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# Bosses, Spam, and Grieferers

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A Study of How Old Words Adopt New Meanings in Online Computer Games

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## **Abstract**

This essay investigates 20 gaming words generally present in the genres of Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games, Real Time Strategy, and First-Person Shooter. From each genre, one game was chosen as a representative for their respective genre, namely Guild Wars 2, StarCraft II, and Quake III Arena. The 20 words were chosen on the basis that they all occur in at least two of the three gaming genres, and that their use in the games differ from their original definition presented in Oxford English Dictionary. The aim of the study is to investigate how online multiplayer games adopt certain words and how they are used in their respective contexts. My hypothesis was that there would be differences in meanings of the words within the different games since the games, in themselves, are different from each other. However, only 8 of the 20 analysed words differed in use between the games, which does not fully support this initial hypothesis. The reasons for this are, according to this study, mainly twofold. The sample size is limited, thus making it difficult to draw any major conclusions. Moreover, gamers move between games, bringing acquired vocabulary with them. In this study, only verbs and nouns were adopted in the different genres, and they had changed from their definitions present in the Oxford English Dictionary mainly through widening and/or conversion.

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## 1. Introduction

The inherent nature of language allows individuals a large amount of creativity in expressing themselves as languages offer infinite possibilities for sentence formation (Cruse 1986, p. 50). As languages are dynamic and ever-changing, they adapt according to their respective contemporary society and its individuals. As society develops, so does language. New contexts are constantly forming and new contexts are often in need of a certain terminology to explain them. How then is this new terminology acquired? One way is for existing words to receive additional meanings, which is known as widening (Bloomfield, 1969[1935], p. 426). Other ways to form new words for a new context may be to convert an existing word into another lexical form, for instance through conversion or affixation (Bauer, 1983, p. 32; Cruse, 1986, p. 77).

With the invention of the Internet a whole new world of technology opened up, and with this new context many new words were invented, which are known as neologisms (Bauer, 1983, pp. 42). With this new online experience, sub-contexts soon developed, for instance, online computer games. The unique world of online computer games required new terminology in order to explain the various concepts within them. From a linguistic perspective, online computer games can therefore be interesting to study in terms of how new words develop or old words receive new meanings.

Many of the meanings of gaming words do not exist in standard dictionaries, such as the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), but can instead be found in more specialized “wikis”, which are encyclopaedias that can be edited by anyone (“Wiki,” 2006). Context bound words in online computer games often have a highly specialized meaning, and although a person can technically play a game without knowing all the specific terminology, knowing the terminology facilitates communication with the larger gaming community.

In this paper I will compare 20 words used in three different popular genres of English speaking online computer games, namely Real Time Strategy (henceforth RTS), Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG), and First-Person Shooter (FPS). The 20 words were chosen on the basis that they all occur in at least two of the three gaming genres, and that their use in the games differ from their original OED definition. I will investigate how the 20 words are used in their respective contexts, and what word formation processes and/or semantic changes each word has gone through.

The aim of this study is to investigate how online multiplayer gaming communities adopt certain words and how they are used. My hypothesis is that there will be differences in

meanings of the words within the different games since the games, in themselves, are different from each other. My research questions are presented below.

- Which words have been adopted into the genres of MMORPG, RTS and FPS?
- How have the adopted words changed from their OED definition?
- What are the differences between game genres in terms of how a certain word is used?

After this brief introduction, section 2 outlines previous research history and also places this essay within the same research context. Section 3 presents the material and the methods used in this study. The different gaming genres and their respective games are listed, as well as the reasons for their inclusion in the study. In section 4, the results are explained and presented together with a discussion for each word. In section 5, conclusions are presented briefly.

## 2. Internet Linguistics and Online Computer Games

Below follows a brief exploration of previous research related to online computer gaming and Internet linguistics, but first it is necessary to discuss the ways in which words form and change.

### 2.1 Word Formation Processes and Semantic Change

Words can form through a number of different processes, and one of these is compounding. Compounding is, simply put, the process whereby two words are combined to form one new word. One such example is the combination of *paper* and *clip* to form the compound word *paperclip* (Bauer, 1983, p. 11). Another word formation process is affixation whereby an affix is added to the root or stem of an existing word. Examples of affixation include adding the prefix *un-* to the stem *popular*, creating *unpopular*, and adding the suffix *-er* to the stem *long* creating *longer* (Cruse, 1986, p. 77). New words can also be formed through changing the lexical category of an existing word without changing its form. From the noun *napalm*, the verb *to napalm* has formed, and this is known as conversion (Bauer, 1983, p. 32). Another way for new words to form is through blending which is the word formation process where parts of two words are mixed (Bauer, 1983, p. 234). Gries gives an example of blending where parts of *br(eakfast)* and *(l)unch* have mixed together to form the new lexeme *brunch*

(2004, p. 639). New words also enter languages through borrowing (Bloomfield, 1969[1935], p. 298), such as the originally Swedish word *ombudsman* adopted into English (“Ombudsman,” 2004). Sometimes there is a need to invent completely new terminology and such new words are termed neologisms. One example of a neologism is the word *television* (Bauer, 1983, pp. 42-43).

