of what drops I needed on which classes and what item levels I currently have on them, and it's almost completely full right now.

Jake: *looking at chart* So 60 means you have it all?

Shawn: No, 60 is an item level piece in that particular slot, uh head, body, hand, belt, legs, feet, necklace, earrings, wrist...RG, what the heck...oh ring [haha] I'm a little bit dense because I haven't really had to think about this lately [uh uh] but yeah my main job to the point where this stuff is completely beneath me and I am just stockpiling it for when I level those jobs in the future and even at this point, its, okay, I'm not even going to have to bother anymore

Jake: So at this point, if they never released another patch, you kind of wouldn't have much more to do in the game

Shawn: Uh, I'd have plenty more to do, it would basically be going over the same stuff with the other set of jobs, or, other set of combat jobs [uh huh]

Jake: Um, so when you are going, so you're going through the same dungeons and raids, um, kind of over and over, hoping that, knowing that there's a certain chance that you'll get those remaining drops

Shawn: Well, and because it's also giving me basically a currency that I can spend on really high level items for my class, so, that's the primary thing, the secondary thing is that there are these drops that are happening and no one's really paying attention to them, so I might as well slurp up a couple of those that I still need. Just so that when I hit level 50 with another job in the future I'll be able to go "Okay, I already have this set of armor that's going to be better than what I would have been wearing at that time" [mhmm]

Jake: so um, so you mentioned that a satisfying gaming session would be getting one of those drops, cause that would be like

Shawn: Well, not so much those drops, but if I'm on a lower level class and doing a lower level dungeon there might still be some pieces that I wanted from a lower level. And I say that knowing that I have been running through the same dungeon on my archer for time after time after time, mostly for the experience points out of it, which is one thing they're going to increase in the next patch, they're going to make dungeons like that give more experience points and be

more worth my time, as opposed to me just running over and over this thing trying to get the last couple pieces of armor in one particular set.

Jake: Yeah, so is it like, what is the experience of going through the same dungeon again and again?

Shawn: Um, part of it is *sigh* well, a lot of it is getting to look at these other people, I mean they, the way the duty finder works is, it's not always going to be folks from your server, if there's a particular deficiency in one job they might pull people from other servers, basically in your cluster, so it might be people you've never seen before and will never see again but you're just trying to get through it, usually as efficiently as possible. [okay] and, sometimes that's not going to be the case because someone's going to be new to the instance, sometimes you know, you might get someone who really knows their stuff, and then there's kind of that factor of, do I feel like going through teaching this person, or are we going to get through the entire thing in 15 minutes and I can you know, spend the next 15 minutes making fried rice, I dunno [yeah haha] so it's basically

Jake: So the dungeon stays the same [the dungeon stays the same] but the people change

Shawn: The dungeon stays the same but the people change and I sit there wondering how efficient it's going to be

Jake: Hm, so efficiency is is one of the important things you're looking at

Shawn: To me at least, because some of these dungeons you might have to run it 10 times per week to cap out at this particular currency that I've been collecting, so you know, if you have an option between 150 minutes or 300 minutes [yeah] you're going to save yourself the 2 and a half hours, right?, [right] exactly.

Jake: *pause 3 sec* So this is just an out of curiosity question, but how many different currencies are there?

Shawn: Um, right now there's just Gil, which is just the straight up money, there's uh, philosophy tombstones..or tomestones—I always look at it and go “did they misspell that?” No, it's actually tomestones. And mythology tomestones, and you're usually the, the last 2 are the ones that you're farming the high levels dungeons for, and you get them both at the same time, it's just that they're spent of two different classes of gear. Uh, the philosophy stones are for the level 70 item set and the mythology stones are for the level 90 set [okay]

Jake: So what would an unsatisfying session consist of?

Shawn: People doing everything wrong, and my wanting to throttle them. Admittedly, my playing on PS3 helps my temper a little bit, because sometimes I might be a little more caustic than I prefer to comport myself, [uh huh] but if I actually want to tell them off, I have to type everything in using a D-pad and buttons, and I just don't want to take that time [uh huh] so I keep my mouth shut. Um, or, any kind of server or connectivity issues because that's really one of my big frustrations with online gaming as a whole. I don't know if it's just because Comcast is frequently kind of wonky for me here, but if there's some kind of big lag spikes that are happening, especially if it's an exciting point in the game, then I'm sitting here going "okay, this is, we're gonna end up failing this through no one's fault, and that's going to make me feel awful" [mhmm] why didn't I just play something locally instead?"

Jake: So you play on PS3 [yeah] so do you use a headset or do you—how do you communicate with each other?

Shawn: Um, well I don't really communicate with that much of anyone [okay] except, you know, the people in my guild, and they're the ones who are actually worth typing things out—I mean I could get like a USB wireless keyboard but the upgrade that it would pose to my current play is minuscule at best, I don't feel like spending the money.

Jake: Huh, so it really must limit your ability to type things to each other, if you're doing it through [ahm]...I've never done that so I'm not sure, but it seems like it would take a long time to type anything.

Shawn: It does, which is why I usually save my words for if there's something I actually really want to say, or you know, if it's one of my friends, who needs a response from me, they get a response, even if it takes me longer to type it.

Jake: Yeah, so it sounds like, it seems like when you do the dungeons and raids you have to cooperate, right? I mean it sound like it's not

Shawn: We do, but the end game stuff really is so familiar to everyone right now, that you know where you are, and it's just kind of taken as read.

Jake: So as long as everyone knows there stuff [mhmm] you actually don't really need to say much to each other to pull things off

Shawn: Exactly. And even then, if there's something I need to say, I'll say it, but there isn't really that much you need to say, if everyone's...again we're in that lull where everyone is so familiar with this material that more often than not you're just going to get in and go

Jake: Yeah. So you mentioned that you're part of a guild. [mhmm] um, what does that concretely consist of, like what are the interactions that happen between you and guild, guild-members.

Shawn: Uh, well, it's probably very different for me than it is for most other people in that a couple of the folks that I know from FF11, and that's the reason that I am on this server that I'm on, because they were there. Back when the game was originally released connectivity issues all over the place, you couldn't get into one of the North American servers with 5 gallons of vegetable oil and a sledgehammer [haha] they were just so packed because they just woefully underestimated how many people were going to be trying the game, and they had major connection issues. So, I started my character on a Japanese server, [mm] which, you know, I understand enough Japanese to be able to communicate on that level. A couple of folks thought it was interesting from an anthropological perspective, and I had a couple friends who I would actually hook up the USB laptop I have over there and hack out in Romaji, because you can't actually type in Japanese Kana in this North American client, and that was kind of fun, kind of reminded me of FF11, because all the servers were integrated then, so you had, you know, in one party you might have a someone from France, Germany, Ireland, Japan, Australia.

Jake: So people wouldn't even have a language in common.

Shawn: People wouldn't even have a language in common. There are a couple ways that they got around that, like the auto-translate system, which now that I'm on a North American server no one ever has occasion to use, because everyone, pretty much everyone speaks English. But kind of as a hold-over from when they didn't have segregated servers and everyone was trying to communicate across multiple language barriers, they actually devised a system where you could type, um, say, "thank you" and then hit a button, and it would turn that "thank you" into an object in the text string that would resolve differently depending on what client was looking at it, I mean if [right, so it would be different for everyone] it would auto-translate

Jake: Yeah, interesting. So it seems like the game isn't really um, I mean it seems like there's a few barriers to a lot of communication, a lot of easy communication.

Shawn: Well back in 11, yes. In 14, not so much because it's a segregated server now, and everyone pretty much speaks English. [yeah] But, the folks that I keep company with are my friends, one of whom actually got me one of my first writing gigs, and her husband and their friends from Ontario, and his wife, and there—I think there's like 6 people who still play [yeah] it's really small and I've been considering leaving and getting into something bigger, but they're my friends and I don't want to leave them.

Jake: Right, so they're all people that you know in real life

Shawn: People that they know, and I actually tracked down one of them the last time I was in Chicago and got a burger with him [cool] and we shared a room when we went to E3 a couple years ago but that's pretty much been it.

Jake: Yeah, so they're at least connections that have formed through real life networks and [mhmm] um, so what, um, as, being in the same guild, what are the things that you do in relation to them as guild members that makes it a guild

Shawn: by and large I have been teaching them some of the endgame content and listening to them go on and on about their children of various ages [*laughter* So do they type that in through the controller, or do they have keyboards?] They might have PC versions, I'm not sure, but, there's also a PC client for the game that goes onto all of the same servers it's just a PC client. Kind of, again, a holdover from FF11, which I actually own for PC, XBOX360 and there was also a PS2 version, so all three of those machines you can use the same accounts and they'll all be on the same server talking to each other. [hm, okay]

Jake: I feel like I am kind of hung up on the typing on the controller thing...I'm just sort of amazed...can you like...by hung up I mean, how much can you really type to people while playing?

Shawn: Well it depends on how fast and heavy the action is. Generally speaking, if the flow of action is so consistent that I can't be bothered to type, then things are going so right, that I can't be bothered to type anything.

Jake: mm okay, so say things are at a lull, like you're not even really doing anything, like you're waiting for someone or whatever, would you be typing messages to someone?

Shawn: At that point I would probably be checking facebook.

Jake: okay, so you're not really, there's not a lot of casual back and forth going on

Shawn: No so much because, like I said, you might be with someone who's on a different server and you're not going to see them again, ever, or if it's someone for my own guild, who I'm trying to teach one of these end game instances too, that's the kind of situation where I'll plug in a USB keyboard so that I can just "okay, you need to be here, you need to be here, you need to follow me, I'm going to grab these MOBs, hit this thing, then come back"

Jake: Okay, so there are times when you would use a keyboard, in a special circumstance

Shawn: Rarely, but there are certainly circumstances where I find it useful. [okay] I mean there are certain circumstances where if I know I am going to be, you know, responsible for leading them through a dungeon, I'll actually set up a, the PS3 and a small TV here *indicated he means on the coffee table* , just so I don't have to work from across the room

Jake: mmmm, okay. Um, well, I'm just looking at the time and seeing if I want to ask you anything else before you actually get started [jump in]....Maybe I'll do that at the end, why don't we jump in [okay] and then um

Shawn: Okay, well I'm going to log in and then I'm gonna, stop to hit the can for a moment

Jake: Yeah, go for it

Shawn: Just got a secondary authenticator thing here *logs in, goes to bathroom, returns*

Jake: So you said you had multiple characters going, or was that in 11?

Shawn: Well you don't actually need multiple characters, because you can level every job on the same character. That second one there was uh, a friend of mine was "hey I want to see this" so I her make a character and play through the first couple levels.

Jake: Okay, so there's really no point making another character [nope] it's really just like you have a character that's more like your account, sort of?

Shawn: Uh, basically...you might make another one if there's stuff you really want to store, but that was mostly and 11 thing, you don't really have that, you have a lot more storage space now, so, there's really no point.

Jake: So your character...tell me about your character

Shawn: Uh, well, if you look past the fact that his name is on my Penguins sweater, it's basically the same name that I've had since FF11...XXXX, which is a callback to NBA JAM, which is itself is a callback to a Michael Jordan/Spike Lee Nike commercial [so you like references *laughter*] *laughter*, also considering that he's, most of the time in the dragoon class which involves carrying a big ass spear and jumping up and down on things, the name XXXX is kind of appropriate

Jake: So what is the name, I think I'm not quite hearing what the

Shawn: XXXX

Jake: oh, XXXX, I get it now, haha

Shawn: 9 years, it's still as goofy as it always was. Alright what should we do. Let's try queuing up for a dungeon [okay] what do you think—endgame dungeon or more middle-game?

Jake: Um, would a middle game be quicker?

Shawn: Um, probably not, end game would probably be fastest.

Jake: Then, I think, we might as well go for the efficiency right?

Shawn: Exactly [*laughter*] Let's do Wanderers, Andapor, and Howling Eye just to see if we can get into a Goroda (?) fight and you can hear some of the best music in the game [cool] So this is one of the main three cities, Gradania, um, here's a company chest which is just full of stuff that folks in the guild can stick in here and say "hey, use what you need, donate what you can" Um, there are a lot of cute little pets that end up getting stuck in here because you can only have one of them and tend to accumulate more than that. [mhmm] *long pause* Someone apparently names "IIIIIII IIIIIIIII" that's going to be hell to count. If you want to send a message to them, you have to get the correct number of I's and L's. Splendid. [maybe that's how they keep people from not talking to them.] Shsh, certainly considered it. The number of people who can't spell "XXXX" is kind of amazing. [haha]. But, this is the main market board system. A summoner there just annoying everyone by making lots of noise. All the various armors and weapons, and like I said, you can switch between jobs. Right now he's on dragoon, switch to bard just like that, switch to white mage just like that, switch to carpenter just like that [hm] *long pause* Um, well until the duty finder pops, let's see if there are any quests in here that I haven't done yet. Am I up to date on my botany quests? I am not. Let's go grab a quest.

Jake: So what kind of race is your character.

Shawn: Cat-boy. That's pretty much the size of it. There were cat-girls in FF11 and it was like, why aren't there cat-boys? [hahaha] A couple folks in my guild were kind of wondering, "when is that ever going to happen?" This is as much a nod to them as to anyone else. [what is?] uh, the fact that, in 11 I was one of the standard human race dudes and I'm like, okay I have ears now and you have to deal with it [haha]

Jake: So do you have a sense of your character having a personality or a story or is it just...

Shawn: Um, I mean, considering on one character you can literally do everything, it's...there's only so much being built up by every guild master in every city till you go "yeah, this is getting a little bit unrealistic." And it kind of loses the illusion a little bit

Jake: the illusion of what?

Shawn: The illusion of it being a, basically a mortal character

Jake: Okay, so it doesn't really feel like a single mortal existence

Shawn: Nah it feels...it's where the gaminess of it shows through I guess.

Jake: What is um, I think I know what you mean by gaminess, but can you explain what you mean so I know for sure?

Shawn: The artifice of it all. Alright, so this quest is going to yield me 90,000 experience points, a new hatchet, and some gear, which I can make better myself, so we're just going to go for the money. *reading from the screen* :A dear old friend of mine has found himself in a predicament, he's in dire need of a botanist's aid." What the hell kind of predicament would you need to be in where you would need to enlist the help of a botanist? [*laughter*] "It will fit in nicely with your training" Sure it will you lazy sack. [haha] "having a feast...need the freshest most fragrant Laurel leaves that you can find. Vegetation North East of Little Almigo." Okay, so, I could either just go over to the market board and buy 20 sprigs of Laurel, which would be the admittedly sane thing to do, or I could go and harvest it myself and I think that's what I am going to go and do [okay] First off, I am missing a pile of gear. This should be toad skins, that should be the XX of perception, we'll not worry about the rings for right now. This is a level 28 hatchet and I am currently level 37—I think I can do better. Mithril hatched it just outside my level range right now.

Jake: So these are items that you have in your inventory?

Shawn: No, these are items that I can craft. [you can craft, okay] And it looks like I have the stuff on hand to craft a steel hatchet, so I am going to go ahead and do that right now, so I switch to blacksmith, make a steel hatchet, navigate the weird little crafting mini-game.

Jake: What's the mini-game?

Shawn: In order to complete the synthesis you have to fill up the progress bar by using action that increase progress and decrease durability. If you want to make a high quality version of the item, you also have to increase the quality bar, which increases the probability of an HQ item, as indicated by the percentage underneath, but using those actions also decreases durability. You have to balance which of those takes priority and still finish crafting before the durability all goes away. But, it's a level 20-ish synthesis and I just hit level 50 on blacksmith, so it's going to be kind of silly easy.

Jake: Okay, so there's actually a game that's going to happen now

Shawn: Kind of, basically passively balancing out everything. That action gave me 382 quality at the cost of 10 durability. Now I can [so you're choosing different uh] yup, basically it's kind like how the hot bars in pretty much any other MMO would work, except in this case they're mapped to these 8 buttons and whether or not I'm holding L2 or R2 [okay] and you get 16 of these icons of these macros at a time, and then you've got 8 pallets of those you can use [mhmm] That should be enough, you need to cap out quality then it's just a matter of filling out progress...and I've made a pretty awesome steel hatchet. Which I can go back on to botanists, inventory, and equip it.

Jake: So I am kind of seeing what you mean by the artifice of it all, just change to blacksmith, make something, change to the botanist. So does that impede your enjoyment or is that just sort of preferred?

Shawn: On the one hand, coming from 11 where to change jobs you actually had to go to an inn or a certain place and could only change it there, it does lose a little bit of the, kind of sense of immersion, but on the other hand it is so much more convenient [mm] so much more convenient [yeah] Anyway, Little Almigo*long pause* That sounds like it's time to go fight somebody. That sounds like it will be time to go fight something very shortly. Somebody just made the duty finder ping. *long pause* So, vegetation North East.*long pause* Nothing to see here folks, I'm just a botanist! [haha] No need for any hostiles to jump up in my shit, I'm just looking for some plants. This is going to happen sooner than later.

Jake: So you're uh going to be getting into the dungeon soon?

Shawn: Yup, well, specifically it's a primal fight, it's not a full raid, it's just one confrontation with a boss [okay] and in this case, I am going to have to switch back to Dragoon, and into the event. [I guess they don't need a botanist?] Not in this case [haha] not in this case

Jake: So are some of the character classes more for just the gathering and crafting and that sort of part of the game and then some are the fighting part of the game?

Shawn: Well, they are only gathering and [exclusively] yeah, I mean, you can, if you're on goldsmith, you can pull out your little ornamental hammer and go out and whack things, but you won't actually get experience for it because it would be combat experience and you're a goldsmith [okay] Let's see if it works this time. There's always someone who has been waiting for this a little bit too long has just stepped out to go make themselves a sandwich and can't confirm the instance. Or was in exactly my situation and had to jump off into a different job. Someone's...okay, there's the part, 8 people against

Jake: So it looked like there were a few different categories of

Shawn: Yup, just the basic trinity

Jake: okay, up, and so that's tank, healer,

Shawn: and DPS [DPS] Some of the best music in the game. *plays air piano* I don't even know piano but I'm compelled to do that every time

Jake: So is this part of the plot that

Shawn: Um, this was a post-game, you have to fight her once during the plot and then you get a harder version. It looks like someone is new to main tanking the event. I'll be nice and bow because

Jake: How do you know someone is new to it?

Shawn: They were talking about it [oh] They said they were always off tanking and never main tanking. This is a fight where you need two tanks at a certain point.

Jake: So it's two tanks, two healers, and 4 DPS

Shawn: Yup. There we go, game on. *fight against raid boss begins* Or actually grab the MOB, please. *long pause*

Jake: So what are you needing to be aware of right now?

Shawn: A, the fact that the MOB is bouncing around all over the place and I'm taking a pile of damage, mostly unjustly, and I just died.

Jake: So is that cause the tank wasn't doing

Shawn: Yeah. Unless he is dodging a slipstream that MOB should not be moving at all. Then all of these additional things show up

Jake: So are you alive again?

Shawn: Nope. [no] I'm just moving the camera around [okay] Gonna need those stone pillars to protect you from her big old whompin' attack. And all of those little razor plume feather things that she's strewn around are trying to destroy it. Alright, we're back in this. So Dragoon has a bit of a more difficult job that some in order to get some of my attacks to have their full potential I have to be standing at certain points on the MOB whether it's too their side, to their flank, whatever. [uh uh] Like in this case, well first off, I am going to do a pile of damage to all of those little razor thingies and then use my area attacks as much as possible. Alright, so attack give me an attack bonus so long as I am standing behind her, one gives me an increased attack—it hits stronger if I'm standing behind her—and then enables another one of my attacks of also increasing her vulnerability to piercing attacks and that one also makes another one of my attacks give a damage over time effect [mmmm] And now I've got to stand behind one of these things, because...Bar just bit the dust because they didn't get out of the way in time.

Jake: So this is someone, you've obviously done this many times, so you kind of know what to expect when and

Shawn: Out of this fight, yes. *long pause* Eh, we're managing to salvage it a bit. *long pause* Big attack that hits everyone. Now we get a whole separate phase of the fight.

Jake: What's different in this phase?

Shawn: She's going to create those big tornado zone things, and I'm going to get bounced around them, because the tank didn't pull her to the right corner fast enough, and she die again [haha]. Now she's going to call two little sister things, one of them is going to have a green line attached to her, and that is the one we need to focus fire on. And I'm dead again. And the folks in the fight don't even know the correct strategy because they're hitting the wrong one.

Jake: So this would be an example of an inefficient fight?

Shawn: Yeah. The red one just makes Goroda hit harder, and that can be dealt with more readily because usually the tank fairly well geared and the healers can focus on him, and they're fine. In this case, they decided to ignore the green one which just restores Goroda's health and is a lot more difficult to deal with in the long run.

Jake: I'm just looking at the texts, and it seems like there is very little conversation about what to do.

Shawn: Oh yeah, also, the fights kind of intense

Jake: Right, there's not really an easy way to do it while the fight's going on

Shawn: Exactly, and, again, tank not nearly moving fast enough, managed to wipe most of us. *long pause* Well that time we barely did any damage because they weren't hitting the right sister which is that one.

Jake: Did you just put a mark on it or something?

Shawn: I did and then it went away heh

Jake: So everyone else can see that?

Shawn: I might not be able to type, but I can still get my point across most of the time.

Jake: So as this is going on, you're constantly trying to correctly position yourself for hitting your, getting your bonuses [constantly] along with avoiding

Shawn: Constantly, and why are the two tanks on top of each other? This is going to hurt bad.

Jake: Is almost everyone dead right now?

Shawn: Yup. I would just leave, but then there's a 15 minute abandonment timer before you can get into another dungeon and I don't feel like making you sit through that, [uh huh] so instead we're going to critique the rest of these folks. *long pause* Now we have a tone argument going on. Hey! Someone abandoned, which means, I don't get that penalty. *logs out of raid* So, that was kind of a [huhuhu] catastrophe

Jake: So when things go wrong, that's what it looks like. So out of like the, overall, how often would you be joining the, you know, finding a random group versus playing with people you know?

Shawn: Uh, since I am fairly higher level than most of the people I know, I think it's almost always going to be a random group.

Jake: Okay, so, it's just sort of rolling the dice [yup] who you end up with

Shawn: And again, it's one of things, I've considered leaving my guild and joining a more adept group of players, but they are my friends, and they have been for a long time so I don't really want to do that [yeah] So, were going to...this might take more time though. We'll try one on bard just to mix things up a bit. And in the mean time we'll get some of that...I don't know which it is now. One of these is the lavender or the lilac, or whatever the thing was.

Jake: Oh so that' actually, I see

Shawn: Yup that's the harvesting menu. [So] And it's always the hardest to find the first one of whatever you are looking for, but it give me an XP bonus at the same time. And there are abilities I can use to greatly increase my chances of getting items, but since I just switched jobs a couple of seconds ago, my gathering points need to rebuild a bit. [okay] Okay, that's Saffron. [So the question mark thing is something that you have not yet identified?] Something I have not yet identified, correct.

Jake: And the chances of you identifying it are based on your level and the gathering points and other factors?

Shawn: And the gear that you have on [uh huh] Like I said, it's always a lower percent chance for something you have never harvested before, but now that I've already found one, it's up to 91% for the thing that I'm looking for [so being able to successfully get it] Get specifically a high quality laurel with the symbol after it. And, my inventory is packed up, so I have to ditch this aloe. I actually want to find that HQ Laurel and set it to the hotbar just so that I can see how many I have at a time

Jake: Do you mind if I use your bathroom?

Shawn: Oh sure it's right over there.

Jake: How's the harvesting?

Shawn: Well I've got 5 of those Laurels that I need to collect. Now I just need another 15...14...13*long pause*There's kind of a sense of busy work about it but at the same time, you know if I'm watching something on the laptop, I might just have exactly this level of attention that I can give to it [hm] just running around to four points and avoiding the weird sentient cacti.

Jake: Hm, so you're just going around four different bushes?

Shawn: Yup *long pause*

Jake: So you said it has a sense of busy work, but that doesn't, um

Shawn: Well, there's something relaxing to it, knowing that I'm accomplishing a goal [yeah] in a manner of speaking. And I just leveled up, which gives me a nice fanfare.

Jake: So you said it gives you a sense of accomplishing a goal, but you could be watching something while you do this

Shawn: Mhmm, it's one of the reasons, I've never really been into comic books, it's, I like to multi-task. If you weren't here I would almost certainly have something on Hulu or something [uh huh] just to share my attention of the moments of downtime I get.

Jake: So this wouldn't be, on its own, entertaining enough [um] like doing something like this, gathering.

Shawn: No I suppose not. I wouldn't really do it as an entertainment value, I do it more as a means to an end.

Jake: Mhmm, do you think

Shawn: Now if I were

Jake: Go ahead

Shawn: I mean, there's certainly a level of engagement that I might be taking away from, you know anything that I was trying to watch, if something got really intense or if I ended up going into a dungeon, I would be just completely ignoring whatever else I was doing and focusing completely on that, that's where the entertainment comes in, but for the lulls it's nice being able to patch something else in there as well

Jake: Yeah. What do you think would be different if the game just didn't include this sort of stuff? Like it just had the more, I don't know, the content that requires your full attention?

Shawn: Um, well I don't know if I'd really miss it. [4 sec pause] You know I think I actually would miss it a little bit if only because I can't really think of any other means by which to acquire these things, that would be, you know, anything other than just throwing money at it. At least here you can go out and harvest things for yourself if you know you're going to be cooking a whole lot of, say, acorn cookies, you can go out and get the acorns yourself, which will probably, in the long run, take more time and effort than just buying them, but at the same time it gives you a little bit more engagement, [uh huh] even if it is running around to the same four bushes [uh huh]

Jake: So there would be something missing, it sounds like

Shawn: I suppose, yeah

Jake: I'm curious about that, because it does seem like there's something important about having activities that aren't actually designed to really be fun, [mmhmm] I guess, I'm not

Shawn: Well, for something that's actually putting resources into the economy, you can't just have them all just fall from the sky at once, it would wreak havoc on the economy [mhmm] In this case if you actually make people *noise indicating the onset of a confrontation sounds* hello?...hmm, looks like a fight's broken out here [between?] Uh, this pack of brigands just kind of appeared out of nowhere. I think I'm beat some of them up. Unfortunately, since I just changed classes, it's going to take me a while to get my abilities back up, but in the meantime I'll still get my licks in. *long pause* And again, the references just never stop in this game. This particular fight, since it's against the "Corpse Brigade" is fittingly named the "Corpse Bride."*long pause*

Jake: So why did you choose to be your warrior class instead of your dragoon?

T; Well, as you can see from the data over there by the timer, this is a level 27 fight, and mostly, these particular fights are best for gaining experience points, and since my dragoon is already at maximum level, he can't gain experience points, I could have done it on my bard, but then I would have some durability issues, so I grabbed the next best things. Also, the warrior can actually dish out some decent damage, whereas if I would have switched on to my paladin, it would take a whole lot longer to kill any particular MOB. [mhmm] More durable though.

Jake: So durability issues mean that you would have a greater chance of dying?

Shawn: Yeah [okay] In this case against this level MOB, the warrior can get by just using his own abilities to heal himself, whereas—oh hello, you're not dead yet, let me fix that—whereas bard would have to dance around for seemingly ever just to get anything done.

Jake: They're still trying to get their money, huh *in response to dialogue onscreen*

Shawn: eh, I'll get a couple more MOBs. A lot of it is just cycling through the same three or four attacks, but that's because not nearly near the end of this particular job. *long pause* I'm kind of outclassing them by a fair sight, mostly because they're level 24 and I'm level 30, and with all the crafting I've been doing I've managed to assemble a pretty darn spiffy set of armor [uh huh]

Jake: So this is, you're not really in any danger here of losing, it's just a matter of taking the time to kill everyone

Shawn: Yup. And specifically there's a number that you have to kill in order to finish this particular event, as shown the progress bar underneath the timer there. *finished event* And, eight and a half thousand experience points for a job that I'll get to eventually.

Jake: So before that started you were saying the economy wouldn't really make sense if there wasn't some sort of

Shawn: If there wasn't some sort of busy work preventing, you know, just floods of resources coming into it at a single point in time.

Jake: And I remember you were saying too that, I asked if um, I dunno, if you would miss it or there would be something missing, I think I said, if this wasn't there wasn't there, and you initially said you wouldn't miss it and then you said well maybe you would

Shawn: I- I backpedaled on that one

Jake: Yeah, I'm curious about like what the

Shawn: I think from a balance standpoint I can understand certainly why it has to exist [yeah] It's just a matter of do I feel like bothering with it at any point in time, and that's largely where the market for things like this comes into play, where you've got people who want to level up one of their crafting jobs and maybe don't want to actually go out into the field and harvest all of their own materials, so they're willing to pay a premium if you just buy it off the market boards, and that's where, you know, demand comes from your supply. Like I have absolutely no idea what I am going to do with all of this regular quality laurel

Jake: So you could just put it up for sale?

Shawn: I could put it up for sale, maybe there's an alchemy recipe that needs it, I'm not seeing it though. No idea what I am going to do with all of this, probably sell it. *long pause* Come on, let me finish this dumb thing. I don't want to go near that one cause there's a giant lizardy thing there

Jake: And would it just be a matter of time to have to kill it, and switching your class and [yeah] the hassle of...

Shawn: *finishes collecting Laurel* There were go, let's get out of here *character teleports*

Jake: So you can just teleport to certain points?

Shawn: Yup, where ever there is a huge stinking crystal that acts as a point for you to teleport to *long pause* You're going to make me run back to the archers' guild aren't you

Jake: So that's the person who initially gave you the quest?

Shawn: Yup. There's you're 20 stinkin' Laurels. Pleased as peas, because you're a botanist, I see how it goes. It makes gluttons out of everyone—I should know, I'm level 15 culinarian as well. *long pause* *following map to next quest point* Back here? Who the hells back here?

Jake: So she just told you to go to someone else? [yup] and now you're just trying to find them

Shawn: At least I don't have to run out to the archers' guild, which admittedly just involves teleporting out to the archers' guild. There's you're stinkin' Laurels—I feel like I'm saying that a lot.

Jake: hahaha—there's some resentment in that

Shawn: Well, there were brigands, and I had to beat them down, so it took a while. You're welcome. Now I'll go back here—I don't think an MMO would qualify as an MMO if there wasn't just running back and forth for quests like this

Jake: Yeah? Why is that so central? *both laugh*

Shawn: I mean it's kinda become a trope of the whole thing, I mean, I don't know what I'd make of myself, I'd, it's one of those things where I'd constantly be going “are you going to make me double back on myself and just play ping pong in order to complete this quest?” You can burden yourself with your troubles as long as you're paying me. Ca-ching. Alright, I get money, I get a plume steel hatchet, which I have already upgraded because I made my own. Alright.

Jake: So it seems like the running back and forth thing is a little bit like the gathering thing, like it seems like somehow it's not really the most fun part of the game but at the same time somehow it has to be there?

Shawn: Well, it's there whether we like it or not [yeah, I mean do you think it could not be there?] in real life situations there might be a circumstance where you might have to play intermediary and go back and forth between folks way more times than you'd really feel comfortable with [uh huh] this is one of those situations. Alright, let's go to an inn.

Jake: I'm just keeping an eye on time, we probably have about 15 minutes or so left, if we stick to two hours, not that that's

Shawn: I've certainly got the time if you do

Jake: Yeah, well, we'll try to keep it relatively close [I don't know when this dungeon's going to pop either] yeah we'll partly base it on that. Um, so I guess I want to ask you your sense of um, I mean you were engaged in 11 for a really long time, [mhmm] You haven't really been playing this one that long comparatively, do you have a sense that you'll be engaged in this a long time.

Shawn: Uh, with the new patches that they've got rolling out, it seems like they've really got the timing down. Moreso in this than there ever was in 11 there's a feel of connection between the development staff and the players, there's more a sense of transparency. I mean, they do have like live question and answer sessions, the fact that they're entirely in Japanese is just kind of coincidental to the point, [haha] but I still tune in because I can make out just enough of it and see footage of the new stuff they are adding [yeah] But, also, in terms of just progression, this game moves so much faster than Final Fantasy XI ever did.

Jake: And progression means...

Shawn: Um, it took me about a month to fulfill the entire main story line and get my first job in 14 to max level. That same feat in Final Fantasy XI took me two years. [wow] I mean 11 was...it it knew how to grind. That game knew how to grind.

Jake: So what does that entail, like what, how, what does it do that

Shawn: Well, you really couldn't gain experience points unless you were in a party with five other people and then you went to pretty much one predetermined spot, which was usually full, and then someone would get pissed off at that fact and then leave [uh huh] And unless you were one of the four out of the twenty classes, you were really undervalued and couldn't get experience points to save your life. It was really tough going in the early days. [hm] And, now, if

you played 11 again, it's not even the same game, [mhmm] but those early days were harsh, they were baaad.

Jake: So what kept you playing?

Shawn: A, friends who were doing the same thing, so I could group with them on occasion[mhmm] B friends that I made in the game, C, um, the fact that it was college and I was looking for any way to procrastinate [hahaha]. Let's sell some stuff.

Jake: I'm curious, I'm getting the sense that there's a lot that this kind of game involves that is like not instantly gratifying, like its stuff that you're sort of like working

Shawn: Absolutely, you're building up to it

Jake: But, there's something also that seems like, that there's this, (1 sec pause) long-term engagement or something that seems to happen with this kind of game that doesn't happen with other kinds of games

Shawn: I'd say that's fair. Also, you know compared to a lineage of Final Fantasy games where what was on the disk was pretty much all there was, the fact that you know expansions are released and patches are updated, there's you know a refreshment of content. Even if I get to a point where I'm not so, I'm not as interested in this as I might have been before, there's still a part of me that going "I'm going to stick around because I'm expecting this." What else is here that I can sell. Not much of anything. So, in the meantime let's play back a particular chunk of plot that I thought was pretty cool [okay] Um, this is...where is it...oh class quests not job quests. This is the cut-scene that you get when you hit the maximum level in armorer and have to do the one last quest that gives you the special weapon for that particular class. *starts scene* So you've just gone through 50 levels of armorer, you've managed to craft every form of armor known to man [hahaha] there's been this joker in the guild...oh wait, this is blacksmith not armorer, I got that wrong heh [okay] Come on, armorer, there were go. So you've gone through 50 levels or armorer, you've crafted pretty much every piece of armor known to mankind and then some, and all the while you've kind of been the guild master's pet project in defeating the other head-honcho in the guild, who is kind of distrusting of the current guild master's ways and how accepting and welcoming she is to all of the newbies, so you have entered into a competition with him to see who can create the best suit of chainmail, and it turns out that this particular competition is being adjudicated by the admiral, the ruler of the city itself. [mhmm]

Jake: When you say guild you mean like the armorer's guild?

Shawn: Yup, the armorer's guild. *begins to speak theatrically* You didn't know how she was going to test it and it turns out that she's going to stick a guy in each suit of armor, and then send

dudes to just beat the shit out of them [*laughter*] Filmed in nausea-vision. And the guildmaster is kind of shocked as shit that this is how it's going down[*laughter* yeah] The old curmudgeon of the guild is like “You think this is something, you wimp” Heheha. And he's still talking smack and armor is still standing! the admiral is quite impressed by this display...and then takes matters into her own hands [*laughter*] Guildmaster's a little bit upset, but, that's what it was there for. But, oh hey look, his armor cracked under pressure, turns out the guy just couldn't stand getting the shit beat out of him and then a gunshot wound. [*laughter*] I win. That felt good. And when I talk to folks about the different crafting jobs, they say that the storyline for the armorer is the weakest, until the cut scene where it's just like “okay, okay that was pretty darn cool” [yeah] “that was, that was, bloody hells”

Jake: So that was a big moment of satisfaction

Shawn: Absolutely.

Jake: Yeah, what's the feeling?

Shawn:Uh, (2 sec pause) I dunno, I think it's partly getting to see that particular chunk of plot, getting to see this boastful curmudgeon finally get put back in his place [mhmm] the fact that it took a couple of gunshots to do it—certainly entertaining. And you hear a round of applause cause just saw two guys get shot. [*laughter*] Wax philosophical about.... The fact that I'm wearing my bard gear throughout the entire thing is kind of jarring a little bit

Jake: Yeah I was actually wondering about that *both laugh*. So if there anything else that I haven't touched on or asked that you feel like is important about like what's central to the experience of playing or important about why you play or what you get out of it?

Shawn: I think we've touched on most of the stuff. I mean, right now there isn't even anyone from my particular group online at the present time [mhmm] because they don't usually log on until they've set their rambunctious three-year-old to bed in Oklahoma City, so there's an extra time zone bit in there [yeah] and usually by that time I might be nodding off early or might be tied up with something else [mhmm] so we tend to miss eachother. How did I get kicked out of the duty finder? Oh well, I've got the best way to incite getting into a dungeon—be a healer. *long pause* Should pop pretty darn quick *long pause* See this exactly the circumstance in which I would be considering—”okay I'm queued up for this dungeon—Mario II”

Jake: Okay, yeah, it could just be waiting while you

Shawn: Yup. Make sure my gear's in good shape. Um.

Jake: I'm just thinking if I have anything else I want to ask, cause I feel like we're kind of

Shawn: Kind of hitting the end of it

Jake: Yeah, feel that way. I'm just thinking back to the main points we hit, it seems like the sort of pursuit of efficiency was a theme [mhmm] um, and that there's something satisfying about achieving that efficiency and kind of increasing

Shawn: Yup, I'd certainly say so

Jake: Yeah. (15 sec pause). Well, um, I guess if there's not anything that comes to mind for you, I feel kind of like that's the end of my questions.

Shawn: I'm just kinda ruing the fact that I didn't get much dungeon content except for that one boss fight where everything just kind of went off the wheels.

Jake: What else would you want me to, have wanted me to see

Shawn: Uh, really, just the flow of the progression through a dungeon—hey look at that *sound for party being ready on the duty finder sounds*

Jake: That was the dungeon?

Shawn: Yeah

Jake: Okay

Shawn: Just popped up

Jake: Alright, I will stick around for this

Shawn: Let me...don't believe I have re-fixed my macros for white mage though. We shall find out. *long pause* *T mumbles mostly to himself about the abilities he has linked up to different buttons*

Jake: Is it hard to keep track of all of your different skills for all the different classes?

Shawn: Um, I don't have that much of a problem with it. I should have added thunder too. Oh well. We've got a paladin tank right now who is proving himself to be stupid durable—I like this.

Jake: So if I understand the way the different classes are supposed to work, your main job is healing the tank, and then the other players as necessary

Shawn: Yup. That's pretty much the size of it. *long pause* Not entirely certain why he's standing there. That was the wrong button.

Jake: So when you're looking right now, like what are you seeing? Cause I mean I'm looking and I'm seeing a lot of things that don't mean anything to me. [um] Like what's important that you're

Shawn: A, the tanks health bar.

Jake: So that's one of the main things you're looking at.

Shawn: Yup, and if the tank's safe I can

Jake: And that's CamoMcCloud at the top?

Shawn: Yeah. If a tank's safe then I can move around some subtargets and throw some offensive stuff, like a wind-based damage over time effect, or a stone spell.

Jake: So do you really even need to. I mean seeing the, um, health bar obviously isn't like seeing the action. Do you need to be watching what people are doing or is that kind of secondary.

Shawn: Not so much. Hey, everyone's inside. I mean it's good for positioning sake and certainly there's plenty of positioning concerns that come up. Aw shit.

Jake: What happened?

Shawn: My targeting got messed up. And we're currently in combat so I can't raise him either.

Jake: So the paladin died?

Shawn: Yup, cause I'm not very good, well admittedly I don't really have very much practice at healing. I want to call it that before I get into any particular slights against my own skill.

Jake: Yeah

Shawn: I got every job just to taste the mechanics for each, [mhmm] but other than that I've got dragoon at 50, and then I've been working on bard ever since and I've kind of left the healing and tanking to other... That was my mea culpa. *long pause* *getting ready to start again, setting up buttons* Dammit, close enough. *long pause* Everything just stopped, that was, it seemed to indicate to me a network issue, and that had me moderately concerned. *long pause* Swap out virus for thunder. *long pause* Oh shit. In switching that out, I have locked myself out of all of my healing abilities. Uh, spit.

Jake: Not good haha

Shawn: Uhhh, well, that was stupid. hehe, now I feel horrible! [haha] *types out message to party explaining the situation* *long pause* At least he's taking it well

Jake: yeah haha

Shawn: Okay, now that I've got his targeting down, I know which one I can safely sleep, and then black mage just wakes that one right back up.

Jake: What do you mean now that you have his targeting down?

Shawn: Now that I'm realizing "okay, when he marks two targets, that means that there's actually three, and the unmarked one should be slept.

Jake: mmm. So you have the sleep spell?

Shawn: I do. I just recently realized that I do.

Jake: Okay. So how do you know that that's what he

Shawn: I, from how other tanks have operated in the past, it's mostly an educated guess.

Jake: Uh huh.

Shawn: And that time there's not a third, so I'm just going to sleep the second one. May have defeated my entire presumption there

Jake: hahaha. So it seems like you really have to kind of operate on a kind of an imperfect communication system.

Shawn: Mhmm. Well, I don't know if it's because I'm used to working with a Japanese player base and working on little to no communication system, but it's definitely a thing that kind of develops.

Jake: Yeah. I'm just thinking, by comparison, of the people that have the headsets and are talking the whole time, um.

Shawn: Well those are usually, to what I've noticed, much more intimate groups of people [right] and I don't really have that [right] so, I make do with what I do. And I mean, there's nothing here that's really difficult. There is one particular dungeon that I've not even started yet mostly because it required that level of communication and I haven't been doing any of that yet.

Jake: Yeah

Shawn: That also, likely, would require a high level group of people, and at this point I'm, kinda content just waiting it out and going with my old group of friends, because even if I do have to kind of lead them by the hand a bit, we have better communication when it comes. And, make sure I know where my cure poison thing is, because we're about to see some poison flying

around. *long pause* *one boss fight ends* Yeah, I barely even looked at the MOB that entire fight, just kept focused on the left, on those health bars. *long pause* I used to run this dungeon all the time just for the silk that certain monsters drop. [hm] Leveling the cloth crafter at the time

Jake: So different dungeons at different points might have different benefits.

Shawn: Yup *long pause* Quick and easy. Really for most of these lower level dungeons the primary motivation for running them is being able to gain appropriate, or level-appropriate experience points at pretty much any level depending on which dungeon you're doing. And as I mentioned, that is one of the things that's getting increased in the next patch.

Jake: The amount of experience you get from dungeons?

Shawn: Yeah. And since most of them tie into the story and are required to progress, it also then becomes an incentive for folks who are working on some of their lower-level jobs to use dungeons as a primary means of gaining experience points.

Jake: Mm. So there would be like a very first time that you would play through any of these and that would be like progressing the story, because you would be seeing content for the first time

Shawn: Yup, and specifically, you know an NPC goes, "hey, there's this thing, in this dungeon, we need you to investigate it" [yeah] and then you go and do that thing

Jake: And then from then on it's sort of available as a thing you can go back and do for [for experience points] experience points for leveling up, okay. So how many times have you done that thing dungeon do you think?

Shawn: Ohh, this dungeon? 15-ish? [mhmm] but again it's a good source of the XP for a particular chunk of levels

Jake: yeah, so you wouldn't, you would do it when your character, when a certain class was around the right level for it. [yup] So what dungeon have you done the most?

Shawn: Those would definitely be the endgame dungeons, or maybe the very first dungeon, because I've done it on every class.

Jake: So how many times have you done the endgame ones?

Shawn: Um, probably a couple dozen times each. *long pause* Never before have I had to consider so many times just how quickly poison damage can stack up on you. I mean any other class they just take it as read that it's something that the healer takes care of. [yeah] Now that I'm

actually the healer, the shoes on the other foot. [haha] Especially in this dungeon where things just lay on poison time and time again. [mhmm]

Jake: So are there specific things you do differently when it is poison versus just physical, some other kind of damage

Shawn: Well, in this particular instance, uh, you can actually have several different poison effects all stacked on top of each other [mhmm] so that can quickly become unbearable if I'm just trying to mangle through it and heal as much as possible [mhmm] so really getting those out of the way first is important in terms of strategy

Jake: So you can remove those effects

Shawn: Yeah, it's just not a thing I've had to be cognizant of before

Jake: Mhmm, so in other words if you were a, you know a DPS, and a good healer was taking care of you, you wouldn't really even have to be thinking about it

Shawn: It's not a thing that I would even be considering. *long pause* Throw some sleep around. *long pause* Alright, I'm getting the gist of this a little bit better. It's a learning experience, it really is. [mhmm] Especially since there are two healer classes and they act very differently. [hm] *long pause* Good practice in any effect. Alright, we should be coming up on a boss room again. Oh come on. *long pause* Yeah getting the sleep rotation down is certainly making things a bit easier.

Jake: The sleep rotation of...

Shawn: Getting things slept so they're not dealing damage to the tank and basically further conserving my resources. Again, a thing as I've mostly played melee DPS before [mhmm] I've never even had to consider up until this point.

Jake: And your resources are what?

Shawn: Magic points and the time I have to spend between each cast

Jake: Uh huh

Shawn: *long pause* Now this is normally the point where...A. these little MOBs running along the sides would be taken care of and B. the other caster would consider throwing out a couple heals himself. That doesn't seem to be the case. Ideally the tank would be holding all of those MOBs simultaneously and would not have had the MOB standing inside of the room to poison everyone right at the beginning of the fight. Again, that's where the time that I take to have to cast things is in itself a resource, because I fell behind really quickly.

Jake: So he should have pulled that thing to the side along with everything else [yeah] that would have given

Shawn: Or I might just need a whole lot more work. I'm not going to deny that that is a possibility.

Jake: Yeah

Shawn: But yeah, black mage should have totally helped me out there, I'm just going to say

Jake: haha

Shawn: Don't want to cast dispersions

Jake: Classic white mage/black mage tension

Shawn: hehe There aren't even red mages in this game to intermediate

Jake: haha. So you're you're just running through the dungeon where everyone died?

Shawn: Yup, there was a short little warp that was a shortcut. A lot of it is the backtracking. Now I wait for him to show up so I can protect everyone. *boss fight starts again* And now only the tank gets poisoned, excellent! That's much better. *long pause* much more manageable *long pause* That's not good, because I've just been inflicted with Slow, and the tank is still oblivious to the fact that there are other MOBs here. But at least this time the monk has picked one of them up. *tank almost dies* Ahhh

Jake: hahaha good save hehe *fight ends*

Shawn: The black mage got of his kiester, funny enough Certainly would have liked to have seen a bit more activity by the tank in picking up those MOBs that spawned in the middle of the fight.

Jake: Mhmm. So that's just like a lack of awareness on his part?

Shawn: Ye, I would say so

Jake: It seems like being aware of what's going on is what's

Shawn: *looking at a piece of loot* uhh unique untradeable, which means I can't sell it which means I don't care for it. *long pause* These fleshy pod things explode if anyone gets too close to them, which means we need to get someone to smack them from range. *long pause* If I'm not completely mistaken this is more or less the last throw of the dungeon

Jake: Mhmm

Shawn: Have to fight through some of this trash and then: boss*long pause* Most of it is just smacking fleshy pods from range

Jake: hmhm

Shawn: Okay, grip has been got

Jake: What does that mean?

Shawn: It means I'm back in control of the situation

Jake: Oh, I get it haha

Shawn: I'm rather enjoying this—I haven't had to heal anything for some time!

Jake: hahaha. What is that's enjoyable?

Shawn: Just how different it is. I'm haven't had to do most of these things or consider these things in some time

Jake: yeah

Shawn: I think it's one of those situations where the more you play, the more diverse your experience the better it is in the long run. Cause instead of just thinking you know what the healer has to do in a circumstance, you actually have hands on experience knowing "okay, this is where the healer wants me to be"

Jake: Yeah

Shawn: And then that contributes, like I said, to how everything flows together [mhmm] and how at some point you don't really need so much communication because not only does everyone know the fight in and out, but they know multiple aspects of the fight [uh huh] *long pause*

Jake: It's almost like you have to have a certain kind of empathy for what other people are trying to do [yup] and how what you're doing is affecting what they're trying to do

Shawn: I certainly agree. And I feel like, you know, specifically these Final Fantasy MMOs where you can play all of the classes on the same character really encourages moving throughout the classes and learning those things a little bit more intimately that you would if you had to pick one class and stick to it. Yeah this is the finally stretch. Not even bothering with those MOBs, fine by me. *long pause* Final boss.

Jake: Sticky web.

Shawn: Yup. The real frustration is that it presents a barrier that not only can you not walk through you can't cast through, so

Jake: yeah, so you're really cut off from the group *long pause*

Shawn: Boss fight. Hey a giant scorpion thing. You haven't seen enough of those in this dungeon.

Jake: Looks like more poison.

Shawn: I am running in the wrong direction. [hmhm] I am going to recast protect, because that seems like a good thing to do. *long pause* I meant to nod there instead of bow, but at this point I don't really care. Are they viewing a cut-scene? Oh that's right, yeah this one actually has a fairly lengthy cut scene, plot wise.

Jake: Uh huh, so someone might be doing it for the first time or something

Shawn: I have to expect so.

Jake: So how would this experience rate on—like I asked you earlier what makes a good session what makes a bad session—and you said

Shawn: It's efficiency

Jake: Yeah, I mean you said getting through it really efficiently is one of the main ways you end up feeling really satisfied.

Shawn: Um, I'll be there first to say that most of it was my fault [hahaha] *long pause* We've got the MOBs...*inaudible* ...especially since the tank's pretty much already admitted that not gonna try to help us in any way [haha] just being a pain in my butt. But it's perfectly manageable so I'm not too bitter. Too bitter. no one's poisoned. No zone damage on the field. *I look at my recorders* Everything's still okay with the recording?

Jake: Yeah, it is, doing great

Shawn: Excellent

Jake: Still full battery. *long pause*

Shawn: Op, now I'm poisoned. Ew, just took a pretty bad hit. We should aim for the tail. See this is a time where even if I had a keyboard, I wouldn't have enough time to tell them: "You need to be aiming for the tail"

Jake: Right, haha. So you don't even have time to do the mark thing

Shawn: Right, but, it looks like they've almost killed him outright. That's kind of weird [haha] I don't think I've ever fought that thing where the tail didn't die first. I'll take it though,

Jake: Yeah

Shawn: I will take it. A good hearty laugh and loot that I don't care about and forty six hundred experience points, so

Jake: So is that the most valuable thing you got, experience points?

Shawn: Probably at this point. I ended up with the loot anyway. Okay. But yeah, I'm already higher level than this dungeon, I just picked that one because it's, because the dungeon that I really wanted to run is two levels higher than my current level so I can't do it on white mage yet, and I wanted to show you the specifics of a run like that, so I had to switch to white mage.

Jake: Yeah, that was good to see.

Shawn: But I think it's safe to call it there.

Jake: Yeah, great, glad we got the last bit in there.

Follow up email:

And "making big numbers bigger" is, in essence, a means to an end... but it doesn't mean that the means should be disregarded. Again, part of the appeal is in efficiency, being able not only to acquire resources/complete tasks quickly for one's own sake but being able to "hold up your own end" and make everyone else's run that much better because you're prepared. (As I so pointedly did not demonstrate in that run where I was healing the party and didn't even have my macros set correctly, and spoke often about feeling badly as a result.)

Heck, there's an entire line of offline games (the Disgaea series, and associated titles like Phantom Brave and Makai Kingdom) which are known for a moderate RPG experience in the "basic" storyline, but which can be increased in difficulty from one to 2100 levels (no typo) to greatly extend the game's replay value, mostly through - you guessed it - making big numbers bigger. And more specifically, by retooling a party, manipulating any of a number of environmental factors, constructing bonuses on armor and accessories, and generally making the game deeper and deeper by making the numbers larger and larger, to where the whole scope of the game changes. The main story only requires a party of L100 or so; I've constructed situations where a L1 character can gain three hundred levels in a single attack.

Making big numbers bigger might just be a means to an end, but sometimes analyzing the logic and mechanics behind the means - and executing them most efficiently - is a goal unto itself. (In other words, being a big ol' Spade, as the suits go.)