In addition to word formation processes, semantic changes can extend or limit the meaning of particular words, or modify them. This can happen in mainly two ways. A word can attain an additional and/or broader meaning, known as widening. As an example, the word *bird* used to mean just a young bird, but today the word can apply to any bird, regardless of age or species (Bloomfield, 1969[1935], p. 426). A word can also lose meanings and/or attain a more narrow definition, known as narrowing. An example of narrowing is the word *meat*, which used to mean any food, but today *meat* is only used to refer to flesh food (Bloomfield, 1969[1935], p. 426).

Words can change association, i.e. formerly positive words can develop negative connotations or vice versa. This is known as degeneration and elevation (Bloomfield, 1969[1935], p. 427). An example of degeneration is the word *knave*, which used to mean simply a boy or servant, but has today come to be associated with a dishonourable person. In contrast, the word *knight* also originally meant boy or servant, but is today associated with a chivalrous military man (Bloomfield, 1969[1935], p. 427).

This is not an exhaustive presentation of all types of word formation processes and semantic changes that can occur, and there also exists some debate regarding the nature of some of these processes. However, there is no room in this essay to go into further detail regarding this subject. Of the above presented processes, conversion, neologisms, affixation and widening will be further discussed in section 4 to help answer the research questions of this study.

## 2.2 Internet Language

Within the field of linguistics, Internet linguistics is a relatively new subfield. The term was first coined by David Crystal, who can also be said to be one of the most influential researchers within Internet linguistics. Internet linguistics is concerned with language used on, for instance, websites, in e-mails, and in chat groups (Crystal, 2001, pp. 9-13).

Variety and change are two phenomena to keep in mind when discussing the realm of Internet language. It is not only native English speakers from a certain social class and age

group who communicate through online media (Crystal, 2001, pp. 6-7). An increasing amount of people from all over the world are using the Internet on a daily basis, and thus both great variety and constant change is inevitable. People use the Internet for private messaging, for work and business, and for research. Therefore to discuss the language on the Internet in general is not likely to be very constructive. It is instead more interesting to speak of different forms of online communication, and what types of linguistic traits that characterize these forms of communication. Crystal (2001) divides Internet communication into four sections: the World Wide Web (i.e. webpages and databases), e-mails, chat groups, and virtual worlds (online games) (pp. 10-13). Virtual worlds will be discussed in 2.3.

The language of webpages differs depending on the purpose and intended audience. A government site, an official news site, and a personal blog, for instance, are all different in terms of writer and the intended audiences. Crystal (2001) argues that official websites, online documents, academic texts, and advertisements are mostly just adapted to fit an online medium, and still carry the linguistic traits of their printed forms (p. 28).

The language of e-mails differs in regards to who the sender is, and the intended receiver. Frehner (2008) notes that e-mails have features of written language but are conceptually oral, and compares e-mails to traditional letters and telegrams (p. 44). E-mails (especially personal messages or those written in a hurry) tend to be written in a casual manner where punctuation is often lax, or even lacking (Frehner, 2008, p. 60). E-mails also have a tendency towards syntactic reductions with sentences such as “[d]idn’t get any mail from you, so don’t know where it went”, making them resemble telegrams (Frehner, 2008, p. 63). Frehner (2008) also points out that a particular feature of e-mails is that they are asynchronous, meaning that the sender and receiver do not need to be online at the same time to communicate (p. 37), in contrast to, for instance, a synchronous chat group.

Chat groups share many similarities with e-mails, such as syntactic reductions and lax punctuation, and can be either synchronous (like an in-game chat which will be discussed in later sections), or asynchronous (forums and chats where messages are stored for some period of time) (Crystal, 2001, p. 129). However, in a chat group it is common for people to be anonymous (or known only through a username), and they usually tend involve several people who message each other for some time (Crystal, 2001, p. 133). The messages are usually short, especially in synchronous groups, and met by responses from several different people. Abbreviations, non-standard spelling, emotional noises, emoticons, highly colloquial language, and other similar features (with sentences like “it wuz lotsa lafs”) are common in synchronous groups (Crystal, 2001, p. 164-165).



Crystal (2001) points out that the online categories of e-mails, chat groups, and virtual words all have features of both written language and speech. This, he argues, is an adaptation to the respective technology. Just like speech, these modes of conversation are time-governed; a quick response is expected, and they are transient (p. 29-30). The difference from speech, however, he argues, is that feedback is slower (we need to type a message and send it) as well as the pace of the conversation (Crystal, 2001, p. 30-31).

The different features of Internet language is difficult to sum up in a few short sentences. Language is dynamic, and the language of the Internet incredibly so. Regarding the Internet, Crystal (2001) writes that “[n]ot only does it offer a home to all linguistic styles within a language; it offers a home to all languages” (p. 216). This statement, I believe, conveys the vast variety and complexity of Internet linguistics.

### 2.3 Online Multiplayer Gaming Language

One special sub-context within Internet language is the language used in online multiplayer games. As pointed out in the previous section, the virtual worlds of online computer games share traits of both written and spoken language (Crystal, 2001, p. 29-30). Ensslin (2012) adds that, today, most of the communication regarding online computer games takes place either through forums related to the games, or through in-game synchronous chat channels. In forums, individuals can take their time to formulate proper sentences, but in chat groups time is lacking and turn-taking is fast paced, and therefore words and sentences become shortened (p. 70). Further details regarding the language of chat groups were discussed in the previous section.