Appendix 7: Crystal's Interview Transcript

Jake: So, um, do you want to tell me a little bit about your life in general, and then we'll [okay] get into the important thing.

Crystal: umm, I grew up in a small-town community in Pennsylvania, I grew up on a farm, very rural, you know, [mhmm] three channels, that kind of stuff [yeah] hahah [okay] But um, you know I was always an artistic one and stuff like that, so eventually when I got old enough I came up here and went to school for art and I met Peter here and we decided to get married, went out for a very long time and just stayed up here cause my folks, or my mother, only lives maybe three hours away and I still want to stay close to her but I just decided to stay up here [mhmm] after I finished school and got my degree in computer animation and multimedia [mhmm] but even when I was a kid and stuff like that I was always into fantasy and drawing and role-played and did the whole like miniature gaming and all that kind of stuff, and MMO's just seemed to be an extension on that, so

Jake: Yeah. So, what did you , what miniature games and stuff, roleplaying and stuff, since you were how old?

Crystal: Oh, hell, sixteen maybe, I was real young [yeah] you know I had a lot of friends to it, they introduced me to it like back in the day the oldschool D&D, like the first edition stuff [oh wow] yeah, so I was all into that and, you know, just kinda moved along. We've been playing a lot of Werewolf, and you know, just all kinds of stuff. I usually like the pen and paper [mhmm] through Peter, he introduced me to them so we've been doing some of that every once in a while when we get a chance to and that's the live action stuff [oh okay] with the Nerf weapons and the running around [oh yeah yeah] and yeah. And we're real into reenactments and stuff and we actually belong to a Star Wars costume group [oh cool] that do things for charity and stuff like that, so we're into that too and, just, you know the whole idea of costuming and being a character and you know all that kind of fun stuff [yeah] And I do all my own sewing, so the farm aspect comes into it, [oh yeah] so I do all my own stuff, uh huh

Jake: And how old are you? I didn't ask you that.

Crystal: I was born in '75—I'm sorry, my math is horrible, so I think I', like 36, right? 36, 37. [uh] I never really keep track of it

Jake: wouldn't you be 38 or 3-?

Crystal: I think I'm close to 40, yeah

Jake: Okay getting close to 40

Crystal: Yeah

Jake: That's close enough

Crystal: haha somewhere around there

Jake: We'll ballpark it

Crystal: Yeah, I never really pay too much attention to that [yeah] cause you're only as young as you feel [yup] and as you can see we have lots of videogames and [mhmm] movies and stuff too, and we got little Star Wars stuff everywhere and

Jake: Yeah. So how long ago was it that you were in college?

Crystal: I graduated in 2008 I believe. And um, I actually didn't really do, I tried to get a few jobs around here and I actually did get a few interviews but things didn't quite work out but I did land a corporate job, I work for a shipping company [okay] bust as a, just as a pencil pusher [yeah] but it pays the bills, so [yeah] hahaha I'm hoping to eventually that I could land like a communications job or something to you know get into my graphic background and stuff [yeah] but, you know

Jake: And you've been living here since, um, after art school or

Crystal: Umm, I've been living here since art school, so that would be, I think it was '98 that I moved up here officially. 1998 is when I think I started.

Jake: And this is Peter's parent's house?

Crystal: Yes.

Jake: So tell me the story of how World of Warcraft started—was that the first? Well, first of all was that the first?

Crystal: No, no

Jake: Okay, we'll go back to the beginning of, of

Crystal: Well the very beginning was Peter, Peter got into um, the Dark Age of Camelot, and that's when we first started. And I did play that for a little while but I didn't quite, you know, that was the first one and I didn't quite get it [mhmm] But then Final Fantasy came out online, [yeah] and I played that religiously and I mean I was like on it and stuff like that all the time [mhmm] and then Peter was like, you know he was with me and he was playing, but he got tired

of all the grinding and stuff and then he was like, well check this out, this is a new game, and he had World of Warcraft. And I was like, I was always like “no, no, no, I want to be a Final Fantasy person” [mhmm] you know, they look a lot better, more realistic, the WoW characters look a little too toony for me. But then he’s like, “no c’mon try it, try it” so I was like “oookay”. So I finally got into it and then that was it, that’s all I ever played after that. I mean we still play Star Wars occasionally and I’ve been playing Diablo a little bit here and there, just, you know, cause the new expansion’s gonna come out but, it’s always been WoW since that point so [mm] and I’ve been playing since Vanilla

Jake: So that was since 2006 or something like that?

Crystal: Yeah, I was playing since the beginning, before BC

Jake: Okay

Crystal: Cause I remember the days of when you couldn’t get your mount was a big thing, oh my god, and now all these people are getting mounts at like 10 or 20 and it’s like “you don’t know the real thing!” [hahah] you know and stuff like that

Jake: Yeah, yeah. So um, so there’s something about WoW, you said that was just it, that there’s something about that that’s just kept you...

Crystal: Yeah, it’s kept me interested for a very long time. I do like different aspects of it, and you can still get your role-playing fix, but for me, I really like the idea and challenge of leveling all of the different classes [mm] and having all the different combinations where, I like leveling, I like power-leveling, I like experiencing uh, you know, instances, and moving, you know having this class at the maximum that you could possibly have and the versatility of all the different classes. [mhmm] You know if I don’t want to be a tank one day and I just can’t heal then I can just DPS, I can just sit in the back and do what I gotta do but, Peter enjoys, I think, more achievements and raiding and those sorts of things but he doesn’t like the character grinding, for some reason I do [hm] you know, I’m not sure why but it’s just one of those things that I always have liked and and I have almost all maximum 90s on my Horde characters and I’ve actually started making Alliance one haha

Jake: Okay, so you—and how many characters is that?

Crystal: Well, I have 11 characters on the Horde, I only have two left that I have to maximize, so I have at least, let’s see, 9 90s. And I’ve got about five or six Alliances and I usually just sit there and I work on two at the same time, uh, I’ll alternate and, you know, right now I’m leveling a warrior, I still have a monk to level and a DK, but then I started working on some of my Alliance characters on a different server, but I only have two servers, cause if I have them all over the

place I tend to forget about them, so I try to keep everything situated, you know, but I can also do...Peter more likes the group aspects sometimes with, um, you know the different, what do you call em, guilds and stuff, but, I usually just kind of stick to myself

Jake: Hm, so you don't really, you kind of just like to have this ongoing project of leveling characters

Crystal: Of, yes, I just like the continuous moving towards and then once I hit 90 I just kinda, well if I wanna do it I'll go do that, if I don't I don't have to

Jake: So hitting 90 for a character is not necessarily the very end of your engagement, but kind once you get to 90 that's

Crystal: I just, yeah

Jake: That's kind of

Crystal: I have it at maximum, I don't have the best gear, but I'm not so concerned with gear, you know, or anything like that. For me, it's just going from 0 to 90 and then once I hit there, you know that's cool, and when I finish all those 90s, I might concentrate on one or two, but in my head it's difficult for me to have a main, because I just—sometimes I want to tank, sometimes I don't

Jake: So you don't really think of any of your characters as your main character

Crystal: No, not really, I mean I have favorites because they've been with me forever, but that's about.

Jake: So what are your favorites?

Crystal: My warlock, he was always my number one guy, I have an undead warlock dude. And it's funny, when I saw that Ozzy commercial I was like "that's my character!" haha [oh yeah?] yeah cause I was like, I was always that weird guy you know with the weird Mohawk hair and stuff like that. But, if I get into him, I kinda get a little bit, I don't know I get too excitable cause I'll like PvP with him, [yeah] and I'm just throwing out DOTs like crazy and stuff, I mean I might die but they'll die with me hehehe you know

Jake: What do you mean throwing out, throwing out

Crystal: I usually play an affliction 'lock, so their DOTs are damage over time [oh, uh huh], so I'll just sit there and just cast it on everybody

Jake: So they're called locks?

Crystal: warlocks

Jake: oh, okay

Crystal: That's a warlock, it's a caster type [okay] But it's just funny because I', squishy, so I'll die quicker, but I'll kill them at the same time

Jake: So it seems like there's a certain feeling for you that goes along with that, like being kind of crazy

Crystal: Uh huh, that's my crazy character haha

J So what does it feel like to be in that mode?

Crystal: I get too rambunctious and I'll start yelling at the TV hahaha [hahaha] or my monitor, I'll be like "oh no he didn't" you know haha [hahaha] and stuff like that and uh, I have to stop myself sometimes so [yeah] I can't do that for too long cause then I just get too excited at my computer and start messing things up and, you know and stuff like that, Peter just looks at me funny, it's like when I watch a Steelers game hahah [hahaha] it's like "why'd you do that?!" hahah

Jake: So, by contrast, what are some of your other experiences, like with other characters that, it sounds like it could feel different to play different classes

Crystal: Yeah, um, when I tank and stuff like that. I do have a paladin, he's one of my favorite characters and stuff like that, but I'm finding that now that I'm leveling a warrior some of the mechanics are a lot different [mhmm] um, and it's a lot easier to tank as a warrior, like, the, your resource is rage doesn't quite go down as much, and it's harder to, I don't know what you want to call it, mediate things than a paladin, but um I do like my paladin. I do like tanking, I like the aspect of, of, it's me and the healer, and in the party that's the most important thing, but as a tank I take it as a lot of responsibility—I have to know the fights, I have to know if I have to turn a specific boss the other way, away from the party or what have you, those kind of things are my responsibility, and sometimes I get tired of that, you know what I mean?

Jake: The responsibility

Crystal: Yeah, that I have to know the fights before I go into them, and that's kinda like too, like when they get a new expansion out and all these new dungeons come out, I don't want to play right away because they have to come up with the mechanics first so I know what to do, I'm not one of those people that can just willy-nilly go in there cause I mean, I don't have a guild with me and friends that I would know, and if we wipe too many times, they'll be like "oh, you suck" and all that kind of stuff [yeah] and I just don't want to deal with that, this is a fun game, I don't

want to deal with that [yeah] so, the same thing goes with healing. I have to keep everybody up, but if I have a stupid tank or something, I just kind of get upset with it and I just, I'll just go to my warlock instead and just go crazy [yeah] hahaha so

Jake: so it seems like those are two extremes—on the one hand feeling all that responsibility and frustration when you let people down or don't know the mechanics yet versus just being able to go crazy and just

Crystal: Yeah, go crazy and do what you want to do [yeah] so.

Jake: So you said, you don't normally play, do the group content, but you do sometimes it sounds like

Crystal: Oh I do instances and stuff cause I think to me that's the easiest way of leveling [yeah] cause I know all the dungeons and I know what I have to do [okay] and things like that, so I do get a little temperamental when people like—you know cause once you hit the BC lands and you're like 58 or so, everybody thinks they know what they're doing and they can keep everything up and they don't adhere to the party idea and they just go crazy and they go running around pulling everything and, but if I'm tanking it's like “oh my god, I have to go chasing after you and I have to like pull all this off of you and [yeah] cause you're going crazy and you're not understanding the party aspect of it, you know, you have DPS, you have your healer, you have your tank. You let your tank go do all the pulling, you don't pull [hahaha] you know, and destroy the party and wipe you know and all this other stuff cause they're not going to like that, but

Jake: So do you usually do pickup groups then?

Crystal: I don't, like

Jake: or are you in a guild

Crystal: I just, no I'm not in a guild, I just do PUGing you know, I just, what is it, Looking for Group, I just go into that and just queue for whatever [mhmm] and you know, I don't, like I say, Peter and I, we're not into the big guilds and everything because we did try that kind of stuff, but we got so tired of the cliquing and you know, all these people being together. And then the stress of the raiding, you know, can kind of get to you—you gotta be there on time, sometimes people don't show up, you're all skyping, things don't go right, everyone starts pointing fingers, and it's just like...we got tired of that. So we just do, I was actually very excited that they did the Looking for Raid and stuff, I mean, you might pick up a bad PUG here or there but I mean in general it's not always that bad. [yeah] I mean we usually stick to RP servers, both servers that I play on are in the same clique so like if, you know, if Peter is in one and is outside of the area, our two characters could meet up even though we're different factions, but you know, that kind

of stuff. [yeah] So we usually stick to RP servers. I mean we were on PvP servers and stuff like that but the ganking got ridiculous [yeah] so I was just like—and then they start camping you—and, no, we got tired of that and moved all our characters. We used to be on a few of those servers but we landed in our current server and we seem to be okay with that. Cause we're not, like I said, I'm not all that competitive, I don't care about PvP and I'm not going to be rank one, and I'm not going to be the best, in the best PvE guild or anything like that—it's just too much pressure, it's a game and that's the way it should be.

Jake: Yeah, so your experience of the sort of, being in a guild and raiding and stuff is that there's too much

Crystal: Too much pressure

Jake: Too much pressure, yeah

Crystal: From the people, but also they start pointing fingers, things don't go right, you don't have the right kind of leaders but yet you can't say anything, you know, or whatever had you, and it just got pointless. It was high school all over again and I just, that wasn't enjoyable. I'm not paying 15 dollars to be in high school again [haha]

Jake: Is there any story that comes to mind that was a particularly like

Crystal: No not really, we've been in a few and that's just the way it was, you know. [yeah] And, we never really met too many people locally, like we've gone out, and like you know when an expansion came out or something we would stand in line at midnight at BestBuy or whatever you know [yeah] but it was just for the enjoyment of it, but we never really met people off of our server, you know, that kind of stuff. We didn't really go to any of the meetups or you know, even if they have any, you know, I have no idea so

Jake: So it sounds like—and correct me if I'm wrong—you never, you never really developed relationships in WoW that were satisfying in any way really,

Crystal: No

Jake: like people that you

Crystal: Not that we made friends with or anything, but it's not that I'm opposed to it or anything, but it just hasn't happened. And the other thing is I mean, I don't know, a lot of younger people play this game, and that's fine, I have no problem with younger people playing it and stuff like that, but I just don't know how people will react seeing two 40 year olds hahaha showing up at their event, already married and they're all a bunch of single like you know, single

dude running around joshing each other and then me being a very minority, I'm thinking, I mean I know there are other women players but um, you know

Jake: So your sense is that you wouldn't fit in

Crystal: Um, probably not as well because we're older and stuff like that and, you know we're married fogies *both laugh* and we're 40 year old RPG players you know and stuff like that [uh huh] we'd probably be looked at a little funny

Jake: Well it sounds like you also have a lot of other gaming-related networks so [oh yeah] so there would be no reason that you would have to find it through WoW anyway

Crystal: No I mean, every Saturday we go out to a gaming store, and we have a good group of friends that are real life friends, and we role-play, we pen and paper every Saturday, you know, we move around to a lot of different games, and Peter and I will play pickup games every once and a while with our miniatures [mm hmm] so I mean we still go out, we have our friends, we just don't have WoW friends

Jake: Yeah, it sounds like you get the social experience and network of gaming through other games [right] WoW doesn't need to server that function for you

Crystal: And I find it a little hard because I don't see their face. [yeah] I hear a name, or I might not even know their real name, or anything like that, but all I hear is a voice, you know, and who's to say who's on that other side, they could be telling me "oh I work at a lawyer, you know this that and the other, but how do you know? [yeah, yeah]

Jake: Has there been anyone that you felt like you've gotten to know?

Crystal: Um, we've had a few people that we've talked to and things like that, but they either move on or like sometimes, um, not really me per se, but Peter, like we'll play other games once and a while, and we might not be on as much, but we're on, but it's just like people move on, [yeah] you know they find new friends or you know, we were the hot item for a little while, but then their interest floats other ways, which is fine we understand that, I mean that's the nature of people and the way it goes

Jake: What do you mean you were the hot item?

Crystal: Well I mean they don't find many couples that play together and stuff like that and they want to talk to us and we're older and we had a few like, I think there was a girl up in Canada that we talked to, and she had some problems and I don't know, some sort of family life, and we talked to her for a while, you know just to help her out and stuff [hm] and tell her some of our experiences because we were older and stuff [yeah] but eventually she found somebody else that

apparently talks to her too and, you know, I don't know things just didn't work out and she decided to say that she was gonna drop the guild and move on to someone, to something else so it's like "okay, you know, whatever" [yeah] "you know, you do whatever it is that makes you happy."

Jake: So how long was that that you were talking to her?

Crystal: Uh, we talked to her for what—a couple months?

Jake: Yeah, so it sounds like long enough to kinda get to know her

Crystal: I hope it was right, I mean I have no idea, but, she did say "ey" a lot so maybe she was in Canada, I have no idea [hahaha] haha [yeah]

Jake: So those kinds of experiences have been few and far between?

Crystal: Yeah, I mean, we got, I mean I think it's because of the fact that we can't see then, we can't just call them up and be like hey—we never knew people's phone numbers or anything like that—they come on down and watch a movie with us or whatever [mhmm] you know we just, we get our interactions through other means, really, so [yeah] I mean we got a couple friends, Star Wars people, I mean our Star Wars-people friends don't really mingle with our RP friends, but some of them do, and we come over here and watch two movies together or hang out and whatever [yeah]

Jake: So what is your play schedule—do you tend to play in certain pattern?

Crystal: Um, I do, because of work and stuff, and I work a 9-5 corporate job, I get most of my play time on the weekends, unless I'm doing something else. Like even when I play on Saturdays I'm only gone from like 4 to about 9, so I'll play early in the morning, my do will get me up at about 10 o'clock, so I'll play early in the morning and then when I come home I'll play for a couple more hours until I feel sleepy enough. Sunday, it just depends on my chores, just what I have to do to clean up and stuff, but Sunday I'll play most of the day and then on the weekdays I'll come home after a long day of work like 5, 6 o'clock, um except the holidays because that was ridiculous, um, I had a lot of overtime, but I'll come home and that's what I do to unwind, I'll sit in front of the computer for a couple hours, [mhmm] just play a couple, you know if I level or something like that, it's like "yay I did something" [yeah] And that's what I'll do for a couple hours until I have to go to bed [mhmm]

Jake: So a couple hours most week nights and then, couple hours on the weekends [yeah] at different points depending on what's going on

Crystal: But that's what I do to unwind, and that's why I think I like all the different characters, because if I'm healing and stuff is wiping or I'm tanking and things are just not working out correctly, I'll just switch to DPS and just go crazy, but I have that option [yeah] you know, that's what I like about it: if I don't want to do one thing I don't have to

Jake: Right. So you mentioned it's like, it's to unwind, that's how it fits into your life [yeah], like this is your thing that you

Crystal: It's something that's always there, it's constant, and I know what I'm doing. And it's just like, I see that progression bar going or you know, or I'm working on, like I almost have every single profession covered at the maximum level, so if I need a jewel for one of my characters, this character has it [yeah] so I don't have to go to the auction house and waste my money on somebody else to do my work [uh huh] I'll go out and grind the crap out of my materials [yeah] I'm not going to sit there and spend thousands of gold—though, Peter and I have bought gold before ha, [yeah?] at some of those China markets [oh yeah] yeah, so we have done it before, because there's like that one item, like that, that darn dragon mount that, oh just had to have it haha, [haha] and it was like oh god, we're gonna have to spend some of our own money to go get the gold and that kind of stuff

Jake: How much did you have to spend?

Crystal: I think we spend like sixty or eighty bucks, but we got like, tons, so much gold and stuff like that out of it, but it's always like creepy, like “oh my god I'm gonna get crashed and” [haha] cause you know they're gonna know that we bought gold from a Chinaman and they're gonna ban my account and [yeah] and it's kinda like, I don't know, but we've done it, but I've tried to make sure that it's like every once in a blue moon [yeah] but we have done it before

Jake: So what was it about like that mount, like you said that was one of the things that you just had to have it

Crystal: It's, yeah, it's, aw, and then they came out with all these pets and stuff and it's just like “oooooh my god” I mean I know it's for a good cause, and they'll put it up for like the hurricane victims or whatever, and it's just like, I'm a cat fiend so I need the Cinder Cat you know hahaha [yeah]. And then, I think, if anybody though it's my husband, he's the achievement whore haha [yeah] he's gonna, we're working on him right now, we're trying to get him the insane title, because that is really hard to get, and that's like 50 reputations at exalted, [mm] so Peter's the attention whore. That's the only reason I leveled a rouge really is so I could go out and get him stuff [oh yeah?] yeah ha

Jake: So um, so tell me about the mount that you liked that you

Crystal: Um, well Peter just wanted to get a Vial of Sands, which is a two person flyer, but I find it easier, and then I leveled, the

Jake: Yeah, so that's just like an element of the game that's just a fun way to

Crystal: Just to relax, it's a game [yeah, yeah] you know, I mean some people, like I'll watch trade, Peter turns trade off, but I'll watch the things that they're talking about, and sometimes it's annoying but other times it's hilarious

Jake: That's the chat of people trying to trade stuff?

Crystal: Yeah. I still have an old tee-shirt that says "I survived Barrens Chat" hahaahaha

Jake: What's that?

Crystal: Barrens Chat, it was before like uh, the Barrens, the Crossroads, what was it like Durtar? Well anyways, the Crossroads used to be the place where everyone would go and talk about Chuck Norris

Jake: Oh yeah hahah

Crystal: Yeah, it was horrible, and oh my god that was the place where everybody would just talk smack or whatever have you, the most ridiculous things, but now it's all moved to trade chat, [hm] so all the ridiculous stuff has moved over to trade chat and trade chat is like universal between all the cities [okay] if you're in a city, you're in the trade chat [I see] But it used to be called the Barrens chat, because everybody was there because they would all do their dueling and all that kind of stuff there, and it was just ridiculous, but now it's all in trade chat, and the most ridiculous thing is they always talk about that Thunder-Seeker, this weapon, and then they always go, like, they always do funny things about anal, they'll put, they'll link it, like hash tag, to all these different really crude stuff and it's just like "ugh, I don't want to see that" [haha] I don't even want to know, you know, or something like, and I do watch like, the other thing I do too, is I do watch and follow a lot of YouTuber's that play WoW, like Swifty, I watch him quite a bit, [mhm] I've watched all those kinda big-namers, like Hotted, and I'll watch their, their game plays and listen to them and stuff like that, I keep track of those kinds of things. I don't like PvP as much [yeah] but I still watch BigEra and all those kind of people [mhmm] just to, you know, keep my, just to understand what they think about the game, what they think about the game, and they're usually more informative about what's coming[yeah] you know, and like I said, I don't, like when something new drops [yeah] I'm not on it because I'd rather wait, watch somebody else do it, so then I know what I have to do and then go and do it. Like I'm not one of those people, cause I don't have the support around me to just be like "oh hey we're going to wipe, it's okay, it's not a big deal" [hm] you know

Jake: Your sense is that people would be upset

Crystal: Yeah, and this is a game, I'm not going to do that [yeah] so

Jake: So, I'm kind of getting the sense from a lot of the things that you've said that WoW provides you with a sort of um, like it's always there, it's always available for you when you need to relax [mhmm] you have all these different characters so you can kind of get different things out of the experience, and you were also saying something about how , um, it sounds like in addition to it being relaxing there's also this sense of progress, and you're seeing the progress bar moving forward, if you level, there's sort of, not only have you relaxed but there's some sense of achievement?

Crystal: Yeah

Jake: Could you say more about that part of it?

Crystal: I've always been an achiever, meaning, I'm not an achievement whore like Peter is, but, to me, I always have a set goal in my head, and in my head it's like, it's that next level, but when I hit 90, I don't have anything in my head, I have too many characters to concentrate on just one [mhmm] but it's just me to hit that next level, or if I need, if I need this profession done or something along those lines, I just go for one thing, then I get it done, then I move on to the next thing [yeah] you know, I'm very, I guess, focused? [yeah] On that one thing.

Jake: So that one thing would be like finishing a profession or leveling a character

Crystal: Yeah, like right now, the character I'm working on right now has maxed her blacksmithing, I can't go anymore until I level. I have to hit 65 on that character level before I can progress to my next blacksmithing. [okay] Do you know what I mean?

Jake: Yeah, I do

Crystal: So it's like that. So I'll sit there and set a goal for myself and I'll hit that goal and then I gotta go level. And then I can click more for the blacksmithing, though I might want to level more before I go back to the blacksmithing [yeah] you know what I mean, so I don't have to stutter.

Jake: Right, so um, what is, what is the sense, what do you get out of leveling a character?

Crystal: I think for me it's the option, that I don't have to stick with one thing, if I want to do something else I can [mhmm] you know. I do like some of my more versatile classes like paladins. They can DPS, they can tank, or they can heal. And I like druids that way too, they can kind of do all three things, [yeah] just depending on just as simple a thing as a tree, and some

gear [yeah] you can do anything you wanna do, you just gotta fix it [yeah] so I think I gravitate more towards that, is, being versatile and also doing what I want to do

Jake: Yeah, so you, through the work of leveling all these characters, you've created this toolbox of all these different options

Crystal: Right, and I can do whatever I want to do depending on what my mood is [yeah] and you know I have it at the maximum amount that I'm allowed to have—I might not have the best gear, but I can still go out and do it [yeah] it's just, do I want to do it?

Jake: Yeah, and your sense is that having a main character that you're trying to get the best gear or whatever just involves too many stressful, non-relaxing activities

Crystal: Yeah I mean

Jake: Cause to do that, you have to be raiding, right?

Crystal: Well, yeah, you have to go through

Jake: at a certain point

Crystal: yeah, you—I don't like the grinding. I mean I like level-grinding, but I don't like grinding for gear

Jake: Hm, what's different?

Crystal: I-I don't know, it's just something about it, it's doing those same dungeons—I mean yeah, granted when I'm leveling, I do do the same dungeons over and over and over again [yeah], but then I have to sit there and figure out, “okay, well I need this many points, Justice points, to go here and get this gear, [mhmm] okay, and then I have to um you know, I have to be exalted with this group to get that gear [mhmm] and um, I don't know, it's just like, I don't know where to go to get that stuff, you know what I mean. I could look it up on WoWHead or whatever have you, but I don't like having to go to someplace, go to one spot, grind five or six quests over and over again every day [mhmm] you know, to gain reputation t get that item [yeah] I don't like having to be told what I have to do every day [uh huh] I think that's what it is, I don't like to know that, I don't like the farming as much, because it's like, okay, I have to go there every day—and it's being kinda like told what I have to do [mhmm] Well I wanna do what I wanna do. I don't want to have to go and grind this same quest every single day to get that rep to get this item [okay] When two weeks later, after I get that item, I have to upgrade it, go here, go run these same dungeons over and over again till I get the next gear. I mean, I don't want to do that.

Jake: So that's what you have to do past 90, and daily quests just mean that you have to do it every day [every day] and it would refresh and you'd just have to do it every day.

Crystal: Yeah, and I don't like that, that drives me nuts, is being told, "okay well if you want this, you gotta go do this." I mean it is kinda I guess the same, you know, to level blacksmithing or whatever have you, but I can do that when I want to, I don't have to do that every single day if I don't want to, if that makes sense

Jake: Yeah, I'm getting a sense of what you mean. So what's your experience of level-grinding then? Cause that's what you like.

Crystal: Yeah, I mean, I don't, to me, it feels, I, I guess it's, routine, but, I like routine, I like to know what I'm doing every day, [mm] you know, but eh, I don't know, it's just weird, because I hate the grinding for like gear, [yeah] it's like ahhh

Jake: It seems like there's something interesting about, about this

Crystal: It's just something in my head that gear grinding to me...and and too, I know this upsets my husband too, is like, once you get the best gear, within a few months, it's crap [yeah] it's crap. And you have to grind it all out again. [yeah] And do you know how many mains I have? [hahaha] How many 90s, if I had to grind gear for every single one of them? [yeah] And I just can't, I just can't concentrate one or two characters. In my head, in that next expansion, when they hit 11, oh my god I gotta level everybody again. which is fine it doesn't bother me [yeah] but to have to have the best gear possible, and then every couple months they'll drop like a little expansion, or a little bit more, and then a couple more things come out that's new, then I have to grind that for every single character, and it's like nooo [hahahaha] that's not fuuun [yeah]. But does that make sense?

Jake: Yeah, I definitely get what you're saying. Um.

Crystal: But when you hit 90, you're done. You know, you don't have to worry about all this gear, and keep grinding for that gear constantly, I mean I see my husband going through it, and you know having to do this, and I'll love to help him, I'm fine with that, you know, I'll do whatever I've gotta do, but I don't want to go through that

Jake: Yeah, so it seems like there's something about that definite endpoint of 90 that works for you [yeah] where the idea of a never ending quest of constantly keeping up with the best gear

Crystal: Keeping up with the best stuff—the best doesn't matter to me. I mean it's nice, sure, I'd like to have the best gear that I could possibly have but I don't want to do the work for it [yeah] cause then within two—however long the next expansion drops, I have to go get it [yeah] and I

just don't, I think it's the uncertainty [hm] cause once you get that best gear, there's nothing out there that says that's it. But once you hit 90, that's it [hm] there's nowhere else for you to go

Jake: Huh, so there's something really nice about starting a new character and having a definite kind of goal

Crystal: It's the progress, like everything I have to go through, you know, like oh my god, leveling my hunter *sound of exasperation* at the upper levels was like half an hour for queues and for me to sit there in front of my computer, you know staring at trade chat and just being bored silly [yeah ha] But then my tank is, that's why I think I do a DPS a tank and a healer, because instant queues for that is ridiculous, you know, it's so much quicker and easier so that's kinda why I flop between two of them [mm] so my queue times is like, ugh it was so hard to level my hunter, oh god [hahaha yeah] but it's done now, so

Jake: So now it's done and you can feel

Crystal: Like I've done something

Jake: like you've made it

Crystal: I did it, yeah, I got him to 90, so he's done.

Jake: So is it fair to say that the activities of level grinding and gear grinding are similar and, but it's more the sense of the goal that's different, that you don't have a moving target as much with level grinding? Or is there something different too about the activities?

Crystal: (pause) well, the other thing that I noticed that I do that other people do differently, is that when I am level-grinding, I don't quest. I don't go out of my way to go here to there to here, you know, go over there, kill so many people, come back [okay, yeah] I don't do that. That's too time consuming to me. All I do is when I hit 14 or 15, go straight into the dungeons, and that's all I do. [hm] To me that's the fastest way of leveling [mhm] so I don't get all the experience of the lore, you know, of all the different things that's happening out in the world, I do do that, with like one character, like one character, usually one of my mains, like my paladin or my warlock, especially when the new Pandaria stuff dropped, I did go out there and did every single quest once [okay] you know, so I do experience the content, but once that's done, I'm done, you know, I don't do that anymore, I go just straight into dungeons. Does that make sense?

Jake: Yeah, yeah

D: Is that kinda like what you were asking about?

Jake: Yeah, yeah, totally. so you, um, so that's what most of your playing consists of is leveling [dungeons] and doing dungeons with whatever character you're working on [yeah]. So how many, since you don't so many characters and leveled so many characters, like have you done some of the dungeons like dozens of times or

Crystal: Oh, hundreds of times

Jake: hundreds of times, yeah

Crystal: I do have my favorites and stuff like that, but I've done every single dungeon hundreds of times. At different times, you know, like I'll have a lowbie versus, you know, my highbies, you know, but, yeah, it's, I've done dungeons hundreds and hundreds of times [yeah] and I even sat there, and I'll power level people, like my husband, like if he has a lowbie character, I'll run into a dungeon with him with my paladin, pull every single person, and he gets all the experience, you know what I mean, and just go crazy [yeah] so, I mean, there's that too, but Peter, my husband, only has like maybe like two or three, and that's it, and I have like 12 haha

Jake: Yeah, so those dungeons must be just very familiar places to you

Crystal: Oh, they're so familiar, yeah, I mean I know every little crook, crevice, I know where I'm going, [haha, yeah] you know, I can, with my warrior right now, it's crazy because half the people are just trailing behind me cause I'm just boom, next person, boom, next person, I'm just going crazy, pulling everything, you know, as long as the healer can keep up with me, then I'm going through that dungeon in five seconds, you know. [yeah] they almost yell at me to slow down because they need to loot everything [right] cause I'm not concerned about looting either, I'm just boom, next person, boom, next person.

Jake: So it sounds like you don't have a sense of being bored of the dungeons, it sounds like there's something about the familiarity

Crystal: I know what I'm doing, you know, if somebody goes crazy, or if one NPC goes running off one way, I know where they're going and I can yank them back to me or whatever have you. So I know what I'm doing every single time I'm in there [yeah]

Jake: Yeah, so it seems like how you were saying before how you don't, when something new comes out you wait to find out how you're supposed to do it

Crystal: yeah, or, the other thing, I'm not concerned with it. Oh, I have the best gear, these new, these new plans for a pair of pants came out, they're better than what I have, and I gonna go crazy trying to get it? No. [mhmm] Cause everybody and their left nut's doing that, and I don't want to be part of it. [yeah] I'll get it, a couple weeks later, when the hype's died down and I'll go and do my own thing and get it eventually

Jake: Yeah, so you just have to sense of urgency to keep up on the cutting edge of the game

Crystal: No, I mean I do experience some raiding every once in a while, but it's not my thing, I don't like the pressure, it's a game [yeah] If I'm not having fun...

I look at questions

Jake: Yeah it seems like dungeons are what take the most time, what you spend the bulk of the time doing

Crystal: Mhmm, dungeons, leveling

Jake: So just, go through a typical gaming session for you, like you get home from work, it's a regular weeknight, what, how does it, you log on

Crystal: I log on, pretty much check my supplies, make sure my bags are empty, I'll go repair every single time um between instances, I'll queue up for a dungeon, and pretty much just wherever I get plopped at you know, I'll make sure, first off I'll run forward and make sure the rest of the group's there, cause we're always piled on top of each other so if they move around I know they're alive and they're playing [yeah] and then I'll just be like, you know I'll just start running off to the next available person, or, to the first MOB, and then just start taking them down or whatever I have to do. If I have to wait, if I'm a DPS or something then I have to wait on them to do what they want to do, because I can't, I know my role, I try to play my roles, I'm not going to be a healer and try to run up there and try to tank something haha [haha] I think I'd die pretty quickly [right]

Jake: So you, then you would play through that dungeon...

Crystal: And then go, immediately sell everything off, repair again, and then queue for the next one

Jake: And how many dungeons would you do in a few hours?

Crystal: It depends on what I'm playing, on a DPS it might take me an hour just to do two, if I'm a tank, I'll usually within an hour probably get maybe five or six done. [wow] Depending on the queues and who all's around. [mhmm]

Jake: So that would be the, what it would consist of: dungeons, doing the repairs, and selling stuff

Crystal: Yeah, I'd just play a couple hours—or, I'll usually wait on the weekends to work on blacksmithing or whatever, but I'll have more time, and I'll usually use one of my better characters, you know because they can fly faster and stuff like that, so if i'm gathering stuff, for

materials, I'll use one of them to go out and grab everything, and then just throw it in the guild bank, switch characters, have that character go grab everything, do what they gotta do [mhmm] so, weekends are usually when I concentrate on other stuff

Jake: So um, why do you have it set up that way that on the weekends you do that, is that just your routine or?

Crystal: Eh, just whatever I want to do

Jake: So we kind of covered what parts you enjoy the most, it sounds like it's really the, uh, leveling up characters

Crystal: It's the knowledge that I know what I'm doing and can pretty much, you know, do what I wanna do when I wanna do it, but you know, like the grinding

Jake: So what's your um, like mood, or what does it feel like when you're just playing on a typical night, like what does it feel like?

Crystal: To me it feels good because I see progression, I see that I'm working towards my goals. If I see that little bar moving, then I'm happy. You know, that kind of stuff. [yeah] So that's really, and the knowledge that it's always there, and it's never changing, not really. I mean sometimes they change, but it's not that bad.

Jake: What do you mean it's never changing?

Crystal: I know the dungeons, instances. A few times when the new stuff comes out, like the Scarlet Monastery got completely overhauled [mm] and it changed a little bit. It took me a little while to figure that out, but now that I do, [yeah] things don't change. I could run, uh, Black Phantom Depths five hundred times and know exactly where everything is and what's going to happen [yeah]

Jake: So there's something about just seeing that progress bar moving that, for you, [yeah] just gives you a sense

Crystal: Yeah, and then that progress bar goes away at 90 haha and then that's it! haha

Jake: Yeah, so, so, the satisfaction of seeing the progress bar go up is, there's something eventually it not being there anymore that is satisfying.

Crystal: Yeah, and I don't, I'm not gonna—I mean the same thing happens with Rep and stuff I guess too, but once I hit, you know, I just, eh—I'm not gonna, like those same five quests every day, and I have to go back to that place again and again and again, it just does not do it for me [yeah] I can't do, I can't do those. [yeah] My husband can, I can't, no, I, nooooo!! [haha] haha

Jake: Have you ever done it?

Crystal: I have, I've tried, it's just, it never seems, like I can't make myself do that same thing, those dailies—that's and evil word for me—dailies—is like, ugh, monotonous. But yet I like repeated stuff, so, I don't know what it is about it that, I guess it's the forcing me to do it

Jake: Hm, yeah because you sort of do the same dungeons daily

Crystal: Yeah, so I do that, but I don't understand why I can't get over, why does instances not bother me but dailies do

Jake: Yeah. (pause) Is that just a mystery for you?

Crystal: It's a mystery, it's a complete mystery. Because Peter loves them. [yeah] My husband can do dailies till the sun doesn't shine. And he's, you know, it's a good way to get cash and money and all that other stuff, but I just can't, I can't do it, and I don't know why, I don't know, it's a complete mystery, I have no idea why I don't like it [hahaha] cause you would think, with the way that I am I would love it [yeah] but I can't, I don't, nooo!

Jake: Well it seems like the thing that

Crystal: Cause it's got a progress bar too, because you can see the reputation going up and up and up, but I don't know, I have no clue why that bothers me so much, it just does [hm] that is really strange

Jake: Is this something that you've been aware of or is this something that just, us talking about now

Crystal: Yeah I just never really thought about it until now, and it's just like, well I do like all those things, so why can't I stand it? And it's just in my head, it's like that word "daily" is just like ahhhh! [hahaha] *sigh* [hm] And you would think I would love it because it's the same stuff, but I don't, and I don't understand it, it's a weird thing.

Jake: yeah, it seems like the one thing you did say is that it feels like it's someone else telling you that you have to do it

Crystal: I guess, and not me voluntarily doing it. [yeah] Maybe that's what it is.

Jake: It does seem like you are in a way doing daily instances

Crystal: Yeah, but that's cause I want to

Jake: no one, the game, or no one is sort of saying like, this is what you have to do every day to get to here. You're just saying, well that's the best way, and that's sort of what I want to do

Crystal: Yeah, maybe, I just...

Jake: But that's not a totally satisfying answer

Crystal: Uh, yeah, it's just, you would think I would but it's just not, it's just, ugh, but I know that, if I really have to and I put my mind to that's what I really want to do, I've been dying to go back to BC to finish up doing these quests for the Nether Drakes, cause I do want their mounts, their dragon mounts, [mhm] and a lot of people have them and stuff like that, but you need to do these same quests again every day in order to do it and I really do like the Drakes and I, you know, it's just I have to knuckle it in my head to be like, okay, I don't care how hard it is, I'm gonna do it [yeah] but I've gotta get it in my head first and then I'll do it

Jake: Because you want the mounts

Crystal: Yeah

Jake: And that, you've just decided it's worth it

Crystal: But I have to knuckle it into my head and be like, as soon as I get home, as soon as I start playing, I gotta go do this, and get it out of the way, and then I can play with what I want [mhm] you know

Jake: And that's not usually how you feel about the other things in the game [uh uhn] it's just a natural

Crystal: It's just like uggghhh. To me that's not enjoyable, I have to go do this, then I can get to what I want to do

Jake: mhmm. And are most of those daily quests—they're just the quest format where you have to go and do something, like kill something or

Crystal: Yeah, they're all like blue, like, you gotta go here, kill so many things, bring this back to me, you know, and then I can be done with it, and it's just like ugghhh. [yeah] repeatables
shudder

Jake: So tell me, just a story of a really satisfying moment for you

Crystal: (pause) A really satisfying moment—I think, a really kind of fun time I had, we did have a small group of people that we were friends with, a group, a guild, and what we would do is we would go back to old dungeons and old instances just for giggles, you know [mhmm] and to get

loot and to also experience them, because like I said, I don't really raid, [yeah] I don't know what some of the content is for endgame bosses and stuff like that, so for me it was fun because everyone was ultra powerful, knew what their roles were, and basically , it was like herding cats, people just went everywhere, was pullin' all kinds of stuff, and it wasn't like I had to be the tank, I had to make sure everybody was okay—everybody was at such a level that they could handle it

Jake: So you were, um, I don't think I got you at the very beginning—so you were going back to do content that was like [old] easier—so you were really powerful because you were further along in the game

Crystal: Yeah we were like 90s, but this raid that was back like during the 60s, so everyone that was in the group was 90s and could run around like cats, I don't have to conform to that group standard, that I as a tank had to go out and there's a certainty of death or wiping. We could just run around like crazy and be fine [right, right] So that was fun to me, like that was ridiculous fun, because we just went back, and then you get loot that was like more on the lines of cosmetic, so you would get like that weird weapon or something that's just kind of cool to look at cause now you have transmogging [yeah] you know and certain things to make it look like different stuff [yeah] so there's this one thing that you could get that was like a head, like a hat, but all it is is like a little strip of cloth that goes over your eyes so you look like you're a blind person [hm] so it's just kind of fun to go back and do those content but not have all that kind of responsibility on you that you have to do it in a certain way. And but yet at the same time every boss I kind of got to experience what everybody else did during that time and knew what happened [yeah] and that was fun to me. I don't really get to do that very much anymore because I have to wait until, like, I just don't like doing raids like I told you because it's like I have to do things the right way or whatever, I have to watch out for this or that, but to me, going back to the old content and just going through it was really fun because I don't have to worry about other people I can just *makes motion with hand* you know.

Jake: yeah, so you kinda got to experience the content of the raids without the responsibility and stress

Crystal: Yeah, I do like that, cause I think that's why like, I'll watch things online, and I'll watch other people playing it, you know to experience the content, like I know what happens in the Siege of Orgrimmar, [yeah] because I've watched other people do it [yeah] you know, I've watched my husband do it, or I've watched all those other people online like Swifty and stuff, I'll watch them, so I know what happens, but I'm not going to put my characters in there and have all that, you know, anxiety on me, pressure, to, you know that kind of stuff, cause then I can't concentrate on the game, I have to concentrate so hard on what I'm doing, and I'd rather watch the story.

Jake: Yeah so this, this opportunity was a nice way to get the story [to relax] just without having to

Crystal: Just goofin' off

Jake: cool. and was that a while ago?

Crystal: Uh, yeah. I would say that's probably about a year ago

Jake: Yeah. Alright, so tell me a story of something unsatisfying, something that is just, what you don't like about

Crystal: Again, it's kinda like with guilds, people get so cliquish, and point fingers, and it's like high school all over again—c'mon people, it's a game, enjoy it, don't get caught up in he said, she said kinda stuff cause then it's not fun [yeah] and people don't understand that. Or maybe they're too young too. [yeah]

Jake: Is there a time that happened to you that you remember?

Crystal: Yeah I mean you know, there's times that I've been in guilds and stuff, and, I mean I'm not on very often and people sometimes get a little pissed at that, or I don't show up to certain events or something like that, you know, and I shouldn't have to tell them my whole life story to be like, "hey, look, I'm sorry, I work 9-5 in a corporate job. I'm sorry, this is casual to me" [yeah] you know that kind of stuff. and they just don't understand or, or they may take something of context or something like that. I'm sorry, I'm, I shouldn't have to watch what I say you know what I mean. I mean I'm not going out there are saying F this and you know being all, you know nasty or whatever [yeah] but, you know, I just, you know, I wanna goof off

Jake: Yeah, so it sounds like what you experienced in those sorts of social contexts is the sense that you had to keep up, ummm...you had to sort of meet the requirements of

Crystal: What they wanted.

Jake: Of that they wanted and

Crystal: Cause a lot of times it's RP guilds. I'll go into RP guilds just to relax and a lot of times I do like to play more, if I get into a group we always play evil characters, because I mean we're the Horde [right] you know, so we gotta be evil and—and I did, one time I played as the victim, you know, so they were coming after me and stuff like that, which was fine, I didn't, I'm not going to take anything personal and it's not like my character was dead dead and I had to get rid of them or anything like that, it was just for fun and stuff like that, but, it's just you know, I don't know, it just got way too—and I have my own real friends that I see, you know face to face, I

can give them a call, I don't have to Skype them, I don't even know what these people look like, you know

Jake: Right. Yeah. What, tell me about playing on an RP server. Like why you chose to be on an RP server, how that kind of changes the experience.

Crystal: Well I've always had an RP background so I like the idea of getting dressed in costumes, I like the idea of playing roles [mhmm] I like the idea of coming up with like the goofy Hell's Angels, you know [yeah], or, you know with the Pandaria stuff like that, you know, being a bunch of wandering monks or something, you know, I like those kinds of ideas, I like playing my character [mhmm] I mean, you know, on an RP server you're supposed to do that. It doesn't matter who's behind the character, it just depends on, it's all on that toon. [right] So, I mean, I have role-played my warlock before as like an evil person that puts like demons inside of people and he's a, he's a tailor so he'll sit there and stitch people's bodies up and stuff like that you know, or just weird freaky stuff like that [mhmm] My paladin, he's an upstanding, you know in my head he's a character, [yeah] he's a toon. When I play that character, I'm in that kind of mindset [okay] you know, each of my toons kind of has a different mindset [yeah] so, that, to me, so that's what I like. And I don't get gear just, you know, cause it's the best gear, I might get that best gear, but I'll go out and find something that looks cool, and transmog it to look like that you know. [yeah] But I don't go for all the sexy b'elfs and you know, I don't care about my clothes being sexy or, or anything like that as long as it's functional and it's kind of in that same mindset of what I have for my character [yeah] that's what I like

Jake: Do you want to show me some of your characters and tell me kind of like what their personalities

Crystal: Yeah, can you see from here?

Jake: Yeah, I think I can see from here pretty well

C: I mean, I don't have, like some of their gear's in their stuff, you know, like one of the things for my paladin is like, I had to get the Justice and Lawgiver set, you know, I just had to do that, so that was like one of those goals that I put in my head that I just had to do

Jake: I think I'm going to put the recorders here and put these on the arm of the chair if that's okay

Crystal: Mhmm. Like and then we've gone to a few world events, like there's my mage, she's kind of more in a Western outfit. I specifically made this outfit for her, [uh huh] you know with the hat and stuff so it's kinda more of a Wild West

Jake: So by made you mean you found those different elements and

Crystal: And then just transmogged everything

Jake: Transmoged stuff yeah

Crystal: Yeah to make it look like that. So, the gloves don't quite match yet but like the pants and the boots and the shoulder piece, and I made sure I got the black hat you know, and that kind of stuff, [mhm] so everything kind of matches

Jake: and which character is that?

Crystal: Uh, she's my mage.

Jake: So what's her personality and her story and

Crystal: Well, I made sure she had the blue eyes, but she has the green skin, so kind of like Thrall where she might be more human, like maybe be more like a half breed. But she was trained by humans and stuff like that, so that's why I kind of gave her a mage, because a lot of the mages and teachers and schoolings—it's not quite orcy, [yeah, yeah] you would think orcs are more like, shamans and stuff like that [right] so that's why I kind of gave her more blue eyes and she more, looks a little bit more like a—she's not tribal or anything—more human [she's sort of a] has a human background a little bit or maybe gets along better with humans than most orcs would [yeah] so that's kind of like my mindset with her

Jake: So when you play that character and you're, you're role-playing that character, how do you bring that into, into the way you're playing

Crystal: Um, I'm a bit more like understanding of a lot of different things, like I would—this character to me would go up to an Alliance person and be more friendly with them, would try to be friends rather than “oh my god I must kill you” hah [yeah] you know that kind of stuff, or Peter's character or somebody he knows is an Alliance character, like outside of Orgrimmar, we could meet [yeah] you know that kind of stuff. And she actually does have an arcane thing on her that I can understand what they say. Cause usually

Jake: Oh usually it's scrambled?

Crystal: yeah it's scrambled but what, I have a thing for her that I can understand

Jake: Oh cool, so that actually fits the background

Crystal: Yeah, so I can actually understand what they're saying because there's a glyph that I can, when I put on it allows me to understand what they're saying. [cool] so I figured she would be more of a, you know, she's not quite all orc, so orcs might actually distrust her [mm] and that's why I kinda gave her the blue eyes cause it's unusual [yeah] for her [yeah] so that's why I

figured she might have a little bit of human in her somewhere maybe in her background or something, she just never quite was a full orc but eh

Jake: So she's just kind of inbetween worlds

Crystal: Yeah. You know, but yet she's an orc so she has to do what she has to do [yeah] so that's kind of like her mindset, or her character in my head [yeah] but she's also a fire mage. Fire mages don't do the best damage in the world, but in my head she's always been a fire mage, always will be.

Jake: Just because, even if you could switch to something more high performance, it would ruin

Crystal: Yeah, it'd be strange in my head [yeah] and I've leveled her as a fire mage from the beginning, so to switch to a different type of mage, I might not know the mechanics, because it's different [right] you know, certain things might not proc the way that fire mages do. [right] so, but I kinda stuck with that and that's the way I'm going to be no matter what. So to me this person will never be a raider, because fire is not the best in the world right now [right] but, you know, that's fine with me. And that's my warlock, and as you can see he's got the Mohawk and everything, but all of his gears inside the, inside of his bank and stuff cause I keep all that stuff, but I've never transmogged it yet.

Jake: So what's his, kind of, personality and backstory?

Crystal: He's sneaky, you know, he's evil, like he's got evil intentions. [mhmm] To me when I play him is like, you know, I might be the most nicest person in the world, I'll be like, "I'll be your best friend" but I'm that best friend with the knife on your back hahaha [haha] you know? [yeah] On the front I'm "Yeah, everything's fine, everything's good, let's go to this party" you know or whatever have you but at the same time he's slipping that whatever in your drink haha [haha] you know, it's like, you know, "what do you need?" you know and stuff like that, but at the same time it's like well if I do this for you you're going to do something for me, in the long run, or something like that, so I kind of play him like that. But he's also a little bit wild and crazy, so you know.

Jake: And how much, um, when you're like communicating with other players, in a role playing server, do you actually like, is everything that you say role-played or are there times when do and times when you don't

Crystal: Times when I do or times when I don't. Usually it's like a staged setting [okay] It's, you know, we already have this planned out that we're going to go to here, and when we go to there, we're in character. Other times when I'm out and about or whatever, it doesn't, you know, we're not in character unless it's already planned or you know, that they want to do that. [yeah] I'm not

one person to just walk up to say, you know as a role-player, I'm not one of those kinda people [okay] like I, if I want to, if I really wanted to I could walk up to the inn and go into that mode in my head, but, you know, I'm not a random pickuper, I have to have people that want to do that [yeah] and then have it so it's, that's what we're going to do

Jake: So what people would you do that with, or are you doing that with anyone right now?

Crystal: Um, not right now, but I mean I did in the past. Like I said, we had that evil guild that we were part of for a while and Peter still is, and my character kinda knows them, and if they need extras then they'll set it up with me, you know, they'll come to me, or they'll come to Peter and tell me that they need—like that one time I told you about that one character—they needed somebody to die [mm] and their characters, their guild people were gonna come kill me [mhmm] You know, and that was fun to me, that was great [yeah] I mean I got to sit there and sneak up on them and typed it all out that I, you know I was a hunter at the time, and I camouflaged myself, you know, and I was, had this outfit on, and I was sneaking through the snow and stuff like that you know [yeah] and then when they caught me it was like “oh my god” you know and I had to, you know, “you guys are liars! you know, you're a bunch of...!” So I got to play that, so that was fun [cool] I mean it was a couple hours out of my day, and they got to have fun, and I was like, “ugghh” gurgling and “nooo! you can't!” and they were carving my eye out and torturing me and stuff, and it was just like “ahhh!” [yeah] but it was just, you know, my character's fine and [yeah] after that was over it was over

Jake: Yeah. Is that something that you did through typing

Crystal: Uh huh, yeah.