In addition to casual communication, gamers often use different forms of response cries, such as *ARGH!*, *eeuw!*, and *oops!*, and cursing while playing together with others (Conway, 2013). Conway (2013) argues that response cries are an important sociolinguistic trait within the gaming community, in the sense of upholding a person’s gamer status, but this will not be discussed further in this study.

Players of online computer games are not a homogenous group of people, and, in addition, each gaming world comes with its own set of functions and vocabulary. As a result gaming language contains much variety in terms of terminology. Ensslin (2012) states that

“[g]amer slang spans all lexematic categories, or content words, and game designers and players alike are highly creative and prolific in producing new words for what mostly are new hardware,

software and gameworld phenomena on the one hand, and in adding new meanings to already existing words.” (p. 65)

The phenomena of word formation processes and semantic change has already been discussed in section 2.1, and how this relates to the language of online computer games is the overarching topic of this study. MMORPG, RTS, and FPS are three very different online computer game genres and, as Ensslin (2012) points out, each individual game comes with a different set of functions and restrictions that demands a certain language. It is also important for players to be aware of gaming terminology to successfully be able to play and communicate with other players (p. 68). 20 words from three games, one from each above mentioned genre, are what will be discussed in the following sections.

### **3. Methods and Materials**

In this section, I will present my material and the chosen games of study, which are StarCraft II (henceforth SC2), Guild Wars 2 (GW2), and Quake III Arena (Quake). Furthermore, my methods are also described.

#### **3.1 Method**

In this paper, I analyse, from a linguistic perspective, three different online computer games (GW2, SC2 and Quake), of three different genres, developed by three different companies. My hypothesis at the start of this study was that the games, due to their many differences, would use certain gaming related words in different ways. In order to be able to answer my research questions I initially chose to collect two random words from each letter in the, roughly 1300 words, word list presented on WoWWiki (Game terms, 2014), which is an encyclopaedia for everything related to the MMORPG World of Warcraft, and that also includes general gaming terminology. The second restriction to this collection was that the words should be present in the games described above. As it turned out, however, these restrictions were too limiting. As a result, I chose to investigate all of the words, present in the lists, that existed in at least two of the three chosen games (20 words in total), and I will attempt to explain the absence of a word from a game as a direct result of the specific context for that particular game.

WoWWiki offers the most comprehensive list that I could find, but it still does not contain every single gaming related word, hence, in an attempt to retrieve every relevant word, I have

also collected words from Liquipedia, which is a wiki for SC2 containing information on gameplay, famous players and teams, and also a short wordlist related to SC2 terminology (Definitions, 2014), and Wikipedia. WoWWiki is limited in another way, namely that it does not always contain all possible definitions for the analysed gaming words. Therefore Liquipedia and Wikipedia have also been used as additional sources for definitions.

The collected words were then categorized into two main groups, one where the meaning is the same across all games, and another group where at least one game uses a word differently. The different game definitions of each word were then compared to their corresponding definition in OED in an attempt to investigate what kind of semantic changes the words have gone through. It should be noted that not all OED definitions have been included in this study. Only those considered relevant, by the author, for the analysis of the gaming words, are presented. The results of the analysis are presented in section 4.

### 3.2 Material

Most online multiplayer games have at least one common denominator. The notion of “winning” or “beating the game” is in essence, non-existent. The games are built to always offer new challenges for the players, and while a player may win a battle the war has just begun. If a player is good enough, he or she can try to become a professional (Seo, 2013). One interesting similarity between multiplayer games, from the perspective of linguistics, is that communication between players becomes important in various ways. This will be discussed further for each particular game in sections 3.2.1, 3.2.2, and 3.2.3.

For this study I have chosen to compare three popular genres of online computer games, namely RTS, MMORPG, and FPS. In each genre I have chosen one game: SC2 for RTS, GW2 for MMORPG and Quake for FPS. I chose these three games for several reasons. The first reason is that these games are all popular within their respective genre. SC2 is, arguably, one of the largest RTS games in the world at the moment, and e-sports tournaments, with large sums in the prize pool, are frequently held (Portal:leagues, 2014). Quake may not be the most popular FPS today, but it still keeps a respectable amount of gamers active, although the game itself is, arguably, old (id Software, 1999). GW2 does not have the largest player base online either, but the game is a recent addition to the genre (ArenaNet, 2012).

I also have personal experience playing each of these games. This could perhaps be seen as a potential bias in the study, but I would rather argue that this is a strength since my personal insight into the games has given me reasons to believe that there are linguistic traits

within the games worth investigating. Sections 3.2.1, 3.2.2, and 3.2.3 will present relevant background information for each respective game in regards to gameplay and means of communication between players.

### 3.2.1 Quake III Arena

id Software released Quake in 1999 and the gameplay is mostly fast paced (id Software, 1999). Quake is an FPS with several game modes, but they all have one common denominator: to kill the opponent/s. It is only the justification that differs between the game modes. In all the game modes, death is never final, but there are penalties involved for dying, such as having to wait for a round to be over, or increasing the opponent's score. Or, in the case of duel, a player loses all gathered equipment while the opponent retains theirs, giving them the upper hand and "map-control" (id Software, 1999). As the name of the genre implies, the weaponry used is of great importance and each player begins a round with at least two weapons, and additional weapons and ammunition are scattered across the playing field (id Software, 1999).

Players can communicate via an in-game chat (divided into a general chat and a team chat), and also through internet forums. It is also common for players of the same team to speak directly to each other through programmes such as TeamSpeak or Skype. This enables a greater use of tactics and different game strategies immediately communicated between players, which can be vital for gaining the upper hand in close games (id Software, 1999).