Jake: So you wouldn't use voice chat for role-playing

Crystal: Oh no no no

Jake: Yeah that was kind of my sense

Crystal: No you just type it all out

Jake: Cool

Crystal: So that was fun. I mean I still do that sometimes, but you have to be in certain areas that are known to be roleplaying areas, so like that Inn back there is a known place for role-playing. Pick up lines, [okay] pick up places [yeah] or Silvermoon but I don't like going to Silvermoon cause it's kind of odd haha

Jake: Okay, what's odd about it?

Crystal: A lot of people, like ahhhhh, the stuff that they roleplay is like, I swear to god this one time, I was there and this one b'elf was pregnant and she was having a baby right there in the middle of Silvermoon [haha] I'm like ugh, I don't want to have roleplay—I mean she was just right in the middle of it, people were around her and they were all trying to help her and stuff and her water broke and she was just roleplaying that she was pregnant. And hey, you know, more power to you if that's what you want to do [yeah] go ahead, you know, but I'm , I was just like ugh I don't want to hear that hahaha [haha]

Jake: So it wasn't your idea of a fun role-play

Crystal: Yeah but hey if that's what you want, that's cool [yeah] go ahead, and if you want to be pregnant and have a mom and have kids and stuff like that then hey more power to you, I'm not going to judge and you know whatever [yeah] so, there's that stuff. And then, like I put most of my RP guild, my RP stuff in my bank, so my Paladin, actually it's funny cause I have the justice set, but I also went out one day because I heard there was a big party, like this, there's a group that holds weekend parties sometimes or special events, and it's called Club Styx, and they actually pump music, that like, through one of their websites, and you can go to their website and listen to them DJ music while you're at the party, so there's people there, there's tunes there, and it was a beach party, so I actually went out and bought clothing that looked like beach attire, you know, like a pair of thong sandals and a pair of shorts and a little tank top and stuff and I went there and just, you know, danced around and listened to their DJ music and stuff and it was fun, I thought it was fun. People come in all different kinds of costumes, and they plan on this stuff for ages and stuff [really?] and I think that's why it's cool on an RP server, because RP servers, most of the times they're more concerned about what they look like than what they're doing, [yeah] so you know that's kind of fun to see all these different outfits and things that you would never think would look cool but “oh my god that's awesome” you know, and I think that's where the RP side of me, and the costumes that we do [yeah] you know, it kind of triggers in my brain

Jake: Yeah, so that's, so the, there's like a finite amount of pieces of gear in the gear in the world, but there's so many that the combinations that people can come up with are almost endless, [yeah] so that's kind of [yeah, yeah] so part of what

Crystal: But that's gear grinding, but this stuff is never gonna change, it's already in the system, you know, and it's old stuff [right] but it looks cool

Jake: so it's all just material to potentially use to put together for a costume

Crystal: Yeah, but I'm not gonna sit there and grind out for that, you know

Jake: So you would rather find all these things that

Crystal: Look cool—oh my god, you should see my paladin, ah, my paladin has so much stuff, like look, this guy, I mean he's got some really cool gear, he's got some things here that's kind of neat, and he's color coordinated [mhmm] and I like the little headpiece that he's got and all that kind of stuff [yeah] and she's probably 98—yeah, she's 80, look what she's wearing. That's the kind of stuff that I'm like “oh, that's really cool” [uh huh] you know, things that you would never think of, now he's my enchanter, but up here's like his clothes, like I have a harvester, which is, you know, a scythe, you know [yeah] —perfect for a warlock, come on ha you know [yeah] so that kind of stuff

Jake: So you're saying that wouldn't go with his function but it looks really cool

Crystal: No but it looks really cool [yeah] you know. so, that kind of stuff I like. There's the weird goggles that he has, if he's going all crazy, [uh huh] there's his Sharon glasses [hahaha] there's another scythe that I found for him that I thought was pretty cool, there's the gloves, and, where's his shoulders, is that it? Yeah there's his shoulders and there's his head piece, so, you know, stuff like that—when he goes riding around on a nightmare come on! haha

Jake: Yeah, so that just, it all just fits together to create this perfect image

Crystal: Yeah, in my head [yeah] you know, so it works, to me, so, you know, and I go running around with my glasses on and you know, screaming “Sharon” during Halloween or whatever [hahahaha] with my succubus running around behind me, so it's just like, you know

Jake: is that a pet?

Crystal: Uh, yeah, it's one of the pets, yeah. So that to me is pretty fun [mhmm]. And, you know—let's log out here—so there's my, that's my paladin, and for him I had to go out—cause the, the really cool gear for me was the Lawgiver set which is the set that all paladins have and only paladins can have it [mm] but it's all old school stuff, you know, back in the day for Molten Core and stuff, you know, um, it's just really cool. So here's all of his stuff. So like, down here's all that gear I have. It's tons of it. I have the tuxedo pants, there's the shorts that I was wearing for my hah, I have the witch's hat that I thought was cool for Halloween, you know, there's the sandals [yup yup] hahaha, you know [yeah] there's a really cool sword that summons pumpkins, you know pumpkin minions, so that's, you know that's just something funny that I had [yeah] you know that kind of stuff. And I just went out and bough—not bought—but got, like, that's a cool looking shield, um, you know, just kinda weird odds and ends stuff like this one's my favorite because it's a skull and it was really hard to get back in the day, there's the Sword of a Thousand Truths that was on South Park

Jake: oh right I remember that haha

Crystal: hahaha right there, so that's the Sword of a Thousand Truths, it's not really the Sword of a Thousand Truths but it looks exactly like it

Jake: yeah, so you, so um, if you were purely

Crystal: There's a pair of bunny ears haah—don't ask! hahahaah

Jake: Yeah, so if you were purely performance, if that was your only concern all of this gear would be irrelevant

Crystal: yeah

Jake: But to you this is what it's about

Crystal: It's fun, it's just goofin' off, don't ask about the rabbit ears haha [hahaha] And then I have this mask, which is like a, it it, I don't like it, I don't like it very well, but I'll hide it, but the funny thing that it does is it laughs. It has a weird, like if you wear it it laughs. Let me see if I can put it in my inventory real quick. But it has the, the uh haunted, headless horseman laugh. So he'll laugh when I put it on, but I'll hide it so you can't see my face, or, you can't see it, cause I have it so that any helmet I'm wearing you can't see it [yeah] so it's just my face, but if I click on it, as soon as it gets, as soon as it cools off here. So no matter what you'll always see my face, but [mhmm] It's got a cooldown

Jake: yeah, ha, everything has a cool down

Crystal: But it's in the game and it's a laugh that the headless horseman does during Halloween "laugh goes off* [haha] I just think that's funny because I can sit there at any time if I'm out role-playing and just be like mwahahahaha you know [right, right] and it's just kind of fun. And it's in the game, so everybody will hear that. If I do that, everybody hears it. So it's kinda like that evil sinister laugh if I'm doing something evil I can be like ah-hahahah you know [yeah] ha.

Jake: So, do you have that on your warlock too?

Crystal: Uh, yes. Yeah he has it too

Jake: it seems like he would need it more than the paladin

Crystal: yeah, but I have it on my paladin as well. But yeah, those kinds of things, it's fun. [yeah] Like I really like this mask—let me see if I can pull it up for you—because it, it's a deathwing type mask—I gotta turn headpiece on. Like I would use this if I could find the rest of the clothes to make it look good, I would probably use this a lot, let's see if I can get it. Because what it does is it makes me look draconic, but it makes my eyes look red [hm] and it, you know, see it? I really like that, I think it's a really cool look. [mhmm] So, but I don't really go demon with my

paladin. [yeah] To me, my paladin, it's not in my right mindset, [right] my paladin to me is not somebody that's snooty, it's somebody down to earth, is used to working with his hands, you know, get the job done more like a mercenary up for hire *husband makes an effeminate hand gesture* oh stop that, he's not gay ha. He just likes kitties ha, he does, that's his quirk, he likes cats. He has all the cats, like all the little cute cats and stuff like that. [mhmm] and I actually want to try to get an artist, to, like, I could draw it myself but I don't think I could get it quite right, [yeah] so I wanted to try to get a professional to try to draw my character with all these cats lying around him, [hahaha] and he's in this super uber armor you know, and they're like laying across his shield, and he's like you know haha, you know, I just thought I'd be really funny, is like, he's lounging on one of those chaise lounges and have all these kitties draped around him and he's petting them and stuff but he's all in this big bulky armor and stuff like I that and I just thought it would be hilarious [haha yeah] and he has that one like, you know, game show host grin with the little twinkle in the corner of his teeth you know haha [haha] you know that cheesy grin [haha yeah I can picture that] yeah, so that's kinda like, but like I said, this might be more along the lines of a like a DK but I really like it and I know where I can get it again if I have to, so [yeah] but this is his set, I have a here for him, it's my Lawgiver set, and then I did pick up like a couple different like two handed weapons, but he's always been the sword and board person in my head [yeah] you know that kind of stuff. Let me see if I can find my lawgiver set. Oh, I gave him an eye patch once just for giggles [yup] where's my lawgiver set. Is that it? No. Oh there it is, the Judgment set. I did pick up the boots for that red set but didn't finish it *continues to look* where's the shoulders. Okay, so this set right here is the quintessential paladin set that you see all paladins—like, whenever Blizzard is drawing paladins [uh huh] this is the set that they always use. [okay] That it's like one of those sets that, it's famous because it's so cool [yeah] so, that's like the one thing that I had to grind out [yeah] you know, there's the hood.

Jake: So it was worth doing what you hate to get that set

Crystal: Yeah, to get this, oh my god

Jake: How much work did that take? Like how many hours?

Crystal: It, aahhhhh, I could not get the shoulders for the life of me, and between, Peter wanted it as well so we did it together, [mhmm] but you can only do that one raid only once a week, wasn't it honey? I think you could only do it once a week...yeah, so it took about a couple months, [yeah] and there was

Jake: of that

Crystal: Of that same dungeon every week, because you had to wait for it to cool off, [yeah] then go back, and there was always that potential that that one thing wouldn't drop, [right] and there's still a few things that Peter and I will go back to do once in a while, like there's a rare raven mount up in Ashoon that we might do once in a while, there's the huntsman's mount that we still want to do, and I swear to god every single year, when Halloween comes around I—that's the other thing, I got so many 90s so I will get that headless horse mount, I will get it! Ha, but I haven't gotten it yet and a swear to god I think Blizzard took it out of the game and I know they didn't but in my head it's like "Oh my god!" and I do it every day with every single character trying to get it, because as soon as one character gets it, they all get it [oh really] Nowadays, because they changed that.

Jake: Oh so mounts are shared

Crystal: So mounts are shared across your entire account [oh okay] so I just need one character to get it, but it's like rrrrrrr!

Jake: So what do you have to do to get it? What, whats?

Crystal: Every day, um, one of your characters, it's not like an account thing, you get more chances, [yeah] but you can only do it once per day. And it's just one little instance and all you do is you go into this instance and you beat up the boss and it drops, it's a drop, it's not something you have to bid on or anything you know to try to get it, it's just something that's going to drop in a little bag and you open it up and hopefully it's in there [mm] you always get something, [yeah] but you know, those rare items, like the helmet—the laughing helmet, or the one sword that summons the pumpkins, are kind of rare. That mount is uberly rare [okay] but I have like 10 chances to get it and you have to do it every day with every character to see if you can get it and I swear to god Blizzard is laughing at me somewhere! I've tried! [haha] and it's just something that I've gotta have and I will do it every—and it's in my head, it's clicked in my head that I will have it haha [yeah] you can't buy it because it's an account, it's attached, so you can't like sell it to anybody [right] another thing that I would love to have is that spectral tiger, which is another rare mount, which was back in the day, and you could only get it if you played the card game [mm] and now those cards are like thousands of dollars, and I am not spending my hard earned money just to get a mount in the game [right] you know. If it was something I could grind out, and get the materials and make it—that's different, but this, ugh.

Jake: So you mean the actual, physical card game?

Crystal: Mhmm.

Jake: Yeah, so what is it about like, for you, like getting these special mounts, like the headless horse, you know, why work so hard to get that

Crystal: Because it's cool looking and it would be really cool with some characters, like my warlock, oh my god that would be awesome for my warlock, cause they're evil you know? [yeah] It's a green, glowing you know, evil looking horse mount that's half undead—it would be perfect for his Ghost rider you know thing, If he didn't want to ride his nightmare, he could ride this thing and he could fly with it, I can't fly on my nightmare, I could fly with this! [yeah] You know, and stuff like that, and it's just cool looking, every time it stomps it's like green flames around its legs, and it's just like ah yeah. Some of those characters would be really cool [yeah]. I think that's what's, some of my mounts, like for him, I only use red mounts, I don't know why, but in my head, he only rides like the flaming hippogryph, the red dragon, or like a red colored wyvern. Some of my other characters, like one of my priests, I, she's a troll, she's got blue skin, she will only use blue mounts. In my head, I have no idea! [yeah] I guess it's cause I have these concepts in my head of what my characters are like, and they have preferences just like other people do

Jake: Yeah, so it's kind of like aesthetic concerns that, that your, you're sense is that it just wouldn't look right

Crystal: Yeah there's a set for my priest that I would love to have that everybody else is wearing too but it's like a, it's a weird looking hood that makes your face almost indescribable, but it looks angelic [hm] so that would be really cool for my priest. [mhmm] So you know I have certain ideas of things that I would like to have and I will eventually if I really have the mindset that, "oh I wanna go play my priest now and I'm gonna go try to do this"—then I will, but.

Jake: Yeah, what are the odds, do you know what the odds are for getting that mount?

Crystal: *Sigh*. I have no idea, and I don't want to know hahaha all I know is it's hard! Hahaha

Jake: Yeah, so how long have you been trying to get it?

Crystal: awww, years, ugh, at least, maybe three years? [wow] since I finally, you know, was like, where do you get that? And it was like, oh my god, I've gotta have that. But then I didn't have as many characters as I do now, so I get more chances [yeah] you know, I had maybe only two or three, so I only had 2 or 3 chances every day, versus now I have like 10 chances every day, until I do get it, and then it's just a matter of time.

Jake: So do you do it every day with all 10 characters?

Crystal: When that's happening, yes

Jake: What do you mean when that's happening?

Crystal: When it's Halloween, cause it's only a Halloween event [oh] it only lasts for two or three weeks

Jake: ooooh so it's only during that event, so it's, so for the past three years during the Halloween even you've done it

Crystal: I've done it every single day with every character trying to get this mount [gotcha] like, there's a couple mounts for brewfest, but they don't kinda congeal with some of my character ideas, so it's not a big deal for me to get them. [yeah] If I get them, cool [yeah] you know, but it's like, eh. *brief exchange between her and her husband about what mounts they have*

Jake: So what are some of, what are some of your experience of playing often with Peter? Like how does that fit in to playing?

Crystal: I, I enjoy having a buddy, but hahaha, I do, but the funny thing is me and him came up with the concept of, we have twins. So it's funny, Peter and I came up with an idea and we're actually playing twin monks—he's ying and I'm yang. [hm] So it's like, everything about us is the same, we wear the same clothing, the same everything, um but his hair's black and mine's white [mm] So that's the only thing that you can tell them apart, because you know ying and yang is black and white mixed together [right] you know that kind of stuff. Some of our other characters do know each other, but we're not like husband and wife or, uh, I mean certain people might know that behind the scenes we are husband and wife when we play the same time, so if I'm on and Peter's not on and they need to get a hold of Peter they'll come to me, like that one guild they'll come and say "hey, tell Peter we're going to be doing this at this time" [yeah] but, you know, or that one time I had that one character that died for them, that was just for funsies, but I'm not part of that guild, so we do have separate lives [mhmm] and we don't play our monks all the time. That monk that I have is still level 9 just because we haven't been wanting to play together because he's been raiding and trying to get gear [yeah] so

Jake: So a lot of times you're playing simultaneously

Crystal: Yeah, but we're doing different things

Jake: but you're really kind of not in the game doing something together

Crystal: No, but sometimes we do, like I said, if we want to, if he has the time and wants to, then we'll go play our monks and you know, just have a good time. [yeah] You know, we'll go level grinding together and he likes to quest, and when we get high enough I might try to convince him to run a couple instances or dungeons but, you know, I think we're not as concerned—I'm concerned more along the lines of, cause in my head "level, level, level" [yeah] He's not, and he wants to just goof off with those characters, but in my mindset I have to click that off, or try to,

[yeah] you know, and do the things that he wants to do [mhmm] So, it just depends on what we want to do. Cause I, I watch him raiding and playing and stuff like that you know, in the mean time when I'm doing my thing, so I get the content, and it's cool, but I don't have the pressure of having to do it

Jake: So, so, um, if you were playing right now you might be signed up for an instance

Crystal: Yeah, I'd be on my

Jake: waiting for it, and you might be watching what's happening

Crystal: Yeah, and just watching him playing, or I might have something on the TV, and it's more just background noise, white noise—do you need to sit back down?

Jake: Um, eventually. Is there anything else you wanted to show me? That is important to?

Crystal: Uh, so, there's that, and there's my mage, and there's my priest. I've changed a few things with her. She's a troll but she's not like tribal or anything. Again, it's kind of like a mindset with me [mhmm] All my healer types, for some reason her, my druid's a healer type, and my shaman—my, shaman is also a healer type . Now my shaman, because orcs are shamanistic and stuff she doesn't have blue eyes, she has more like greenish, and I made her skin a bit darker, so she's more tribal, so she's more of an orc-y orc [yeah] you know that kind of stuff [yeah] um, so, but all of my healers always have more of a den-mother type mentality that they do want to mother people and help people and stuff like that [yeah] but I don't go tribal. In my head I can't envision a voodoo priest, I mean yeah they do heal and stuff like that but, I don't know, more the light kind of stuff, it's different, I can't seem to get into “they jungle trolls” [hm] I can't seem to speak in that Jamaican accent, I mean I could, I have certain UIs that will do that for me, but I can't visualize that in my head. I find that hard, it's a hard character concept. [hm] And there's my rouge, and there's my hun-tar, and then like I said, there's Ying. So, we both have the same clothes and everything. And then I haven't leveled my—cause the other thing is, for me, Peter's main has always been a DK, a death knight, [mhmm] so for me, in my head, Peter's the death knight [mhmm] so that's why I haven't leveled mine, cause I can't seem to get a concept in my head that fits my mentality. Cause I was never, like if you notice, all of my characters um, I have ranged DPS, except for maybe my harlequin, she's my only melee class DPS [yeah] so I don't go in close and personal, I'm not a two-hander, so I find that concept hard for some reason, so if I go with my death knight I probably do tanking, but I also would get quick instances, you know

Jake: Yeah. So what is it about like, like you said you find the concept of getting in close and personal hard, like what

Crystal: Uh, like I can

Jake: Like what happens when you do, does it just not feel right or

Crystal: It just doesn't feel right, like, whenever I have concept characters, or do uh, like for pro or any kind of RPG that I'm playing even if it's pen and paper, I'm not that type. I'm either the tank, meaning the one person that goes in and distracts everybody, "come on hit me" [yeah] you know, or I'm a healer [mhhmm] I'm very good with the healer mentality, but I think most girls are, I don't know if that's a stereotype or whatnot but a lot of girls are healers, [yeah] there's not many girls running around there as a tank, or at least not that I've seen that are very fluent on like YouTube or [yeah] or any place like that [yeah]. Um, or I'm a ranged caster type [mhhmm] I just can't seem to get into the concept of getting in close to somebody and shanking them, or using this two handed weapon and just going bezerker mode. Even my characters on Diablo and stuff are tanking types. [hm] I don't, *sigh* haha

Jake: something just, it's how it feels

Crystal: Yeah, I can't get over it. I'm not a two-hanger damage dealer. Peter loves those types, my husband's different. [yeah] Or the sneaky, thief-y type [yeah] I, I don't know hah, the only reason why I did level that rogue was A I had to do it because it was a class that I didn't have [yeah] and B Peter needed help with only a rogue, a rogue, there's a certain item that Peter needs to increase one of his, uh, his reputations, and you have to go up into this instance and steal lock-boxes—pickpocket them [yeah] and only a rogue can pickpocket, so I had to max my rogue out so he could go into this place and pickpocket all these boxes so he could turn them in for Rep. [right] But he doesn't like level grinding, I do.

Jake: So it worked out

Crystal: So it worked out. I had to have one, I had to have a 90. He needed a rogue, you know, to finish up his title [yup] and so it just happed. So what he'll do is he'll take my account over, go take my rogue, do what he's gotta do, and then, so he'll just, he'll hijack my character for a little while. So then, some of the things I do for my husband is he loves those achievement things and stuff so I'll help him out finishing out what the best gear is and tell him what he needs—that kind of stuff.

Jake: Yeah, so there's sort of a way you can, especially since you have so many different classes you can benefit him through

Crystal: Well too, like I said, I have maxed all my professions out, so if he needs something, I can get it

Jake: Yeah, so you're, not only by creating all your characters do you have that capacity within your own characters but also

Crystal: mhmm

Jake: yeah, for him as well

Crystal: Or anything he rally kinda needs or I might need sown the road [mhmm] cause like I said, I don't like going to the auction house and spending all this money and gold and, and all that stuff, I'll go out and get it myself

Jake: yeah. do you know how much, I mean you said you've been playing since all the way back when it started. Do you know how much total time you've played?

Crystal: Isn't there some way on WoW that you can find out how much you played?

Jake: Yeah, I,

Crystal: I'll find out

Jake: Other people I've interviewed have told me I'm just curious

Crystal: yeah there's like a certain thing that you can do

tried to figure out how to find it

Jake: Okay all you have to do—I just looked it up on my phone—you just type in slash played

Crystal: Oh okay, I knew there was an easier way

Jake: Yeah

Crystal: Okay it says total time played 3 days 2 hours 59 minutes and 53 seconds

Jake: So is that just for that character?

Crystal: I'm not sure if it does do just by character. Yeah it could just be by character. Let me try my warlock, cause he's my oldest character. Let me see if there's any difference because that doesn't sound right

Jake: Yeah

Crystal: He's my oldest, he's my first. I think that's why it sticks with me. Yeah 53 days, 0 hours, 3 minutes, 32 seconds, so that's what, two months worth of play. Or, 53 days that would be almost, 60 days is two months

Jake: Yeah, it's close

Crystal: a couple hours every day. He is my oldest.

Jake: so he's probably longer than average

Crystal: I don't know, I might have played my paladin more. when I played paladin I was really paladin-crazy for a while. Yeah, 59 days. that's 4 months right there, [mhmm] so, at a couple hours every day, you know, and I played my paladin more than my warlock, but they're like my oldest characters [yeah] but, but in a way, you couldn't be, cause b'elfs only came out in BC, and then I think that's when I went a little crazy, because I was like "ahh paladin, finally!" [yeah] I didn't have to be an alliance character. Because I always will be Horde mentality, like, I mean I just can't seem to [hm] when I play my Alliance characters it makes me feel uneasy [yeah] like I just don't, like I'm in the land of evil people haha [yeah] you know, because I've been in such a Horde mentality that amongst the Alliances I'm like tippy-toeing like "I'm not a Horde character" haha. Cause I just want to look at all these humans and night elves running around and be like "I'm not supposed to kill them" hahaha

Jake: It seems like a lot of your experience playing is that some things feel right to you and some things don't, like it feel right to be Horde, it feels right to be a tank or a healer or a ranged caster and other things don't feel right

Crystal: Yeah, but I can't seem to wrap my head around mentalities like being a night elf and being a tank its like "what?" but I can do a b'elf you know, and it's like, why is that different, I don't know it just doesn't feel right. Or I don't have the right character concept in my head or something I don't know [yeah]

Jake: So what do you think has kept you engaged with WoW for such a long amount of time?

Crystal: I think it's the new content, because they do drop new characters, new experiences, new classes. Um, new content is fun as long as I don't have to do it haha [yeah] as long as I don't have to raid, like this whole thing with the siege of Orgrimmar is awesome, that they're finally killing off Gorash or at least getting rid of him, but Thrall's not coming back so, I do like the story line, like I have read the comic books. I don't have them but I've read them. And I've read some of the stories, and I have actually done into research things like lore, just for character concepts, you know [yeah] and things like that, so the story of it intrigues me. I like how it's going, I like how things will change, like Jana being, you know starting to be a little twisted not that Thrall's moved on, you know, he has a family and does what he needs to do, but now, you know, Volgen's going to be in change. And, now too, it's like there has been no writing or how things are going to progress this point, you know, past Pandara, so where are they going to go. Now it's going to be the Warlords of Draenor. Well, what's going to be the big concept? I kinda

know a little bit but I don't know everything, and, you know, when it comes to time travelling and things like that it's going to get a little crazy but, you know, it's interesting. [hm] You know, so, and then, you know, I do want to experience the new content, questing and stuff like that, to know what's going to happen or what will happen and then I'll let Peter do all the raiding so I can figure out what actually happens haha [uh huh] or I'll watch somebody online do it

Jake: Yeah, cause the main story takes place in the raids, the big events

Crystal: Yeah, they big events happen there. But I'll either A just watch somebody else do it or eventually I'll watch my husband go through it

Jake: Right, so you're pretty excited then about the unfolding of the story

Crystal: Mhmm, I want to know where things are going to go, I've always been—like I love reading, I read a lot. And even like a lot of RP games, I really do enjoy reading the stories and things like that. And I do like playing too but you know, it's just knowing what's out there, where it's going to go, how things progress [yeah] I like the characters changing—you know, having Thrall still being the overlord, whatever have you, it's nice to see a change, even if the change was bad [mhmm] you know, but the story's moving forward, you know, things can't always be rosy all the time. and that's what, Star Wars is like that, you know [right] there's always going to be a time of rift and change but then it's going to be for the better eventually [mhmm] if you can just last through it, you'll be better off for it. It's that whole, even in The Hobbit, you know, there's always that story of the dark times before you move onto something better [mhmm] and I think that's what appeals to a lot of people about WoW is that story line you know, there's always going to be good, bad. I just think in my head I like the Horde story more than the Alliance story right now

Jake: What's the Horde story?