### 3.2.2 StarCraft II

Blizzard Entertainment released the RTS game SC2: Wings of Liberty in 2010 and the expansion SC2: Heart of the Swarm in 2013 (henceforth, both games will be referred to as SC2). Just as in Quake, the online multiplayer experience in SC2 features several different types of game modes, the main difference being the number of players playing at the same time (Blizzard Entertainment, 2010; Blizzard Entertainment 2013).

In regards to the gameplay, no matter the chosen game mode, the strategy employed functions the same way. There is a choice between three different races, Protoss, the high tech alien race, the insect-like Zerg, and Terran, the humans. The goals are to gather resources, build up an army, and eventually kill the opponent/s (Blizzard Entertainment, 2010; Blizzard Entertainment 2013).

Many simultaneous actions are the core of this game. A player must saturate their economy, construct additional unit producing structures and control their army in order to

reach success. While playing the game, the player will have to account for army compositions, synergies between their own units and how they interact with the units of the opponent. For instance, some flying units can only shoot targets on the ground, others only shoot flying targets, and some can shoot both ground and air targets (Blizzard Entertainment, 2010; Blizzard Entertainment 2013). In essence, SC2 can be compared to an advanced game of chess, but with many more units.

The main modes of communication between players are the in-game chat (with an opponent or team mates, if they have any) and different online forums. It is also possible for players to speak directly through programmes such as TeamSpeak or Skype, and SC2 even has a built in voice chat (Blizzard Entertainment, 2010; Blizzard Entertainment 2013).

### 3.2.3 Guild Wars 2

ArenaNet released Guild Wars 2 (GW2) in 2012. It is a classic MMORPG. In the game, a person can play one of many adventurous heroes, and the journey begins at level 1. From there on the player moves through the realm, helping allies and innocent citizens fend off the varying forces of evil, all the way up to level 80 (ArenaNet, 2012). GW2 also offers two other gaming modes where players are pitted against each other in teams. In Player versus Player, two small teams face each other in an arena, while in World versus World three whole servers are pitted against each other on several large playing fields (ArenaNet, 2012).

Communication is of great importance for such a large scale online multiplayer game as GW2, and no matter which game mode a player happens to choose, the communication system is the same. Not only are parts of the game built around being more than one player, especially considering the fact that a few end game monsters actually require hundreds of people to be coordinated in order to achieve victory, but the communicative aspect is also of great importance for the social aspect (ArenaNet, 2012).

The world is a limited playing field, and it is divided into smaller zones. Each zone has its own chat in which players can communicate. The chat system offers functions that let players decide who to write to and how many people are able to read the message (ArenaNet, 2012). A player can also block people whom they wish to have no further contact with. Apart from the in-game chat, players also frequently communicate via programmes such as TeamSpeak or Skype, or on different forums where gaming content is discussed (ArenaNet, 2012).

## 4. Results and Discussion

Below follow the results of the analysis of the 20 words present in this study accompanied by a discussion with examples of use for each word. In this section, I will in turn present and discuss the words and their meaning in GW2, SC2 and Quake, and how the gaming definitions differ from OED. I will also discuss the nature of the words in terms of word class and what type of word formation processes or semantic changes the words have gone through. The results are first shown in tables divided into word classes and then further elaborated in the text.

### 4.1 Adopted words and their different meanings

Of the 20 chosen words in this study, 12 fall under the category “same meaning across all games”, while the remaining 8 fall under the category “different meaning for at least one game” (see Table 1). My hypothesis was that many of the words should differ in meaning between the games, due to the games being so different. However, from the results it can be seen that 60% of the 20 words do not differ. Although my initial hypothesis is not thoroughly supported, 40% of the words still differ in meaning between the games. In the following subsections, I will discuss the outcome of the results for each word.

Table 1. Collected words and their presence across the three genres

| Words                          | MMORPG (GW2) | RTS (SC2) | FPS (Quake) | Difference in meaning |
|--------------------------------|--------------|-----------|-------------|-----------------------|
| <b>Boss</b>                    | ✓            | ✓         | ✓           | No                    |
| <b>Buff (opposite of nerf)</b> | ✓            | ✓         | ✓           | No                    |
| <b>Camping</b>                 | ✓            | ✗         | ✓           | Yes                   |
| <b>Cooldown</b>                | ✓            | ✓         | ✓           | No                    |
| <b>Creep</b>                   | ✓            | ✓         | ✗           | Yes                   |
| <b>Death</b>                   | ✓            | ✓         | ✓           | Yes                   |
| <b>Experience (point)</b>      | ✓            | ✓         | ✗           | Yes                   |
| <b>Farming</b>                 | ✓            | ✓         | ✗           | Yes                   |
| <b>Griefer/-ing</b>            | ✓            | ✓         | ✓           | No                    |
| <b>Health</b>                  | ✓            | ✓         | ✓           | No                    |
| <b>Kiting</b>                  | ✓            | ✓         | ✗           | No                    |
| <b>Macro</b>                   | ✓            | ✓         | ✗           | Yes                   |
| <b>Map</b>                     | ✓            | ✓         | ✓           | No                    |
| <b>Nerf (opposite of buff)</b> | ✓            | ✓         | ✓           | No                    |
| <b>Newbie/Noob</b>             | ✓            | ✓         | ✓           | No                    |
| <b>Skin</b>                    | ✓            | ✓         | ✓           | Yes                   |
| <b>Spam</b>                    | ✓            | ✓         | ✓           | No                    |
| <b>Strafe</b>                  | ✓            | ✗         | ✓           | No                    |
| <b>Tank</b>                    | ✓            | ✓         | ✗           | No                    |
| <b>Zerg</b>                    | ✓            | ✓         | ✗           | Yes                   |

#### 4.2 Words with the same meaning across games

As shown in Table 2 below, 5 of the 20 words have the same meaning across games and are only used as nouns. The gaming definitions all differ from the original OED definitions and this is due to widening.