Crystal: Well the Horde story to me is like this dude coming into power, ruling like he did, then having to move on because he personally, as a person, couldn't keep doing that, that he had to evolve, that he had to, you know even though he had to make hard choices and leave other people in charge that didn't do, you know, as good as him, [mhmm] but he did it for the benefit of everybody [mm] you know, he didn't just, he wasn't just the chief, you know, he had to put that aside and be the better person for all of Azeroth and not just for the Horde, you know, and he took on those aspects, he found a wife, he has a kid, you know, that, even when he came back he knew he could never do that again, he had to pass it on to someone else that would do a good job [yeah] but he's still around, [yeah] so, he'll still be there to help people out and do the right thing

Jake: And do you experience your characters as being part of that story? or when you play do you experience it against that backdrop?

Crystal: Some of my characters, yeah, like, some of my characters, like, people always think that b'elfs are all highfalutin and this that and the other, but you know, some of my concepts for—my warlock? oh, he's just out there for himself, you know, he'll do whatever he wants to do [yeah] you know, but I do have certain character concepts like my mage would be better, would be trying to mend the conflict between us and them. My paladin is not really a highfalutin, he's more of a gritty, you know if people just give him a chance, you know he'll prove that he's a loyal person and can do the job and doesn't care what it takes to do the job you know but he'll get it done [yeah] you know, but, I like that kind of concept, yo know, overcoming something that people might have stereotypes on, you know, the humans would be like "oh my god it's an orc" you know, but if they would just take a second, you know

Jake: So a lot of your characters aren't just um a conventional type for what people would expect

Crystal: For what people would expect

Jake: They're sort of blurring the boundaries somehow

Crystal: somehow. They always have something they have to overcome, or something that is not the same as—you know, I could make a b'elf that's just, you know, all he cares about are appearances and you know the stereotypical, what everyone complains about but I don't do that

Jake: And do you see that as something have to do with you in your own life?

Crystal: I've always been that way. Like I've always had those kind of mentalities in my life, you know, just because something doesn't work out doesn't mean you stop, but, you know, if there's a problem I go at it with that kind of mentality, just because this approach doesn't work doesn't mean if I—just cause, you're gonna make mistakes, you're human, you just approach it from a different angle and if you really want it, you'll get past it. So, you know—girl gaming, I'm not sexy, or haha, you know, in my 20s you know and all that kind of stuff that people think "oh, you gotta be you know like this." No, I'm just a normal person, [yeah] you gotta know me before you, you know.

Jake: So it's almost like you're a twist on the regular gamer or something

Crystal: I don't know, I mean I don't know how other people are

Jake: Yeah, well you were saying before that you expected that if you went to a party it would be all these younger [people] guys.

Crystal: Yeah or whatever, [yeah] probably more guys than girls, cause even when I go to the game store I could count on one hand how many girls there are versus how many boys are running around [right] you know, so

Jake: Right, so you're kind of, blurring the boundary of what a gamer is a little bit?

Crystal: But I'm not, yeah, but, even gamer girlfriends, they go there, most of the times, from what I've seen, they're going there just because their boyfriends kind of pushed them into it [yeah] not because they want to. I do. [mhmm] And I haven't met too many people like me [yeah] so, it's just not the stereotypical, and that's usually how I play my characters [yeah]

Jake: Well is there anything else that I haven't asked that to you is a really important part of why you play

Crystal: I don't think so

Jake: Do you have a sense of um, I don't know, like when you look to your future as a WoW player, like do you see yourself continuing to play for a long time [oh yeah] like, what are you hoping to do?

Crystal: In the long run, I still want to experience the content, I wanna see where the story goes. Even if it's bad, even if I don't approve of it, I'm still gonna play, because it's not going to stay that way forever [yeah] you know, just because I might not enjoy certain things doesn't mean that it's not going to change [mm] and they're always going to come out with new classes, new whatever, levels are going to go up [mhm] you know, whatever have you, so there's always going to be something that I'm going to want to do or experience, so I don't ever see myself stopping unless the game stops.

Jake: Yeah, so there's always a sense that there's going to be more that you're going to want to see

Crystal: and experience

Jake: Experience, yeah

Crystal: eventually, you know. Cause I mean I do want Blizzard—to me Blizzard's always waited you know for proper content, they'll never release something that's not ready, or at least, I haven't seen it [yeah] and I don't think they will. But it's more of a story, and I want to know where that story goes, and the only way I can experience that is through my characters [mhmm] through doing things that I want to do. Leveling if I want to, going out an RPGing with somebody if I want to, you know, whatever, just stay away from the dailies and the raiding hahah [haha] the competition and that kind of grinding and

Jake: yeah, yeah. So I get a sense, I guess my sense is that it's just this world that you've become invested in, you know all about it

Crystal: Yeah, it's just like Star Wars, I know everything about it, you know

Jake: You participate in it so much and you

Crystal: I want to know

Jake: You want to keep participating in it as long as it's there, you wanna see what

Crystal: what happens. But certain characters, like Thrall's a really cool character, Volgen's a really cool character. I can't seem to get into the concept of the Alliance as much because to me they're just kind of arrogant [hm] to me [yeah] But, it's, just because I don't like them doesn't necessarily mean they're not cool, they are [yeah] In their own ways. I mean other people might really like them, I mean some people are straight on Horde, some people are Alliance, that's cool, but I just can't seem to, like, I like the internal struggle of the Horde, and I don't see that kind of struggling on the Alliance side

Jake: Yeah, it just doesn't grab you in the same way. [mm-mmm] Do you think if the whole game was from the Alliance standpoint you wouldn't even be into it?

Crystal: No, I think I'd still be into it because I'd find my own, I'd find something that I enjoy

Jake: Yeah, you'd find a way

Crystal: I 'd find a way to do something

Jake: I'm just going to look over my list and see if I missed anything

Crystal: Okay

Jake: But I think we're getting pretty close to the end

Crystal: Okay. Does that sound like a lot of people or am I weird? haha

Jake: I wouldn't say—I'd, my sense is that there is a lot of difference in terms of what people are into [are into] and part of that is, is what I'm hoping to show. I'm not trying to reduce things down to "this is what everyone does" [mmm] I want to kind of show the variety so.

Crystal: As long as you're getting it

Jake: Do you have a sense that you're, you're an outlier the way you play?

Crystal: I think...okay, alright, this is kind of strange, a little bit, but, I've been through there in a way that—I've started with pen and paper. To me, role-playing—and that's why I think I'm on a role-playing server, and I do this through my own MMOs, but role-playing is not mainstream

anymore [yeah] I mean, pen and paper is a lot different than MMOs: more character concepts, more coming up with ideas, costumes, personalities, feelings, you know, that kind of stuff, and that's not really done as much with MMOs. It's hard to find somebody who has that idea of an actual character [yeah] you know, but, I just don't think that's as mainstream nowadays with younger people, they don't get that concept [mhmm] you know, as well as older people like Peter or I, or, you know, if they're in their 30s and they're talking about, if they know the quote from Spaceballs or Conan then they might have an idea of what we're talking about. But you know, people talking about The Hobbit or whatever, and they don't play the originator, the RPGs, the pen and paper stuff

Jake: Yeah, so you see yourself as carrying on that that tradition whereas newer players are starting as a video game, seeing it as a video game

Crystal: Yeah, and I think that's just kind of old school versus new school [mhmm] not to say that, I'm glad that they're being exposed to role-playing and the concept of being a character, but they don't have the history, I mean unless they're going into acting, haha, or you know [right, right] they don't get that, you know, that there is fulfillment in being a character, you know, and not being yourself for a while. [yeah]

Jake: What do you get out of that? Being a character and not being yourself for a while?

Crystal: It's relaxing because I don't have to worry about my own problems, you know, that I can be into this role and I might have a different set of problems, but it's a game, I can turn that off, [right] you know, and then go back to my real life, [yeah] so it's, it's you know, it's an escape for me

Jake: So when you're playing a character, you're sort of seeing the world through their eyes-

Crystal: Yeah, how they would react to something versus how I would [yeah] but yet I still stay close to home, meaning that those characters have concepts of me in them, [right] and it's easier for me to understand than a bezerker running around with a two-handed sword chopping people down [yeah] I'd be that other person with a shield going "no you can't" or you know, healing that person

Jake: Yeah, you were saying before, um, that tanks and healers sort of felt

Crystal: They're, yeah, that's concepts in my head, but yet I play warlocks, so it's haha

Jake: So there are other possibilities

Crystal: There's, yeah, it's like that once in a crazy way, that one day, that full moon of the week haha, that I'm just like "oh my god, I'm stir crazy" you know haha [huh] I want to let loose, you

know, but the other two are very rigid, and, I have to do this and this is what my purpose is, this is what my responsibility is, but then there's that full moon, every once in a while that "ahhhhh"

Jake: And that's part of you too

Crystal: Yeah haha

Jake: Yeah. So it's, it almost seems like it's a way for you to experience different parts of yourself through [mhhh] also experiencing something other than yourself [yeah] through your characters

Crystal: I can be screaming at my TV like "ahahhaa" [haha] "You took me down but I'm taking you down with me!"

Jake: So you actually get that into it, you'll really be embodying

Crystal: Yeah, he's like *acts out Peter giving her a look* [hahaha] "What are you doing?"

Jake: Yeah, so you really go through a lot of, potentially, like, depending on what's going on you might go through a lot of different feelings throughout

Crystal: Mhhh, and that's why I think sometimes being in social environments, I might get too wrapped up in it and I need to stop that, you know, I can't be that way. Or sometimes, I have to be that standoffish—I'm your friend, sure, I'm your friend online, but I can't see you, I can't interact with you, so I can only take it so far. Everyone's been burned, from friends, from girlfriends, from boyfriends, from whatever, and it's a hard lesson to learn, and sometimes you do have to protect yourself [yeah]

Jake: Um, this is just a small detail question that popped into my head—when you do instances, you don't use voice chat do you? [No, no, no] you just type, you don't need to

Crystal: I do do Skyping and stuff like that for like raids, like I have done it in the past with friends and stuff that I did have, you know, just goofin' off, but nine times out of ten I'm not talking to anybody or doing anything [yeah, okay] or if they're telling a joke or talking about something, you know, but I'm in the middle of this instance and grabbing these people and, so I don't really have time to multi-task and type at the same time [right] so, but no I usually am very focused, I'm going here, doing that, going there, getting that thing

Jake: yeah, so in a typical day when you play, you're not, who do you, are you mostly just talking to other players in terms of, of like what needs to be done and stuff

Crystal: Um, not, I'll watch like trade chat, and I'll, like while I'm waiting on an instance I'll watch what they're talking about and every once in a while I'll input something you know, or

they'll start screaming out a song and I'll, I'll like type in the next piece of it [okay] or you know, but I'm just like reading what other people are talking about and I might comment while I'm waiting and interact with them that way. But I try not to troll, because I see trolling happen all the time and I'm not going to be evil or be real mean about stuff but, you know, if I set time aside on the weekends or whatever then that's different. [yeah] But I do interact with people, you know, and talk to people when I'm waiting, you know, or I'll strike up a conversation, a lot of times they'll be like, you know, "Obamacare, discuss!" you know, or whatever, just to try to get people riled up, I'm not one of those people, but if they're talking about something, or it's like, you know, like I said with the Conan thing, is like, you know, "what is best in life?" and hahaha get someone to say "oh its..." you know, they quote movies or funny things like that

Jake: yeah, so trade chat is sort of like an anonymous—everyone

Crystal: Yeah, everyone

Jake: Could be on it

Crystal: everyone talks and says everything they want

Jake: Yeah, it's not people that know each other [yeah]

Crystal: it's a general

Jake: like a chat room almost

Crystal: yeah, it's just like a general place where everyone can talk about whatever they want

Jake: Okay, so that would be, um

Crystal: And I always hang out, so I'm always into that trade chat, so cause that's the easiest way, place for me to go, like I told you in-between, I'll go empty out my bags, I repair, and then I'll wait on my next thing [right] So I'm always within a city, always within trade chat, listening to what other people say, commenting in-between the times that I'm waiting, and, you know

Jake: so that's kind of the, so instead of um being in a guild and having a group that you would talk to regularly it's more of like a

Crystal: I listen to everyone

Jake: anonymous sort of

Crystal: Yeah. Opposed to only listening to certain people

Jake: Right, and having more ongoing

Crystal: Mhmm, cause if I'm in a dungeon I can't sit there and talk to them while I'm doing other stuff, and I hate having for them to wait [mhmm] you know, if I'm having a conversation with you then I'm going to not do anything and converse with you [right] cause I can't, I can't multitask. [right] Unless they ever come up with something like Speak Dragon where you can just say something, you know, or skype rather than typing it in

Jake: Yeah, it seems like once you're in a dungeon the point is to get it done as fast as you can

Crystal: Yeah, get it done, yeah get it done, get the experience, get the loot, get out of there, done.

Jake: Well do you have any final thoughts or do you think we covered it?

Crystal: I think we covered it.

Jake: Cool.

Crystal: Do you think we covered it?

Jake: yeah I think we covered it

Appendix 8: Robin's Interview Transcript

Jake: so before we even get into the gaming, do you want to just give a little bit of background about your life and just in general who you are?

Robin: My life in general?

Jake: just a sketch

Robin: that's a very broad

Jake: yeah you'll have to keep, you know, just the basics

Robin: um, I'm Robin, I'm 53, I'm 54 years old now and disabled and working part time from home and married with two kids and with two cats

Jake: and you've lived here for how long?

Robin: here in this house? nine years.

Jake: are you from the area?

Robin: no, I've been kind of everywhere. I was born in New England and my family moved around a lot and I've moved more since I left them

Jake: so you settled here

Robin: 20 years of life in New England before here. I didn't really settle here, we came here with the—I had friends here so, that's why we're in Pennsylvania, but I'm homesick, I want to go back to New England.

Jake: oh really?

Robin: yeah.

Jake: so what kind of work do you do from home?

Robin: right now I'm typing inventories for a company. aside from that I'm a computer technician.

Jake: and so how did gaming come into your life?

Robin: well, a long time ago in another life I was a personal care attendant. I did that for about 12 years and I was taking care of, um, disabled individuals, and when you have that kind of job you can't really go out too much, you know. I was working, you know, working at home, and, obviously, and raising my son, who was just little at the time, and um, for entertainment I had my computer, and games, and that's what I did, and then I started, you know, collecting more and more games

Jake: so when about was that?

Robin: that was, um, early '80s, early to mid '80s

Jake: so pc games at that point?

Robin: yup, primarily, um, controllers for consoles hurt my hands because I have arthritis and fibromyalgia and a bunch of other things, but that's when I had to stop doing that work, when I was diagnosed with fibromyalgia [mm mhmm] so that would have been in—I was 31 so '91. yup. so um.

Jake: so the games you were playing back then were just kind of, not online games yet at that point or?

Robin: well, no not really, more adventure games and you know whatever, pretty much whatever I could get my hands on, but I pretty much adventure games and RPGs. [mhmm] and um, they're weren't online at that time, too much. well actually I shouldn't say that because we belonged to bulletin board systems and they had MUDs which were kind of like MMOs I guess, it was all text based and [mhmm] and uh, yeah, I guess those were my earliest MMORPGs.

Jake: yeah that's where it started. does any one of them stick out to you as one that you got really into?

Robin: I couldn't, I couldn't tell you the name of the MUD, I can't remember, but it was run on um, it was argus that I belonged to in New England, I have to look it up to find it

Jake: that's okay—so when did uh, MMOs, like massively multiplayer online role-playing games start for you?

Robin: um. that's hard to answer. well WoW was the big one that came out and we had played, we were big fans of Blizzard games anyway and uh, we had played Warcraft when it was a single player game, you know [right yeah] and um, all the various versions of it. but when WoW came out it just didn't, I think Guild Wars came out around the same time [mhmm] and uh, the cartoony graphics of Warcraft bothered me—I'm really, really visual [mhmm] um, and so, I waited about a year before I started playing Guild Wars because I thought it was pay-to-play like

WoW was and when I realized it wasn't I was sold [yeah haha] yeah, so, I started playing Guild Wars 1 about a year since it came out, and I've been playing Guild Wars 2 since beta.

Jake: so you played Guild Wars up through the Guild Wars 2 beta

Robin: yeah, for years, yup, yup

Jake: so that was what, probably about 2007, 2008?

Robin: um, no, when did it come out?

Jake: I think *WoW* was '06 maybe?

Robin: I think it was 6 or 7 that I started playing Guild Wars 1. and I had been playing, almost, well, about a year or so before Guild Wars 2 was finally released I, it, stopped playing. um, I was a guild leader, I wasn't the original guild leader, but the guild had kind of fallen apart and I had gotten sick and left for a while and when I came back it was like, you know, torn asunder so [yeah] it kind of turned me off a little bit

Jake: so that was the end of Guild Wars 1 for you was that?

Robin: pretty much, I mean I still log into it from time to time and they games still running but it's in automation so [mhmm] um, but nobody ever really, the guild I'm in in Guild Wars 2 has been in existence since the beta of Guild Wars 1 so they, that was kind of nice they just carried over, but it's kind of falling apart

Jake: the guild?

Robin: these days. yeah. the leader has uh kinda been missing in action here and there, and she's come back and says she's going to stay back and then she leaves again so there's a, I guess there's another guild that a lot of people are joining and the um, the co-guild leader has had computer problems just lately so she's had trouble getting online haha, her power supply was dying last week so [hm] I'm hoping it's better now but we'll find out when I log in.

Jake: so what initially got you interested in playing Guild Wars 2?

Robin: well I liked Guild Wars 1

Jake: oh sorry, Guild Wars 1 is what I meant to ask

Robin: well I liked RPGs in general. we had played the wizardry, some of the wizardry series, and the first one we played is actually over there in a box somewhere, [hm] Bane of the Cosmic Forge, [mhmm] was on 3.5" floppy, and when my son was little and I was still with my ex we

played that game, we had a, um, you had to keep a pad of graph paper by the game, so we'd game and we'd map ourselves [huh] going to various things. and I guess I liked the detail, I liked the character creation and

Jake: so that was a single-player RPG?

Robin: yup, yup. and it's pretty old. um, they remade it, Wizardry Gold or something and, but the num , and there was another one that was made by Sir-Tech I believe, in England, and they, there was another one they made that was supposed to be much more detailed, but the detail was overkill, it overshadowed the game, I can't remember the name of it, star something [mhmm] um, I had had been playing adventure and RPG-type games all along anyway, so [yeah] and the idea of playing with other people was kinda cool, I had missed that from playing MUDs [yeah] and all of that so

Jake: so what was it like right at the beginning, when you first tried playing a role-playing game online, on and online context?

Robin: it was great and it was a little bit frustrating too because it was hard to get together with other people you would, I, you know the first guild I joined everyone was kind of separate, and doing their thing and not really a cohesive unit, and that one ended very quickly after I joined. and there was another one that I joined that was great. [yeah] and uh, which is the one I eventually became leader of. um, so um the leader had, was in a car accident of some kind, and uh, you know somebody had to volunteer to keep it all going, so I did, for while and it ended up being five or six years

Jake: wow. so that was, how far into, to you playing Guild Wars was that?

Robin: probably about a year into it

Jake: okay, so a year into it you were kind of established as the leader of the group you'd end up staying with

Robin: yup and I'll never be a guild leader again, it was horrible

Jake: oh yeah? what, tell me about it

Robin: well you know, I couldn't just when you're an officer or you're a guild leader you have to kind of be there all the time and police things and, you know, be responsible and I just wanted to get on a play the game [hm] you know what I mean? but there were a lot of times that I would log on that I would have to deal with some kind of drama or some kind of issue or we'd have somebody new come into the guild who wanted to change this or that and was like getting everybody on his side and we'd have to say why we weren't going to do that or why we were

[yeah] and it just like, it got so political and drama-filled and stuff I just didn't enjoy being in charge at all.

Jake: yeah. what are the kinds of things that there would be conflicts over?

Robin: well, you know, some guilds, um, were very structured, we were more laid back and we were more PvE than we were into um the PvP kind of stuff which was really big. and in Guild Wars 1 PvP you earned um points basically that bought you a name on an area in the game you know, and, and just kind of made you a little more famous and whatever, and we just never aspired to that, our players weren't into that, the vast majority of the people in the guild didn't really want that, so we were a PvE guild and people would come in wanting to join the guild and you know "let's do more PvP, let's do more this" um we had a alliance of like six guilds with us, and someone would complain how they didn't like that guild or they didn't like the way that guild was doing things, or they were not on as much as we were on. you know we had one guild that was made up of families that were in the alliance, and, you know, some of them were kids and whatever, so we had rules about language and you know, that kind of thing for that reason, cause not everyone was a 30 year old adult or whatever, you know, we had kids, and being a mom I was, I felt responsible for everybody, you know [yeah] and there were language filters, there were things built in to the game to protect against that, but you know whenever you have a mix of people with different ideas you have conflict. [yeah] and um, so it just became a never ending conflict for whoever was in charge, you know, like this person wasn't on longer, or this person didn't do this, or you know, I'm doing more of this than anybody else, and, why can't we have that or why is this person still with us and can't ?? like I don't want to do this, you know, I've got kids here, I don't need that *both laugh* I didn't really need that you know [yeah] um, so, so yeah, it was just, it was really tiring, you know, and uh, but I did it, you know I did it assuming the other leader would come back eventually and then one of us found out that she wasn't coming back and I was kind of stuck with it and nobody else really wanted it, wanted to pick it up and then a bunch of people left, and, um, that, I took it personally, it felt personal, because we were so, for so long we'd been together and then when some of them leave to go do other stuff, it bothers you and then um, I got sick, and I put somebody else in charge for awhile and you know I would check in but I'd been out for about a month or so and came back and there was nothing left of it [wow] and a former member had left to start another guild and used part of our guild name in their guild name and that was just [drama], yeah, there's, drama, you know [yeah] there's drama and I avoid that at all costs.

Jake: well that's sort of telling how much you were holding together if you being gone for a month meant that everything fell apart

Robin: yeah, yeah, so, um yeah, that part sucked but um, in Guild Wars 2 I've decided no more, I don't want to be an officer, I don't want any responsibility, I don't want any anything, and we

don't have the same, um, the way Guild Wars 2 is set up we just don't have the same struggles, you know the, it's not as split off, you can pretty much do anything you know what I mean? and there's even so many people even outside of the guild to do it with so it really doesn't matter, but it's hard hard um

Jake: what do you, do you mean that there's less, like, um, just built into the game there's more freedom

Robin: yeah, there's more freedom, but then again, it's harder to stay, to find a reason to be cohesive, you know

Jake: could you give me examples of that, I know what you're saying but I'm, I don't have a sense of what those would be

Robin: well you'll see it, I mean, well, the world, it's an open living world, um and, in Guild Wars 1 you had something called faction that you had to earn and you had to hold so much faction. those were the points that I was talking about, [mhmm] and in Guild Wars 2 you don't have any of that. um, and they're making, they just made changes to the game to make it even more um...as the game's gotten a little bit older now, the whole living world stuff, the newer areas where a new player would start from were kinda emptying out, and um, they've changed their server structure now so you're matched with people in your area and your time zone and your guild, or, you know, whatever, a whole, you know I still don't understand how they've done that but it's ever changing and they call it megaservers [hm] so um, now you go into places where maybe there was a handful of people and it's very crowded, you know there's always people there, and um, so the game is more like it used to be when it first started and it was new and exciting and everybody wanted to be there, you know, now you've got, you know, if there's x amount of people playing the game at any one given time in an area they're pretty much all put together so there's a lot of people

Jake: so rather than there being like 8 different servers with one person in the same area on each server [right] they somehow pool them all [yup] into that area together on one server

Robin: right, so, and we each have, each, when you start the game you have to pick a home server too, so, which is confusing because that's how it was all set up originally we were all separated by our home servers [mhmm] but then people, as guilds got together, they decided, some guilds were more PvP, some were more PvE, a lot of them are both, but, and I guess the only place it comes into play is because of world versus world, that's the multi-player in the player versus player aspect of it, where you're pitted server to server instead of just guild to guild, now it's whole servers playing against each other and that was becoming a problem because um they would stack the servers, see that's what they can't do anymore so much, but the

guilds would stack the servers so that the players were all really great at player versus player, world versus world went to one server, you know [I see] so um, that's 6 months into the game that was happening a lot and everybody was losing their good PvP guilds you know to this server, that server and then, you know, but like I said, now with the mega-server I think all of that's changing, it's still all in flux, it just happened last month that they started this so

Jake: yeah. I've never heard of that before

Robin: there's a lot going on in the game right now and tomorrow we've got new living world content so we should be having new content every couple of weeks again now

Jake: what is living world?

Robin: it's like an event, it's like um, they put new content in the form of a story line into the game, and it's going to switch year to year. so we ended one that lasted all year, and about every 2 or 3 weeks we had new content, another piece of the story[mm okay] so you have new quests, maybe a new area, things to earn, titles, armor, weapons, all sorts of things, skins, um, all all kinds of things

Jake: so is that in contrast to doing a big expansion every couple of years, it's more [right] like a progressive unraveling of

Robin: I don't even know how they would make an expansion for Guild Wars 2 now you know unless they added another map, a completely new map or something. we have so much room on our current map that it's pretty easy, you know, to add—they may add more content in an expansion that way but literally, um, we've have two new areas, two new areas? well one at least, one new area at least added to the game permanently, um, and then there's a, there's other stuff, there's jumping puzzles [oh yeah?] which are insanely difficult and I can't do most of them [hahaha] um, and then they have holiday content and that adds a jumping puzzle and more quests and more things to do and more stuff to earn [yeah] yeah it's uh, it's fun, it's fun, but uh, and the guild I'm in is pretty casual, so, you know some guilds have requirements that you be there, you know [mhmm] a certain amount of time and all that stuff, and I, I can't play that way anymore because I'm just torn all over the place these days but, um, I log in as often as I possibly can haha so, but the, in our particular guild there's no [yeah] you know, there's no compliance issues or anything like that. but again, everything's changing so the guild is kind of dying out and we're going to end up moving into something else I guess, I haven't, I'm not exactly sure what's going on but

Jake: so you said you log on kind of when you can nowadays—how often in a typical week would you say you play? and what's the kind of pattern?

Robin: this past week has been ridiculous, but usually I log in every night, they uh, have reset for our time zone is 8 pm, so I usually log in every night, this past week has been, um, a little crazy with work, my husband's car needs and engine, um I've had family come to visit for the first time in 14 years [wow] it's just like everything's happened this past week [yeah] and um, as you know we had that miserable winter, it was hard to even get you here

Jake: I know haha

Robin: but I was playing all that time, so um, but yeah, and with the guild kind of dying out I've spent um 2 or 3 hours a night, at least [yeah] but this past week not so much. just like I said it's been busy

Jake: yeah. and what was your play schedule like back in the Guild Wars 1 kind of days when you were a guild leader, was it similar or

Robin: well no, once I was leader I had to be there like all the time, I had to log in um

Jake: like how often?

Robin: every day, every day. and I'd be on for several hours and sometimes I'd be AFK or whatever, but you couldn't be like, you know when you're a guild leader you have to be on top of everything um, especially when we had new members coming to the guild, you had to kind of keep an eye on people, because people would guild up and try to extort stuff from other players and whatever and you'd have to, you know, put a stop to that before they, you know, made everybody broke "oh, I need this" you know, and some nice person would give it to them and they'd leave hahahaha [haha] I mean like, you know, if you've got somebody new coming in and they start asking for things right away

Jake: so you'd have to be the one to kick them out or to

Robin: well me or one of the officers, I mean we had 6-5-6 or 7 officers too, so just kind of depending on who was there or whatever but, like ultimately everything kind of fell on me and I had to log in a lot more [yeah] but back then too my kids were in grade school and, you know my son was still here, and um, a little bit older so he was doing a lot of helping out, you know a lot of stuff for his sister and whatever and they'd be in here too doing their thing and uh, you know, things change, schedules change [right] and a lot of people weren't—the guild I'm in right now is um, we have a lot of people from the west coast, so a lot of people aren't logging in till later in the evening too [mhmm] which works out well for me because, you know, normally during the day I'm doing whatever I'm doing and then, they're, they are too, so I'm not missing anything and they're not missing me [right] but um, we kinda had, it, that was the other thing that was hard about Guild Wars 1, you kind of had to find a guild that was in your area or in your

timezone if you wanted to hang out with, and they were hard to find sometimes, you know, and there were constantly people who were, what's the word...it's gone, you know, advertising for their guild to come join them, but until you joined them you really didn't know a whole lot about them, you know, you, texting in the game, messaging in the game is kinda limited you know so um [mhmm] you'd have to look online and they, a lot of guilds would have descriptions of themselves posted so you could find something that way but [yeah] if you were just trying to find a guild within the game it was harder to get information until you joined and saw it was a fit or not, and if it wasn't you'd leave or they would kick you and hahaha [right haha] and that was that

Jake: so how many people were in um your guild kinda during Guild Wars 1 and currently

Robin: we had, at our highest we had about 100 people in the guild. um, this one, um, it's hard to say, they have just um, one of the things that was missing that was available in Guild Wars 1 was the ability to see when someone last logged in [mm] so, um, you honestly couldn't tell, um, you know from the list of members, and I'll show you, um, who had been there, you know, yesterday, or or you know 6 months ago. so they've just, as part of this big patch that they just put out last month, we've finally got those tools now so we can see when people have last logged in and, the guild leaders can kick people who haven't [right] been available. but the guilds here hold like 250 people, um, we probably have 30 regulars that log in during the week. I'm not sure how many members we have currently because they're kind of thinning the herd hahahaha [yeah, right] we're like in this state of flux right now because we're either moving, you know, this one is either dying and we're moving, I don't know, I'm hoping Veronika will be on tonight and I can ask her what the deal is and what we're doing. the other nice thing about Guild Wars 2 is that you can belong to more than one guild [hm] at a time, you couldn't do that in Guild Wars 1 [interesting] but, you know it's both good and bad because some guilds have a rule that um, you know they want you to represent their guild, you can only represent one guild at a time and some guilds don't want you to be in a another guild, they only want you to be in theirs [yeah] we've had a rule like that too, but, um, and the leader was pretty insistent on it, but during the day, for east coasters, the west coasters aren't on and we don't have a whole lot of people out here, so um, you know my daughter and I even asked permission to belong to another guild, you know, that we could rep during the day and they said no, no, no no you'll be kicked. and we're like, well but nobody's on during the day, you know, I mean we can take screen shots and show you, "oh no no people are on, people are always on" but she's the one who hasn't been logging in lately so [yeah]

Jake: so what um, I mean my sense from wow is that the main, like, activity that a lot of guilds are focused on is raiding, is that the case in Guild Wars or is there

Robin: there's part of that, part of that is there, and its, you know it depends on what you're trying to get, you know, um, I don't much like um grind in a game, I'd rather do quests and

puzzles and that's nice because of the living world [mm] um, piece. I've tried wow a couple of times with trials and whatever and it's just so grindy, you know, "get 4 of those, get 6 of these, kill 20 of those" [haha yeah] and that's all it is, it's like, you just, and I couldn't get into any story because that's how you start out, you know [mhmm] and there's just so much of it. um, you get a little more story and a little more humor in think in Guild Wars 2 and uh, there's some things that are grindy but they don't feel that way, you know, um, and uh, it's not so much "get 3 of these or 4 of these" you know it's like, it's more open then that I guess, it's more flexible, you can pretty much go for whatever you're going for, you know, if you want to play in a dungeon group with 5 other people you can go and do that, and then there's a, there's a part of world versus world now called um, something mist—it just got introduced recently as part of world versus world, but it's um, basically following a zerg of people to, ha, you know, to various points on the map, and it's, it's more about collecting loot, and karma, and gold and stuff than anything else, so that's what I've been doing lately, so it's, it's fun, [yeah] and, we have a daily um, there's a series of things that you do daily to get like a daily reward and then there's a series of things that you do monthly to get a monthly reward, and then, you do so many of those things over the course of the game you get yet another chest, you know [mhmm] every so often, for so many points and then um, and then like I said there's the content change [yeah] um, there's a level 80 cap and I'm at that for my main character right now and then I have 5 alternative characters that I play from time to time. [mhmm] they've changed a lot of things in the game now, the trait system and all sorts of things so it's a little harder when you have a new character to level up, um, a lot of people, you know, there's different ways to level up too, you can level through the quests and the fighting and all that, and there's crafting where you learn, you can learn two different crafting disciplines and uh, and basically make stuff and you earn points to upgrade that way as well [hm]. there's just a lot, there's just a lot of content in Guild Wars 2 [yeah] and, compared to WoW it just seems more immersive and more fun and [mhmm] and it's definitely prettier, you know, [oh yeah?] visually it's much, much better than WoW. and I don't pay to play, if I had to pay to play I couldn't do it at all

Jake: uh huh. so it sounds like there's a greater array of, sort of different activities that you can do and there's not a sense that you need to do one in order to, I don't

Robin: you don't really have to do anything, I mean you can just hang out, you know. you can play at your own pace pretty much, and you can still get where you wanna go, you may have to do it a different way next month if you change your mind about something, but there's always a way to do, you know whatever you want to do

Jake: and a lot of those activities you mentioned are kind of activities that you would group up with other guild members to do?

Robin: yup, you can also do them solo. [okay] you know, a lot of them. some things you have to do with other people but there's really a lot you can do by yourself

Jake: so is there not that sort of highly structured raid group mentality in Guild Wars?

Robin: there is and there isn't, it just depends, it really just depends. dungeons you need 5 people to go in. well, you can solo, you can go in by yourself, it's harder though. some dungeons though you need five people. um, with world versus world, it's basically your whole server, whoever's on [mhmm] you know kind of following a commander and going after various points on a map so, um, but you don't have to have a set cohesive group. in Guild Wars 1 if you wanted to solo something, they introduced these NPCs that you could control, and they were kind of stupid, [haha] they followed that AI which wasn't perfect but, you know, they had various skill traits and you controlled them all and it was kind of hard [yeah?] you know, especially if you needed to be healed and, you'd have two or three monks with you and some of them would listen wanted and some of them wouldn't hahaha and you'd eventually die but you know, sometimes that was the only way to get something done [yeah] but we don't have that in Guild Wars 2, there's no, there's none of that. rangers have pets and that's about it. [mhmm] um,

Jake: so what's a typical gaming session like for you? like you log on on a sort of typical night

Robin: these days, these days I've pretty much been going into the OTM and just kind of following the zerg—it's a very quick way to get my daily done and I like to get my daily done every day, because that's part of the monthly too, that you complete the daily a certain number of days in the month [yeah] and it's um, it's fun, if you've got a good group—and sometimes you don't—but now the way the servers are set up if you don't have a good group you can just log out of the game and log back in and you might be re-matched in another area so, but it's, I like that it's kind of fun, and then um, if I only have time to play for a couple of hours that's what I'll do. or sometimes I'll do that on my main character and then I'll get on another character and start leveling that one up [mhmm] following the quests, things that I've already done with ha, you know, [other ones, yeah] another character or whatever, you know, but it's still fun to do [mhmm]

Jake: so this thing that you're describing with the zerg, like that's like basically going with a big group [yeah] to different points in the world and fighting thing? [yup] or what's the

Robin: yup, you're fighting things and taking control of other things, and also fighting another zerg that's doing the same thing

Jake: oh like another group of people

Robin: yeah, so you'll, you know, you'll go along and you'll just be fighting a monster here and a monster there and suddenly you'll find the other group and you'll be fighting each other and [oh wow] and sometimes anybody's guess who's going to survive that, it's been surprising sometimes when a smaller group has taken on a larger group and join [yeah] and you just go on and stuff—some people know the map better than I do hahahaha [yeah] but uh, yeah, cause some people do it much more often than I do, um, but that's been kind of fun, so that's probably what I'm going to be doing when I, when I log in, that'll be the first thing I do [yeah] and then I have to um, once I get done with that I get my daily I check and recycle my stuff, or sell stuff that I got, or use stuff that I got if it's good enough [right] and um, and then I'll get on another character and level that one [yeah] or try to level it, but [right] and talking to people you know

Jake: yeah I was actually just going to ask you about relationships, like you mentioned what being a guild leader was like, but I'm wondering more about friendships or long-term kind of relationships

Robin: well right now we have somebody in the guild who calls me his, his wife in the game, and I call him faux-hubby [haha] and uh, and Amy likes him a lot too, his name's Johnny so we hang out with him sometimes [mhm] and um, Veronika is the co-leader, I think she's from Ukraine, she's got a Russian accent [yeah] she's hysterical. a lot of times I'll, we have a voice thing too, we'll, people who are, me and some, not everybody in the guild uses it but some do and, so we'll be talking and having conversation while we're playing, sometimes we'll be talking about what we're doing and sometimes we're just chatting [yeah] um, but I don't always get on it

Jake: okay, so it's a sometimes thing

Robin: I won't get on it today because I have to wear my headset and I won't hear anything you're saying so hahahaha [sounds good haha] but uh, um, yeah, but we can talk in-game too just with the chat thingy, but when you're killing things and running around doing stuff it's really hard to stop and type and not die so [right] um, there's that

Jake: so the, like Johnny, you mentioned, is someone you've known for a long time—have you known him all through Guild Wars 1?

Robin: no, there aren't, I, there's a couple people I know from Guild Wars 1 who play the game but they're not in my guild and I purposely didn't seek out any of them when I started playing Guild Wars 2 just because, I dunno, maybe I was still hurt about you know how the guild ended up and whatever, cause it took a lot of work to keep it all together for as many years as we did you know what I mean? [yeah] and it kind of just all fell apart and uh, I don't know, I guess I thought people were more committed than that [yeah] and it bothered me so [yeah] um, some of them sought me out and one or two of the guilds survived you know and continued on but um,

you know, I just really didn't want to go there [yeah] so, there's somebody else from Guild Wars 1 that I'm friends with on Facebook and, you know, we talk from time to time, but he's on a different home server, and so he was looking to change servers at one point but he hasn't changed over so [yeah] and um, yeah, and there's one person who I was really good friends with and she just sort of dropped off the face of the earth altogether so I don't know, we don't know what happened to her [yeah] um, as a matter of fact we had friends of hers, RL you know, contact us to see if we'd heard anything so [oh wow] I'm a little concerned about that, she's in Arizona though so [mhmm] um, there's probably people locally that play but I'm not interested in really like getting together in RL with other people to play, I'm just, I'm not interested [yeah] in doing that but, um, yeah. so yeah not too many, not too many friendships that carried over

Jake: so kind of a small, couple friendships now though that are, sound like people you talk to most days?

Robin: yeah, yup, yup, for the most part. and we have a group on Facebook now so we keep in touch with each other that way too, um, so that's been kind of nice. and there's a website and [mhmm] all that. and then um, I guess the server that we're on also has a website but it's sporadic, you know, how updated it is and what they're really doing, especially with the megaservers [right] everything is sort of tossed up into the air and everybody's still getting used to it [yeah] so, um for a while there there wasn't a very good endgame strategy and a lot of people were complaining about it, so there's a lot of people that um, in the guild I had been in, had already leveled to level 80, you know, and got their legendary weapons and got whatever they wanted to get and did whatever they wanted to do *phone rings and Robin: takes the call* where was I?

Jake: um, you were talking about, something about, how the server website is sort of, everything's up in the air with the megaservers so

Robin: yeah, we have um, there are daily events, these big monsters that you kill for really good loot and they're, they've all been on a timer in the game, and there have been extra websites that tell you when those are going to pop up over the course of the day—well even that's been changed [oh yeah] and so, you know everybody's scrambling to find new timers so they know when to go to which area to do that event, and then there's, there's some other events in a really hard area that have, they have no timer now, and nobody knows when they're happening and they have multiple stages to them and they take a long time to complete, you know, and those would pop up every so often, but I still don't think that there's an effective timer

Jake: hm. you were also saying that the end game strategy—you were saying something about how people

Robin: oh, that's right, like 6 months in, the original guild I was in, a lot of people from Reddit were in that guild, it was primarily a Reddit guild, and so uh, and it was going great and going strong, really nice people and I really enjoyed being part of that, and um, but like I said, people started, like finishing up with their characters and they were like "okay, now what?" you know, "now what do we do?" and living story hadn't really gotten a good foothold yet [mhmm] and people got bored, like "I don't want to just do this with another character now, what's the point?" you know [right] "I've got this, I've got that, there's nothing more to want" and they stopped playing. so the guild died off, you know started to die off [mhmm] and then we had one guy come in, um, who was basically put in charge—you know we had an awesome website, we had, you know just a lot of good stuff and he came in and somebody put him in charge of fixing the website, he ended up getting the forums hacked, he lost all the stuff that had been part of the website and that got ruined, and everything fell apart and the leader was really pissed off that he'd been given permission to do all this, and it just completely blew up [mhmm] so that was that, so um, this guild I'm in, it was being run by someone who is my age, and she and I got along really well and we had a lot in common and I brought my daughter in and my son plays now and then too but he's really busy these days

Jake: mm, is he older than your daughter?

Robin: he's 28, yeah my daughter's 20 [mhmm] he'll be 29 this year. so um, but she's been...I mean she was like a diehard player, you know she's had, she's gotten all kinds of achievements on each and every character, you know and she just kept going going going, and um, you could always count on her to be there, and it was good, and now, I guess she had some health issue, or he husband was travelling and she was going to go along, just all these things happened and she was away for a while and she was supposed to come back and she came back for one day, and then she's gone for a couple weeks, and then she came back again! ...for one day and then she's gone for a couple weeks, so we don't know what the deal is, but Veronika's going to be in touch with her by phone and I don't know if there's a breakdown in communication between the two of them or what, I don't know anything, Veronika would have all the particulars but, Veronika's computer has been down for the last week or so, so [yeah] hahahah [yeah] "it won't stay on!" well that's cause your power supply's dying haha "but I can't open it up because I've got a lifetime warranty" I said "ohhh" haha [hahaha] so she couldn't fix it herself so we had to wait and I'm hoping she's back on, so maybe I'll get some information tonight [mhmm]

Jake: well that sounds frustrating that this other woman is someone you felt like you were really getting along with and [yeah] now she's

Robin: and now I don't know what's happening, I just don't know, she's just not logging in at all, so [yeah] I don't know, I guess she was the leader of a guild in Guild Wars 1 too and um, she didn't want to do it in Guild Wars 2 and she said that Veronika kind of tricked her into it ha and I

was like, you know it's hard to know between the two of them, you know what I mean, Veronika says "nooo that's not the way it was" [yeah, haha] I don't know, it's funny. so.

Jake: so it sounds like playing with, alongside your daughter has been a big part of playing [it] at least at some points?

Robin: it's been fun, yeah, she hasn't, she doesn't log in so much. we had the semester from hell this semester and it's, she really couldn't play, and um, I found that if I played her attention would be, you know on the game or feeling bad because she couldn't [mhmm] and so, this semester has been bad. I'm glad it's over. [yeah] but two classes, for the first time she failed classes and that's been hard too [yeah] and now we're down to one car and she has talk to a transfer counselor and we don't have a car to get there because my husband's working two jobs [yeah]. he was supposed to be here tonight, but he's getting a new engine in his car, his mom is giving him the money but wants him to work it off, so she's, the only day he doesn't go to his second job he's now at her house [oh mean] um, and, you know, she was calling all weekend trying to get him to come over, I said you guys need to make a schedule so this doesn't happen cause you're not gonna, he's cranky and oh god [yeah] it's for a 2001 original Prius, and he loves the car, his dad bought it for him, it's his first car, and his dad passed away and he'll never let of the car and the engine's \$4,000 for a 13 year old car and [yeah] yeah! hahaha

Jake: haha so lot's of hard times, not just with your guild

Robin: it's been craaaaaazy, it's been, real life is crazy and that's, you know, online is crazy, so, but it happens, you know, it just happens [right] so we'll go into another guild and it'll be fun for a while too until it falls apart, so we'll go to another one

Jake: yeah, it seems like that's kind of a theme, being disappointed sometimes by groups and relationships kind of falling apart

Robin: well, in-game anyway

Jake: yeah that's what I mean

Robin: it happens, you know, it just happens. but, yeah you get used to that, I mean it happens in life too, you know like, you go to college and you have friends, you know what I mean, and then everybody sort of goes their own way because that's what they do, you know, life is change [yeah] so, I think you just, it just kinda mimics life, you know, you do what you can do with this group of people and then you move on to the next thing, you know [hm] and that's just the way it is. I took it personally with Guild Wars 1 because...I don't know, they sort of all supported me being in that role and wanted me there, and then they sorta, you know, did their own thing. it was kinda, you know they were all loyal to the original leader and we all were, and I, I got that, but

she wasn't coming back, you know, she'd been in a horrible horrible car accident and lost her memory [wow] so, I mean..I remember several years later her family had her get online to see if she would remember us, you know, if it would jog anything for, so I remember we spent a couple hours hanging out with her in game, just reintroducing ourselves and trying to remind her of things that we used to do, and we had screenshots of things that we did, you know, little celebrations and whatnot

Jake: yeah. did she remember stuff or was it not—

Robin: I, I don't know, I don't think so, not a whole lot [mhmm] some of the people were closer to her than I was, you know, um, she didn't really remember too much so [hm] I don't know, it's hard [yeah] it's faceless too, you know, it's not like we actually see people, you know it's characters and, [right] there's a lot of variances, sure, but day after day you see the same person dressed pretty much the same way [mhmm] you know haha the same characters

Jake: so do you um, do voice chat with, is it just a smaller group that you do voice chat [yeah] with or is it with the whole guild?

Robin: well, there's the ability for that, there's a teamspeak server for our home server, apparently. um, I've taken part here and there, it kinda depends on what's going on, how late it is, my daughter's bedroom is right above here, so if I'm down here talking and stuff she bangs on the floor for me to shut up, so it just kind of depends on the time of day and what we're doing [yeah] um, so, but mostly what I've been doing in game I don't have the need for it so much and, um, you know if we're doing something as a group where it's too hard to type direction while we're doing it then yeah, you really kinda need the voice chat thing, you know [right] if I'm doing a dungeon I've never done before and the other, and the rest group has, they're going to want to tell me where to go, where to stand, [right] you know so I don't end up getting everybody killed, because I've done that before hahahaha [hahaha right] and everybody does it so

Jake: right. so even though this semester has been a really bad one for playing with your daughter, but at other points has then been a consistent thing where the two of you play at the same time?

Robin: yup. if I'm on and um, you know, she'll, she'll say "who's on?" and if certain people are on, you know like Johnny, "is Johnny on?" you know, and she always wants to come on and talk to Johnny, [yeah] pick on him and drive him insane [yeah?] cause if I'm his wife then she's his daughter you see [yeah] and she'll pick on them you know haha she, she uh, haha, she um, she um, she private messages him sometimes and she says "daddy where do babies come from?" [hahaha] and he messages me "why is your daughter asking me about this?" hahahaha [haha] and

I said “to torture you” haha. but that kind of stuff, it’s just silly. [mhmm] just silly. but um, he’s trying to level up newer characters too so sometimes we’ll get together and do that, just screw around or whatever, you know, it’s fun [yeah] so.

Jake: okay, well I’m just gonna check my questions and then, cause pretty soon we’ll log in I guess around 8 [yup] um, so what, tell me about what like a, a really good night playing would be, like a night where you finished up and you said “that was a really good night”

Robin: um, when I , when I go on like a, if I’m doing some kind of group activity with people and we’re like kinda all on the same page you know, things are getting done right and we don’t have to wait for anybody or redo things too many times, um, get a lot of good loot, you know, something that’s sought after or valuable , that’s kind of nice, um, but I enjoy, really, just the play of the game, you know, I just, I guess I wouldn’t keep doing it if I didn’t [yeah] enjoy it. that’s what’s kind of nice I guess, you know, you don’t have to, I usually don’t have anything in mind when I log in, I don’t really usually know what I’m, you know, specifically going to do. and I’ve logged in having some kind of plan and “oh look, that’s going on!” you know, and, I’d rather do that [hm] or somebody will say, “ oh! can you, we need one more to do this dungeon, you know, we had five and somebody just left and just logged in so do you want to come do this with us?” [yeah] and um

Jake: so you don’t usually log on with a set agenda of what you want to accomplish

Robin: nope. you know, I look and see what else is going on. sometimes nobody else is on, you know, especially these days with everything kinda screwed up right now [yeah] sometimes nobody’s, especially during the day, if I log on during the day chances are nobody else is going to be there. and now that Mary the leader has been gone other people have been there but they’re repping in other guilds, you know, so the rules have gone out the window a little bit [yeah] and you can’t blame them because there’s nobody there, you know [right] the bad thing about that when somebody’s repping another guild instead of ours we can’t chat, they can’t see, unless you whisper, unless you private message them. [mhmm] um, so we have guild chat, we have party chat, just all these different kinds of chat systems so [right] but um, yeah

Jake: so what would a, like a bad session be?

Robin: um, when there’s technical problems, you know, when things are bugs, or you’re getting thrown out of a game, or you get into a game you’re just, you know, you’re just getting something done that you’ve been trying to get done and you’ve been on for a long time and you’ve been questing or whatever and it says “new build” hahahahaha “new build in five minutes” and you’re like a half-an-hour into something that’s going to take another 30 minutes. [mm] yeah, that’s annoying. yeah, or when somebody’s causing a lot of drama, you know, when

somebody, I haven't had too much of that in Guild Wars 2 though, Guild Wars 1 yeah, there were times that I did not want to log in towards the end because it was so miserable , um

Jake: is there any story that stands out that kind of exemplifies those frustrations?

Robin: well, I mean in general, I touched on it a little before, but we had, um, we had new members, some new members that came in who really wanted to just change the guild and change the alliance and decided that they knew better than any of us did and um, you know, one guild in the alliance had been with us, the one that was made up of families, had been with us from the beginning, you know what I mean. and they weren't with us to be, you know, a competitive edge, they were with us because they were loyal to us and we were friends and we liked each other [mhmm] but somebody didn't like the way that guild leader played in a certain situation, and he has to do this but he won't listen, he wants to do it this way with this character blah blah—well don't play with him then, [mhmm] you know what I mean? it's that simple [yeah] you know instead of getting rid of that guild and getting another guild that would be more cohesive to you, you know, just don't play with that person, play with somebody else [mhmm] other, you know, there's like a bunch of other people here you know [yeah] but it was that kind of thing, you know, we had about 4 or 5 guild meetings over teamspeak about this, it just wasted time, nobody could play because we were just dealing with all this crap [mm] and um, yeah, it got old really fast.

Jake: so these would be live debates over teamspeak about [yeah] what you should do?