Table 2. Words that are only used as nouns and have the same meaning across games

| Word                | OED definition  | Game definition  | Type of semantic change |
|---------------------|---|--|-------------------------|
| <b>Boss</b>         | “Of persons: master, chief.”  | A special enemy that is harder to kill than average enemies.   | Widening                |
| <b>Cooldown</b>     | “An instance of cooling down; a reduction in temperature”   | Represents the time it takes between uses of the same ability. | Widening                |
| <b>Health</b>       | “Soundness of body”   | Measurement for “life level.”                                  | Widening                |
| <b>Map</b>          | “A diagram or collection of data showing the spatial distribution of something or the relative positions of its components” | The playing field in competitive multiplayer games.            | Widening                |
| <b>Newbie /noob</b> | “A person new to a particular activity, profession, etc.; a newcomer, a beginner.”  | A derogatory expression to belittle another player’s efforts.  | Widening                |

The word *boss* exists in all three games, and the gaming definition for a *boss* is a special enemy that is harder to kill than the average enemies in the game. Bosses usually appear near the end of stages in the game (“Boss,” 2012). The word *boss* only occurs as a noun, as shown by the examples in (1a-b).

- (1) a. “I just beat the shit out of the boss on Metroid Prime” (Tbplayer, 2004).  
b. “Bowser is the hardest boss” (Manjoo, 2003).

The closest OED definition from which this term could be derived from is “[o]f persons: master, chief. Of things: most esteemed, ‘champion’. Now esp. in *U.S. slang*: excellent, wonderful; good, ‘great’; masterly” (“Boss,” 1887). The adoption of the word *boss* into computer games, and its use in this specific context, has added another meaning to the OED definition, and thus I would argue that the word *boss* has changed through the process of widening. However, Ensslin proposes that the use of the word *boss*, in games, has changed through the process of narrowing because it refers “to a highly specific concept” (2012, p. 73). But the narrower use of the word *boss* in games is contextual, and other definitions, such as those listed in the OED, still exist in other contexts. The process of narrowing excludes the wider definition completely for all contexts, as discussed in section 2.1. Since *boss* still retains its original definition, and due to its use in games with a slightly different interpretation, it has gone through the semantic process of widening.

The term *cooldown* exists as a noun in all three games, and represents the time it takes between uses of the same ability, as shown in (2a-b). The range can be anything between no *cooldown* to a few days of *cooldown* (“Cooldown,” 2014). The OED states that the meaning of the word is “[a]n instance of cooling down; a reduction in temperature” (“Cool-down,” 2008). This decrease in temperature has an underlying notion of time passing, and in games it is the passing of time that defines a cooldown. Since both definitions of *cooldown* are still in use, although in different contexts, it has changed through the process of widening.

- (2) a. “Save your cooldowns for boss fights” (“Cooldown,” 2014).  
b. “A Hearthstone has a 30 minute cooldown time” (“Cooldown,” 2014).

The concept of *health* (also known as hit points) exists in all three games, and it measures the “life level” in numbers for both characters and monsters (“Health,” 2013). The OED definition of *health* is the “[s]oundness of body; that condition in which its functions are duly



and efficiently discharged” (“Health,” 1898). In contrast to the OED definition, in games, often times a character or creature with just a single health point remaining is fully functional in terms of their abilities (this may, of course, vary between games but it holds true for the games in this study). The word is used as a noun in games, as exemplified in (3), and the meaning of the word *health* has changed through the process of widening due to the fact that *health* has received additional meaning.

(3) “Oh man, that boss almost killed me, but I had like 1 hit point left so I made it”  
(Megatramp, 2006).

The term *map* exists in all three games and can in general gaming terms be “[u]sed to describe arenas in competitive multiplayer games in which the gameplay is heavily dependent on terrain” (“Level (video gaming),” 2014). The closest OED definition of the word *map* states that a *map* is “[a] diagram or collection of data showing the spatial distribution of something or the relative positions of its components” (“Map, 2000”). In contrast to the OED definition of the word *map*, the gaming sense of the word is used to describe the playing field that players “physically” walk around on, rather than a separate visual representation of their surroundings. *Map*, in gaming terms, is used as a noun, as in example (4), and has developed an additional meaning through its use in games. Therefore, the word *map* can be said to have gone through a process of widening.

(4) “Man dust2 sucks, lets change the map to de\_piranesi” (Baxton, 2005).

The term *newbie*, also spelled *noob*, has several meanings, but only the derogatory form within games will be discussed because the neutral form, *newbie*, has the same meaning as in OED i.e. a beginner. OED states that a *newbie* is “[a] person new to a particular activity, profession, etc.; a newcomer, a beginner. In later use freq.: *spec.* a new user of computer technology, esp. the Internet” (“Newbie,” 2003). The derogatory form *noob* exists in all three games and is used as an expression to belittle another player’s efforts in the game, as in (14a-b), irrespective of their previous gaming experience (“Newbie,” 2013). *Noob* appears in the games as a noun, see (5a-b), and since the several meanings of the word coexists it has changed through the process of widening.

(5) a. “How could that guy kill us both? He’s a freaking noob” (constructed example, MJ).

- b. “Anyone playing a thief is a noob, because there is no skill involved, just spam”  
(constructed example, MJ).

Only one of the 20 analysed words exists solely as a verb, and this is the verb kiting, as shown in Table 3 below. The gaming definition all differ from the original OED definition and this is due to affixation.

**Table 3. Words that are only used as verbs and have the same meaning across games**

| Word          | OED definition  | Game definition   | Type of word formation process |
|---------------|---|---|--------------------------------|
| <b>Kiting</b> | “A toy consisting of a light frame... to be <i>flown</i> in a strong wind by means of a long string attached” | Keeping out of enemy firing range while still doing damage to the enemy | Affixation                     |

The word *kiting* exists in both GW2 and SC2, but not in Quake. *Kiting*, in games, is a technique used in combat wherein kiting players keep themselves out of enemy targeting range, while still staying within their own firing range (“Kiting,” 2014), as in (6).

- (6) “Some guys in WoW were kiting a high level boss character into Stromwind and got banned” (SubtlePulse, 2007).

*Kiting* is an affixation of the word *kite*, and the concept in OED from which this definition is derived is “[a] toy consisting of a light frame ... to be *flown* in a strong wind by means of a long string attached” (“Kite,” 1901). In games a player is controlling an enemy like a person flies a kite. However, the concept of *kiting* does not exist in Quake due to the lack of melee/range discrepancy between the different weapons available.

As shown in Table 4 below, 6 of the 20 words have the same use across games and are used both as nouns and verbs. The gaming definitions all differ from the original OED definitions and this is due to widening, affixation, and conversion.

Table 4. Words that can be used as both nouns and verbs, and have the same meaning across games

| Word                | OED definition   | Game definition  | Type of semantic change | Type of word formation process |
|---------------------|--|--|-------------------------|--------------------------------|
| <b>Buff</b>         | “To polish with a buff”                                    | The change of ability, character, class etc. that makes the unit better                            | Widening                | Conversion                     |
| <b>Griever/-ing</b> | “Hurt, harm, mischief or injury done or caused by another” | “The act of a player ruining the gaming experience of another player on purpose”                   | x                       | Affixation                     |
| <b>Nerf</b>         | “A type of foam rubber”                                    | A change to an ability, character, class etc. that has decreased its effectiveness in some regard. | Widening                | Conversion                     |
| <b>Spam</b>         | “To flood ... with a large number of unsolicited postings  | The continuous use of few or a single ability in battle  | Widening                | x                              |
| <b>Strafe</b>       | “To punish; to do damage to”                               | A movement technique   | Widening                | Conversion                     |
| <b>Tank</b>         | “An armoured military vehicle”                             | A character able to withstand high amounts of incoming damage                                      | Widening                | Conversion                     |

The word *buff* exists in all three games, and *buff* is a term for the change of ability, character, class etc. that makes the unit better in some way, usually done by the game developers. *Buff*, in gaming terms, can be used as both a noun (7a) and a verb (7b). A developer can add a buff to a character, thus buffing it.

(7) a. “The buff they gave to Protoss made me switch races” (constructed example, MJ).

b. “Undead are too weak! Please buff them!” (LastDay, 2004).

Buffing skews the game balance, often in an attempt to make the overall game balance better. This sense of the word has an opposite term, namely *nerf* (“Buff,” 2011). *Buff* also has additional meanings in GW2 which does not exist in SC2 or Quake. A character can cast spells on itself to temporarily enhance its abilities. (“Buff,” 2011). The most similar OED definition to represent the origin of the gaming word *buff* is “[t]o polish with a buff” (“Buff,” 1888). The OED definition implies an improvement of sorts, and this sense of improvement is what characterises the meaning of *buff* in games. The meaning of the word *buff* has therefore been subject to the process of widening. Furthermore, the fact that buff is used as both a noun and a verb, as in (7a-b), implies conversion.

The word *griefing* exists in all three games with the meaning “the act of a player ruining the gaming experience of another player on purpose”, and a person who performs *griefing* is called a *griever* (“Griefing,” 2013), as in (8a-b). The terms *griefing* and *griever* are derived from the word grief. Grief in OED is defined as “[h]urt, harm, mischief or injury done or

caused by another” (“Grief,” 1900). From grief, a noun and a verb has been formed through affixation.

(8) a. “Ugh, a griefer destroyed my entire castle while I was in the shower. Fml”

(MimeStalker, 2011).

b. “We were winning the capture the flag game until Brian and Chris decided to started grieving and shot the rest of us in the back” (Industrio Melman, 2004).

The word *nerf* is found across all three games and is used to describe a change to an ability, character, class etc. that has decreased its effectiveness in some regard. *Nerf* is the opposite of buff (although not the temporary boost meaning of the word) (“Nerf,” 2009). Just as a *buff*, a *nerf* is a way for game developers to create a better overall game balance. In OED, *nerf* is described as “[a] type of foam rubber used esp. in the manufacture of children's toys and sports equipment” (“Nerf,” 2003). In essence, the OED definition of *nerf* is a measure that makes something less dangerous, and the game definition of *nerf* reflects that essence. The meaning of *nerf* has changed through the process of widening, and has also become a verb through conversion, see example (9a-b).