Robin: we would have regular guild meetings anyways, you know, just to, if anybody was having any problems with anybody, lets work it out, [yeah] you know there's always gonna be, there was like a weekly meeting and then there was a monthly meeting with the whole alliance [right] and a representative, you know we had limited space for people so, a representative, usually the leader or one of the officers would come to the meeting and air their grievances or make a suggestion or “hey we're having a, we're gonna do this activity” or we're gonna create this event where we're gonna award somebody this, people would like gather things to give to the winner and, whatever, we'd make our own little things to keep people interested and keep it fun you know [yeah] so um. but that gets old really quick—for six years we did that

Jake: those meetings

Robin: it was just, you know, after a while sometimes you just want to log in and be invisible and play the game, you just want to play and you don't want to think about what anybody else is doing [yeah] and you could never do that if you were an officer or a guild leader, you could never do that [mhmm] so, you know, a lot of our officers left, and then a lot of, or people would join the guild and immediately want to become an officer—”oh yeah sure, you're gonna be here

for 10 minutes and then I'm going to give you the power to kick anyone out of the guild" [haha] you know? I don't think so hahaha, they're leaving already at a steady pace, we don't need your help [yeah]. we had a youth minister um, who came in and he was god's gift to Guild Wars, you know [hahahaha] he was just the best player in the world and um, and started, like he seemed to be a nice guy at first and he wasn't that great of a player even though he was in his own mind, but he was okay, and um, but then he started talking about his kids and his ministry and what trouble they were and, you know, and like, just started getting really like verbally abusive in a way, you know like, what he was saying didn't match who he said he was and, you know, we had younger people and stuff and he was like, if somebody screwed up he would be the first to tell them and, you know get on them as though they'd done it on purpose you know what I mean, such a bad player, and like I said he wasn't the perfect person anyway [yeah] but yeah, so we had to get rid of him [yeah] and uh, I don't know, we had some people I'll tell ya. but I mean we've had other people who are like really really really good at the game and all into the strategy and whatever, but they go to the point where—we had one guy who was an engineer, you know, and he had everything down to "you have to do exactly this and be in exactly that place" or whatever, but it's not fun when you play that way all the time [hahaha] like you can probably get from point a to point b in a very reasonable, logical way but it's not necessarily fun to do it that way [mhmm] and we didn't always have the time to be that prepared, you know, everybody has other stuff to do besides playing this game, and the whole thing is, it's a game, you know, playing not constant strategizing, not constant rigid everything. does it work, sure, but it's not necessarily fun for everybody you know [right] so

Jake: it sounds like you had to sort of mediate between all these different people's ideas

Robin: there was constant mediation, constant constant mediation [haha] and uh, yeah, or sometimes it would be me, and I'd finally say, "you know what, I'm tired I'm logging off," [mm] just "we'll talk about it tomorrow" [mhmm] but then I didn't get to play, there were a lot of times where I logged in and just didn't get to play at all, so, but like I said it's not like that so much in Guild Wars 2, you know, even for the officers and leaders I just don't see it [yeah] you know happening that way, but again, we don't have as many um, there aren't as many restrictions, it isn't so necessary, we don't need every player's faction or everybody's gold, or everybody's this or everybody's that to keep things going. but it's nice to be with a group of people who will help you out from time to time and do this or do that you know [yeah] it's not much fun when there's not a lot of people logging in, but again, that's we're probably going to change guilds at some point soon, a bunch of us have already gone into another guild and are repping that too, but I don't know if everybody's in the same one or not but that's why I've gotta talk to Veronika [right] so we'll probably all follow the people that we know and some will branch off and some will stay together, and that's the way it is [yeah] so, and it's 8:00, [alright] so, now it's time. I use Gamebooster, it kills stuff in the background. *starts logging in* it's

terrible getting older because I need reading glasses to see my games [oh] I've told my kids, haha, that, you know, when have to stop gaming, when I can't game anymore you might as well just shoot me and put me out of my misery [oooh hehe] cause at this point I am too old. so this is my ranger

Jake: so that's your main character?

Robin: it is, I have another main that I deleted because I was so frustrated with her and I shouldn't have done it but I did, and it was an elemental, and my main character in Guild Wars 1 was an elemental so that's what I started out with, but in Guild Wars 2 they are very very squishy, they die so easily and it's and it's just so frustrating [mm] and now I've started another one [haha] with a new trait system and even gonna be worse, so I don't know how much longer I'm gonna be able to handle it, but I love the ranger

Jake: yeah. what um, does, do you have a sense of your character having like a back-story and like a, or is it more like a

Robin: every character in Guild Wars 2 has a back-story, I don't pay attention to it so much haha [okay] but, part of, part of Guild Wars 2 is that you also have a personal story aside from whatever's going on in the world, and that's part of what you create when you're building a new character [okay] um

Jake: so it almost, the game almost, does, kind of provide that back-story for you

Robin: yup, yup. and you get to choose it from, you get to make choices as to who you are and what you are. but once you complete the, the personal story, it doesn't really affect you much elsewhere in the game. you know, while you're going your personal story, it doesn't affect any other aspect of the game, just your story [right] but you're kind of travelling through it and being who you are and[mhmm] or, who you're supposed to be

Jake: yeah, so when you play regularly you don't really have a sense, you don't carry that sense of your character's story too much, it's more just, you're playing the game through that character but it's

Robin: that's pretty much it, at least for me, you know, I'm not a whole lot, like there's an awful lot of lore to the game, and I don't retain it, like, I'm playing it, and I'm understanding it while I'm playing it, but if you ask me hahahaha. but if you ask Amy, however, she can tell you [oh really] much more than I can, and I've been playing longer than she has [yeah] it's just

Jake: so for you it's more of an environment, background that's there but it's not your focus

Robin: exactly, exactly. so, this is pretty much what I've been doing in here, "edge of the mists" and there's only an hour remaining in the current map so. you can see everybody else that's on. that's Tom, and he said hello to me. and I missed Veronika—she logged off three minutes ago. Mary was on within the last 24 hours, amazing, she's the leader [yeah] I say we have...10 of 250, 2 of 120 members online [wow] ...220 members, so, but, it's early yet for some of them

Jake: so it just resets so now would be the time when

Robin: well not necessarily because a lot of these people are on the west coast and it's five o'clock there so they're just getting out of work. so, you know, even just within the game mechanics, they tell you what a guild is, you know [yeah] um, this is our roster, guild leaders and officers can upgrade, you know, create upgrades, so we've got , as a guild we've got 10% magic find for 3 days and 5% influence for 24 hours and they can kinda put any of these things into activation [mhmm] and uh, let's see what people have been doing. and what each of the ranks mean. I'm a protected asset so if I don't log in they won't kick me [mhmm] and as a guild we can do various activities but we haven't been doing that lately. so, and, this is part of the new system, now we have a wardrobe system [uh huh] so all of the armor and stuff we get, you can skin what we're wearing at will [uh huh] now we have all this stuff to collect on top of everything else, so that's kind of new

Jake: so instead of just, so you can actually be wearing equipment that looks different but choose a different appearance, basically

Robin: right, so, but it costs something to do that so, this is armor that I got from points that I got in Guild Wars 1 [hm] so it's called heritage armor. alright so

Jake: so if someone sees you wearing that they'll know that you're a long-term

Robin: well a lot of times people don't, a lot of new players that didn't play Guild Wars 1 are like " what is that armor?" because you can't just buy it or get it, I say, "oh it's from Guild Wars 1" and they go "ohhh". and then we have a trading post too, where you can buy things for real money in the game, the game currency is gems, and you can purchase gems either through the game or you can get a gem card. and you don't have to buy anything in the game, like you can't buy your way into winning the game [right] but it just, conveniences, basically

Jake: okay, so it's free to play but there's stuff you can purchase

Robin: right, like salvage without the fuss, or, you know, you can get an outfitter some dyes, that you could probably get anyway through the game. every now and then they'll have something that, that you know, you feel like you just can't live without. these transmutation charges are what you need to change skins. mine is free because I already earned through Guild Wars 1. we

have these black lion keys you get black lion chests are drops from various things but they're locked so also need to find a key somewhere along the line or you need to buy them, um, they have various things—you can get a fuzzy cat hat [haha] so, and I have some gems, and I'm just hanging onto those, and that money is from the last time I logged in

Jake: what is on your characters back, like that

Robin: it is a, this is from another event that ended and it's a back piece, and it has some attributes, let's see, it's called the "Advanced Spinal Blades of Ruby" and I can upgrade it further into a, not exotic but um, ohh what's it called, kinda legendary, after this, and make it even more powerful, but it costs more and I, I'm not ready to do that yet, I don't have all the stuff I need to upgrade it further [yeah] but it came in pieces, um, so like part of the, part of the quest gave you this piece and another thing gave you the rest of it [oh okay] and then you can upgrade it further and further, so right now it's [uh huh] where it can be. and this is the mystic forge, and you can, you can put found items in here or, you might have recipes certain things to put together to make other items, and it's kind of like um, people call it the mystic toilet [hahaha] cause you just throw something in and get something out! haha [hahaha] you know, so, this what I want to do right now

Jake: this is what you were describing the

Robin: yeah, edge of the mists. this is the sort of new, this part, this is part of world versus world, this is more for getting loot and karma and gold and stuff. and also for getting world versus world points so that when you go into the world versus world part you can do more, you're a little more powerful or whatever, but uh, uh, what was I gonna show you? oh, we have daily, daily points, daily quests, things to do, so you have events, you know, five events that you do, condition remover, daily kills, and then you get a little chest when you complete all this [okay] and then monthly is, you know, how many successful events you do in a month, or, uh, group event completer, monthly completionist, you've done your daily over and over for a certain number of days

Jake: so is this the kind of thing that they've added for the endgame to make it

Robin: well the daily and monthly have always been there [okay] um a lot of these have always been there. these are from the living world, the historical stuff from the living world, all of these things that I've done [mhmm] and, then you just have activities, there's dungeons, world versus world, there's all sorts of stuff you can do [yeah]

Jake: so is living world, um, is that different than questing? or would you, is it a different form for questing?

Robin: it's different because it adds new content, it adds content either temporarily or permanently to the game, or some aspect of it may be permanent [yeah] this edge of the mists, this was part of the living world and it stayed. um, so, um...they think I'm a guy [haha]...somebody else fell too.

Jake: so is this, right now is everybody grouping up for this thing to start?

Robin: well some people are pry already been around. let's see, let's see where there's a commander if there is one—there's the commander there. so, I don't know, we're probably red, we're probably, but all of these are our points that we've gotten and we're going to go and try to take some of the green and some of the blue too and not be very successful [haha] so the commander's going here to try to capture the green tower. but, he's all the way over there and I'm probably going to be dead before I get to them so, we'll see what happens

Jake: and so right now you're basically grouped with any, players from even any server?

Robin: yeah, I'm actually not in a party with anybody I'm just kinda on my own but I'm, but there's going to be a bunch of people following this guy to get where we're going. I have a pet—his name's lawnmoa [hahaha] oops, they're over here

Jake: this is a really nice looking game

Robin: it's pretty, I like it a lot better than WoW [mhmm] it's just less cartoony

Jake: yeah. so this game came out, what was it about a year ago? or, I guess you were playing it

Robin: it's been..I was playing it in beta, yeah, so yeah it's been about a year—well a little more than a year.

Jake: I like the way your pet runs

Robin: he's a moa. um, in Guild Wars 1 one of the quests was to hatch a baby moa, a baby black moa, so I've got him too because of Guild Wars 1.

Jake: so are you fighting other players or just the environment? like, right now.

Robin: um, other players and the environment [okay] yup. like them haha. so we're trying to take this, away from another group—this group right here! *long pause* it looks like we're doing okay

Jake: so you're not in a party at this point?

Robin: no. but I'm with a bunch of other people who are all trying to do the same thing [mm] *long pause* and now I'm probably going to die, because we're overrun. and then I just start back where I was. oh wow.

Jake: so you guys won?

Robin: yup. believe it or not

Jake: so when you died why were you able to get right back up?

Robin: I rallied. I don't know. pry because, because we won and it say "okay" you know, and even if we hadn't, then if I'd been stay dead—where's our commander going? this way. um, you just rally, sometimes it's luck of the draw, sometimes you just do [okay, huh] and now the idea is to stay close to the group [ha yeah]

Jake: you made some reference before to players being different skill levels—does that involve the combat part of it?

Robin: well here it does and it doesn't. a lot of areas like this one it will raise your level. so if I'm a lower level it will raise me to 80 but, if I'm actually level 60 I'm still going to have level 60 armor [okay] so being level 80 and having level 80 armor and weapons and stuff is helpful [right] and then just sheer number is helpful too

Jake: sheer number of players?

Robin: who are doing this at any given time

Jake: what about skills just in terms of like not some much your character's abilities but just your skills like choosing the right attacks—is that a big factor or?

Robin: it is and it isn't, it depends on what you're doing and whether or not you're playing against the environment or other players. um, I'm not terribly skilled at PvP and the build I'm using I found online, recommended by somebody else, and I'm sort of trying it out and seeing how it goes, but it's worked out pretty nicely for me [yeah] um. basically anything is effective as long as it's contributing, you know? [mhm] but um, there are some people where all they're doing is dying. if you're with 30 other people doing something like this it doesn't really matter if you're really bad, eventually you're going to get better and you're still contributing something. but if you're in a dungeon with 5 other people and everyone has something specific that they need to do [right] obviously your skill level is going to matter [right] so if you're not good at following directions and you haven't done it before, you know, people are gonna get upset with you very quickly [yeah] but there's lots of ways to find out, you know there's a wiki, there's,

there's tons of information about this game outside the game, there's tons of youtube videos if you don't know how to do something, you know there's just

Jake: you can educate yourself

Robin: there's so many ways you know [yeah] and there's other people to ask. usually if you if you say "I've never done this before, can you help me" a lot of people will be helpful [right] it's been a pretty good community that way in general. there's some assholes but [mhmm] not quite as many as in real life haha [hahaha] I think it's slightly more supportive hahahaha [yeah]. one thing I don't like with this particular build is I'm moving a little slower unless I purposely want to move faster.

Jake: so you said something, I think it was when you were talking about, it was when you were talking about the end game stuff, and that there's like a point when there's nothing more to want, and I was kind of curious about, that phrase just kind of stuck out to me that like, it's sort of like the game failed to provide something to play for?

Robin: I don't think they, I think, you know, when the game was still new once you did a lot of that stuff um you know pretty much people just felt like they were done, like there was nothing else to do, because it took them a while to implement the living story stuff [mhmm] um, it probably should have been implemented quicker but it wasn't, and um, but a lot of people are just starting the game a lot of people are coming back now too [yeah] so um, who had stopped playing because they want to check it out

Jake: by the way, if you're in the middle of something, you can just stop talking

Robin: you mean like this? hahahah

Jake: yeah haha

Robin: I'm going to get killed eventually, once they realize I'm sitting here *long pause* and now I'm dead. alright, I've got to go all the way back over here—I could go back there too, but they can't repair my armor there. let's see what's going on. we're doing pretty good. not wonderful but pretty good. sometimes you wait and see if the whole group is going to come back

Jake: oh yeah, if everyone gets killed at once

Robin: do you play any RPG?

Jake: uh I tried Rift, I played for some time, I didn't get too deep into it but I fully leveled my character and you know, tried most parts of the game. I wanted to do that to get my own feel for how these games work [mhmm] um

Robin: I haven't played Rift

Jake: what are your kind of, um, hopes, like you were—I guess I am kindof going back to the endgame thing. what is it that you're still playing for, that you're hoping to accomplish or you're looking forward to doing

Robin: well I'd like to build my legendary weapon

Jake: is that the thing on your back?

Robin: no no, that's just a—just a thing on my back hahaha

Jake: haha okay wasn't sure. what's a legendary weapon?

Robin: they have, there's, you need to get a precursor weapon and there's all sorts of exotic materials and whatever. it's just like the highest level weapon.[mm mhmm] you know, but it's hard to come by, you need to create it, basically, you need a recipe and it needs to be built and

Jake: it's kind of a long term project

Robin: it's harder to get and it's expensive. so that kind of stuff. and I'm looking forward to more content. I think some of the story lines have been really great [mm] and they're fun. I don't know, I haven't gotten tired of it so far

Jake: so there's a sense that there's just, the legendary weapon is kind of like a long-term project [yeah] but the sense that there's these ongoing, unfolding story lines that you definitely want to know what happens.

Robin: it keeps the game fresh. like I said, I I started out playing out these little RPGs and adventure games and stuff and this is just like a big giant adventure game, you know

Jake: cause adventure games are kind of , um, like Myst or something, where you, like it's linear, like a story where you choose different things [yup] along the way

Robin: but there's definitely an end to it. like once you're done, there's no replayability. [right] um, but with a game like this there definitely is. I have no idea where anybody is. maybe I'll stop and look cause I'm going to get killed

Jake: do you have a sense of, like a—maybe this question is an irrelevant question but like, why play one big kindof endless game rather than lots of different adventure games?

Robin: ohh! why did you do that to me! not you

Jake: somebody just pushed you off?

Robin: yeah, somebody just pushed me off. that wasn't very nice. that wasn't very nice at all. alright, now I gotta see where they are—I might just wait for them to get close again, because it takes a while [yeah] haha

Jake: are there no mounts in this game?

Robin: hm?

Jake: are there no mounts?

Robin: no mounts, no. that would be fun, maybe they'll add stuff. I mean they're still adding stuff. that's what's kind of cool, the game changes [yeah] like its gone through a lot of changes in the past month this patch was like, the mother of all patches that changed game mechanics completely [mhmm] so. see now, he always goes AFK, and there's somebody else not repping. Veronika has young kids, so she'll, she might get on for a little bit when she first get's home and then get off [yeah] you know have her family time and then come back. so, we all have stuff going on. [yeah] since the game changed, though, and well, obviously her computer's fixed, but since the game mechanics have changed again a lot of people are still figuring out what they're doing now [hm] and some of the reason that I'm doing what I'm doing here is so I can gather gold and—now they have this thing called um—one of the things that they've changed is that, it used to be that you would get items that gave you increased magic find and now magic find is something that is recycled from loot. so, in order to get magic find increased, which allows you to get better loot, you have to go after loot haha and recycle it, so it's like

Jake: so finding loot makes you better at finding more loot

Robin: yeah, exactly

Jake: so you said you're trying to get gold right now, what's the, what do you need gold for

Robin: everything, everything. you need gold to purchase materials for—I have no idea where I'm going. let's try up here. no I don't think this is a good idea. I'm not following the zerg so. this is the only bad part of this game, like when you're doing this particular thing, and you're this far out [mhmm] it's hard to catch up to the group [yeah] um, gold helps you buy materials and stuff so that you can, you know, make your exotic or your legendary, or whatever you want to do, or

Jake: so mostly stuff kind of related to equipment?

Robin: yup

Jake: so what's your gear right now?

Robin: it's bezerker's armor, it's actually kind of new, for me. *long pause* you can't look at the big map and do this

Jake: there's no mini-map?

Robin: there is, but [oh yeah there is] you can't see, there's only so much it shows you. sometimes I've travelled half the map and ended up at an area and I get a whole zerg just you know—it's so funny when you have 40 people come and they kill you, like "it took all of you to do that?" haha "like are you really happy with yourselves?" [hahaha] see this isn't good [that's a bunch of] where are you? oh you're way over there, shit.

Jake: so is that another player?

Robin: yeah it's one other player. ah ha, knocking him back. *long pause* *defeats enemy player* so now I've got to stand here hahah

Jake: so you're claiming this spot for your team

Robin: yup. it's amazing that no one has come and killed us. where's our fearless leader? over there. *long pause* wow, amazing. all right then, I'm going this way.

Jake: so you just got a big reward for that?

Robin: mhmm

Jake: yeah one of the reasons I choose Rift over WoW was just the graphics—I had the same reaction as you, I didn't like the cartoonyness.

Robin: it's just so awful you know [yeah haha] I mean really

Jake: so people like it I think but I, I'm with you

Robin: well I guess but

Jake: I find them kinda not very pleasant *long pause* so how do you feel..well I'll wait for you to finish this fight before I ask but

Robin: it's okay—how do I feel when I'm doing this?

Jake: yeah, what's the general feeling, like your general feeling while you're playing

Robin: I don't know, I just kinda, it depends, it depends on what I'm playing. [yeah] I don't know there some satisfaction in completing any given thing [mhmm] I think I just like boppin' around and doing different things, and getting rewarded, and "hey that's cool"

Jake: what do you think has kept you playing guild wars, and just this kind of game in general for so long?

Robin: I don't think I would keep playing it if it wasn't for the living story content [mhmm] cause it would get boring after a while, but yeah, there's different, different things to do, and different things to earn and [mhmm] I don't know, I like it [yeah] it's fun, I just think it's fun

Jake: so is that part of your feeling when you're playing, that you're just having fun?

Robin: yeah, I'm just enjoying doing this, yeah. I like earning all the goodies and [mhmm] you know, I like hanging out with people too when, when they're there to hang out with but they aren't always and so, that's okay, the game isn't dependent upon everybody else and you can play by yourself if you don't want, you know, there's things that you can do. um, one of the, you know there's some frustrating parts, like one of the, I think the hardest thing for me to get as far as an achievement was um, mapping the entire game which I did get done

Jake: is that going, you mean like going everywhere?

Robin: yeah [yeah] I've been everywhere. part of the maps are from world versus world and that's the hardest to achieve because when you try to get into somebody else's territory you end up getting killed [yeah] you know? so that took, just to get that map took months. so that was frustrating. so you have to keep going in to see if you own that part of the map and or if you don't if it's a good time of day to go and do that hahaha [yeah]

Jake: yeah, so that's kind of a frustrating—but what was it like when you finished?

Robin: oh it was awesome [yeah] I love it

Jake: so achievement sounds like it's definitely a piece of what's fun about playing

Robin: well you get a title, you know, that's what's cool about it. you can't see it on my character um, other people can see a little gold star over my head when I'm travelling around and I have a title called "Been There, Done That" for mapping everything [mhm] let's see, where are we now.

Jake: so is there anything else that you can think of that you'd want to

Robin: did you see!

Jake: oh man! so they just came up out of nowhere?

Robin: that must be so satisfying for them to all come up and kill one person [hahahah] isn't that wonderful? hahahah

Jake: the mob

Robin: hahahaha [hahah] it's like such overkill you know

Jake: so is there anything else about just playing in general that you feel like is important to, that you would want me to know or other people to know about why you play or what's enjoyable about it

Robin: I don't know, there's something nice about being somebody else, and being big and strong, and you know, accomplishing things—you know, maybe you had a crappy day at work and your boss yelled at you and whatever and you get on here and, you know, you kill things that are three times as big as he is [hahahah] hahahaha. you know. in another game, I don't know if you know Diablo III

Jake: uh, I've just played the demo

Robin: in Diablo III there's a, one of the monsters looks exactly like my ex-husband [oh yeah?] even just the way he stands and moves looks exactly like him and I take great pleasure [hahahaha] in killing him over and over and over again [hahaha] so

Jake: well that worked out well

Robin: yeah [hahah] so yeah, you know, it's just fun. I love adventure games, you know, and even those there's no replayability I still play them. um, one of the first one's I played were made by Sierra Online, the King's Quest series and Space Quest and they made all these different series of adventure games and they were wonderfully done [yeah] and that's what really got me into this kind of gaming. and they were really hard too, well back then you know, you could just fall off something and it didn't look like there was anything to fall off of it was hysterical, but um, um, there's, you're accomplishing something. and at the end of the game it was always “wow I'm glad I beat all of that, and I collected all of these things, and I did all of this” but there was no reason to do it again [mhmm] and with this type of a game, it's basically that adventure game, you're questing and questing and getting rewards and it just sort of never ends and it's kind of nice [yeah] but you're not doing, it's not like you're just replaying the same game, like I said with the living story it adds so much more content, and sometimes that content builds on something that's already in the game that you want to do more of, or you wanna, you know this back piece was part of the um, the uh, living story stuff, and I can continue to gather more materials to level it up some more, you know what I mean? [right] and it just adds to my stats

Jake: did you say that you still play adventure games to or did this sort of replace that

Robin: there're aren't' really—it depends. I'm so spoiled by quality good stuff, you know. there are a lot of really bad games out there and I've played some of them and they, they're just

annoying. but when I can find something good, yeah [yeah] you know, there haven't been a lot of good one's lately though. I probably spend more time playing this *phone rings* that might be my husband *takes call* my poor husband hahaha

Jake: so he doesn't play?

Robin: this is not his game [not his thing] not his game

Jake: and when your daughter plays, does she have, is she in a different room usually or does she come in here with a laptop

Robin: she's upstairs. we all have a computer, we all have a computer, we're all talking to each other either on voice chat or just in the game or not at all, sometimes she just doing her own thing

Jake: okay, so she's actually in some ways

Robin: we're all gamers, and I got my kids into games, it wasn't the other way around [yeah] so, uh it's bad [hahaha] haha well, it's not, you know [yeah] both my kids have some special needs, um, and computer games are awesome for eye-hand coordination, and it's really, in that area at least, it's helped quite a bit. there were limits on the games I allowed them to play, they couldn't play anything that, where you actually killed other people, and uh, in this game you don't really kill anybody because they res, you know, you don't really kill anybody

Jake: death doesn't really exist

Robin: and that doesn't really exist in real life but, for the most part you know they could play, you know, anything where you killed a monster or something like that but nothing where people are killing people, I didn't agree with that, or war games, I didn't agree with that, so, not of that but they uh, they play consol games too—this guy's dancing. I guess we're waiting for the commander. each class has a different dance, but I think he's a ? too, crazy, yeah, so we're actually doing the same dance. but out of sync [yeah ha] hahahaha [that's funny] a ha

Jake: you're just one step behind [mhmm]

Robin: but yeah they must all be—oh I know why, cause there's only an hour left, oh, there's still 47 minutes, I was going to say

Jake: well I think, my recorders are probably, I bet they're on the edge of dying so is there any last thoughts you have or?

Robin: I don't know um

Jake: we talked for two hours

Robin: it is what it is—did we really?

Jake: yeah, well one hour 55

Robin: time flies when you're

Jake: alright, well I will turn these off

Follow up email:

Hi Jake,

Thanks so much for sending the transcript. I'm just amazed at how disjointed I am talking with you. I guess I found it difficult to describe into words what I take in so visually.

I also describe the issues in my first GW2 guild..about the guy who came in and allowed the web site to be hacked. That wasn't the new leader of the guild but one of his new officers that did it. He had good intentions, but used a theme for the website that unfortunately was prone to hacking, and I guess he also didn't save the original content. Nothing was going to get better until improvements in the game itself, were made. I didn't blame him for his frustration, and I don't want to blame him for the demise. The original leader did enough of that to the poor guy. It was his officer that changed so much of the last remnants that were holding it all together.

After reading all of that, I really wish I had been able to be more clear I guess. The big draw for me, playing these types of games is the game itself first. It is nice to make new friends and do things with others, but I am naturally very independent in nature. I tend to group up when I have to, or when doing something with a group is more fun than doing it alone. Otherwise, I quite enjoy being just off alone solving a puzzle, or fighting some epic boss with a group of others who aren't really totally dependent on me, any more than I am on them. That's only a strength in numbers kind of thing, much like the zerg I was running around with in Edge of the Mists.

I love the lore and stories, but real life is stressful, and I tend to forget a lot of it when I'm not immersed in it. Real life always comes first with us. I know there are a whole breed of MMO gamers out there who live to play, and real life gets avoided. I have to keep a balance, and I have taught my kids to do the same. As much as I use games to escape a variety of things, it's also good to keep the escape temporary. I don't want to miss anything in real life any more than I want to miss something in the game.

At the time of our interview too, Anet had implemented so many changes to the game, that it was difficult to describe some aspects. More changes are coming now too. The second part of the Living Story has begun, and Amy and I are in the new guild I talked about. There are a lot more people to play with and talk to. I still do my own thing for the most part, but the new guildies are pretty nice too.

Will I get a chance to see it again after you've cleaned it all up? It seems like a daunting task!

Hope you're well too!