(9) a. “The nerf to Marines’ attack damage was uncalled for” (constructed example, MJ).

b. “Why the hell did Blizzard nerf Marines' attack damage?” (Koop, 2003).

The term *spam* exists in all three games, and it describes the continuous use of few or a single ability in battle, and is often performed with abilities which has no, or a short, *cooldown* (“Spam,” 2010). The OED definition states that *to spam* is “[t]o flood (a network, esp. the Internet, a newsgroup, or individuals) with a large number of unsolicited postings, or multiple copies of the same posting” (“Spam,” 2001). Both the OED definition and the gaming definition of *spam* is used as both a noun (10a) and a verb (10b), and additional meanings of the word *spam* has been added through the process of widening.

(10) a. “Heartseeker spam killed me” (constructed example, MJ).

b. “To spam grenades in a narrow corridor is highly effective” (constructed example, MJ).

The word *strafe* exists in GW2 and Quake, but not in SC2. *Strafing* describes a movement technique in which the character is moving sideways while focusing the vision on the target, thus creating a circular pattern (“Strafing (gaming),” 2014). Strafing does not exist in SC2 due to the simple fact that units are not programmed to move sideways. The closest OED definition is “to punish; to do damage to; to attack fiercely” (“Strafe,” 1917), but this definition does not include the sideways movement. The meaning of the word *strafe* has thus changed through the process of widening. The word *strafe* is used as both a noun (11a) and a verb (11b), which indicates conversion.

(11) a. “Wow, i couldn't get a head shot. That guy had a good strafe” (MLG PRO CIRCUIT, 2010).

b. “You can avoid them by strafing” (Nero7x, 2005).

The word *tank* exists in GW2 and SC2, but not in Quake. A *tank* is a combat role fulfilled by a character or unit with a lot of health or damage reduction, and whose primary objective is to withstand high amounts of incoming damage (“Tank (game term),” 2014), as in example (21a-b). Since every player in Quake start with the same amount of health the *tank* role is not utilized. According to OED, a *tank* is “[a]n armoured military vehicle moving on a tracked carriage and mounted with a gun, designed for use in rough terrain” (“Tank,” 1933). The image of a *tank* as a force that is not easily defeated has been adopted into games to mean a very sturdy character or unit (which can, of course, be physically represented by a tank).

(12) a. “That warrior is a good tank because he can take a lot of damage and he has a lot of hitpoints” (Ignotus, 2005).

b. “Do you think you can tank this mob for us?” (Ignotus, 2005).

The word *tank*, used as both a noun (12a) and a verb (12b) in computer games, indicates conversion. Furthermore, the extended use of the word *tank* in computer games clearly suggests widening. However, as with the word *boss*, Ensslin argues that *tank* has been narrowed (2012, p. 73). As with *boss*, the word *tank* in computer games can perhaps be argued to have a more narrow meaning in specific gaming situations, however, the word itself still retains all definitions. Thus, I would argue, the word *tank* has undergone widening.

### 4.3 Words with different meanings in at least one game

As shown in Table 5 below, 4 of the 20 words have different meanings in at least one game and are only used as nouns. The gaming definitions all differ from the original OED definitions and this is due to widening.

Table 5. Words that are only nouns and also have a different meaning in at least one game

| Word                      | OED definition   | GW2 definition                              | SC2 definition                             | Quake definition                               | Type of semantic change |
|---------------------------|--|---|--|--|-------------------------|
| <b>Creep</b>              | ”Slow or stealthy motion”  | Any monster                                 | Zerg slime                                 | x  | Widening                |
| <b>Death</b>              | “The permanent cessation of the vital functions”                               | Health reaches zero, time and money penalty | Health reaches zero, many expendable units | Health reaches zero, loss of time or equipment | Widening                |
| <b>Experience (point)</b> | “Knowledge resulting from actual observation or from what one has undergone”   | Character growth                            | Gaining rewards                            | x  | Widening                |
| <b>Skin</b>               | “The layer of tissue forming the external covering of the body in vertebrates” | Aesthetic modification                      | Aesthetic modification                     | Colour scheme of a unit                        | Widening                |

The word *creep* exists as a noun in both GW2 (13a) and SC2 (13b), but not in Quake. In GW2 it can refer to “any monster in the game” (“Creep,” 2008). In SC2, it refers to the ground covering alien slime that the race Zerg lives on (“Creep,” 2013).

- (13) a. “These creeps are too high level, let’s go somewhere else” (constructed example, MJ).  
 b. “You must connect your bases with creep” (constructed example, MJ)

The GW2 definition of *creep* originates from the RTS game Warcraft III. The word was then adopted into the MMORPG World of Warcraft (both games developed by Blizzard Entertainment) (“Creep,” 2008), a game that has come to influence many other games in the same genre, including GW2. Quake was released before Warcraft III and also belongs to a separate genre, and this might be the reasons for why the word *creep* does not exist in this game. The OED states that the definition of *creep* is “[t]he action of creeping; slow or stealthy motion”, and it is a noun derived from the verb *to creep* (“Creep,” 1893). The word has in both GW2 and SC2 changed through the process of widening.

*Death* can occur in all three games, but the outcome of a character’s or unit’s *death* affects the games differently. In that sense, there is a difference in meaning, although *death* is never final. In GW2, *death* refers to a state which a character is in when their health reaches zero.

After a *death* has occurred, the player will re-spawn in some way, often times further away from the origin of the *death*. The most essential penalty for the player is the time lost having to run back to their previous position (“Death,” 2013). The outcome of a *death* in Quake depends on the game mode, but penalties involve the loss of extra equipment, time spent having to wait for the next round to begin, and rewarding points for the opponent. (id Software, 1999). In SC2, since the players are controlling entire armies, the *death* of single unit normally does not result in any penalties affecting the outcome of the game. Instead, only the *deaths* of smaller groups of larger armies can swing the favour to the one or the other side, as in (14) (Blizzard Entertainment, 2010; Blizzard Entertainment, 2013).

(14) “The death of those colossi cost him the game” (constructed example, MJ).

*Death*, according to OED, is “the permanent cessation of the vital functions of a person, animal, plant, or other organism” (“Death,” 2014). The difference between the OED definition and the different gaming definitions is that in games, death is not permanent in the same sense. The concept of *death* in computer games has added new meanings to the OED definition and the word has changed through the process of widening.

The concept of *experience* (often abbreviated exp or xp) exists as a noun in both GW2 and SC2, but not in Quake. There is a difference in meaning between GW2 and SC2. In GW2 *experience* is a unit of measurement for a character’s level advancement, as in (15), and for each level gained, the character grows stronger and learns new abilities (“Experience point,” 2014).

(15) “You need 100 XP for a level” (JiaXue, 2003).

In SC2, there is no character growth involved, the levels gained only fill the purpose of introducing rewards (Blizzard Entertainment, 2010; Blizzard Entertainment, 2013). In Quake there is no character progression, and all gamers play under the same conditions, therefore *experience* in terms of gaining levels is not relevant. The OED definition of *experience* is the “[k]nowledge resulting from actual observation or from what one has undergone” (“Experience,” 1894). This definition has, through the use of the word in computer games, gone through a process of widening.

The word *skin* exists as a noun in all the games. In Quake, *skin* refers to the colour of the player and enemy models. The most common colour is bright green, since the sole purpose of

skins in Quake is to increase the visibility of the player’s target (id Software, 1999). In GW2 and SC2, a skin describes any “physical” modification to the outer appearance of a character or unit, and skins in these games are purely aesthetic, as in (16) (“Skin,” 2009b). The closest OED definition for the word *skin* is “[t]he layer of tissue forming the external covering of the body in vertebrates” (“Skin,” 2009a). This specific definition of skin in OED has developed additional meanings in computer games, and has thus changed through the process of widening.

(16) “I downloaded a skin that changes the main character into the president” (Taximes, 2004).

As shown in Table 6 below, 4 of the 20 words have different meanings in at least one game, and are used as both nouns and verbs. Most of the gaming definitions differ from the original OED definitions, but not all (see *macro*), and this is due to widening, conversion, and neologism.

**Table 6. Words that can be used as both nouns and verbs, and also have a different meaning in at least one game**

| Word              | OED definition  | GW2 definition                 | SC2 definition            | Quake definition | Type of semantic change | Type of word formation process |
|-------------------|---|--------------------------------|---------------------------|------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------|
| <b>Camper/ing</b> | “A lodging in tents”  | Staying in one area            | x                         | Strategic hiding | Widening                | x                              |
| <b>Farmer/ing</b> | “The business of cultivating land, raising stock, etc.”                                 | Mass slaying certain creatures | Playing to gain portraits | x                | Widening                | x                              |
| <b>Macro</b>      | “An instruction written so as to be equivalent to a chosen set of several instructions” | Same as OED                    | Focusing on game economy  | x                | Widening                | Conversion                     |
| <b>Zerg</b>       | -   | Large group of players         | Playable alien race       | x                | x                       | Neologism and conversion       |

The term *camping* exists in both GW2 and Quake, and the concepts exist in SC2 but the terminology used is different. In SC2 it is either called *turtling* (“Turtling,” 2012) or *containing* (“Containing,” 2012) depending on the situation. *Camping* also differs slightly between GW2 and Quake. In the FPS genre, camping is closely related with hiding around corners in an attempt to ambush a passing, unsuspecting enemy (17a), while a common characteristic of camping in MMORPGs is staying in an area where a particular monster spawns (“Camping (gaming),” 2014). A person who performs camping is known as a camper,



as in (17b). The OED describes *camping* as “a lodging in tents” (“Camping,” 1888), but the added meaning in games has changed the word through widening.

- (17) a. “my 50 year old mother could get that score camping like him and shes never played before” (Ace\_Man42, 2010).
- b. “I keep getting sniped, where is the camper?” (NoClanNeeded, 2004).

The term *farming* exists in GW2 and SC2, but not in Quake. In GW2, the process of *farming* mainly means the mass slaying of a specific type of creature for the “express purpose of getting them to drop certain items” (“Farming,” 2014), as in (18a). In SC2, *farming* is limited to, essentially, reward portraits gained from winning a large number of games. The process of this type of farming often involves the intentional loss of multiple games. This will force the matchmaking system to pit the *farmer* (18b) against players of lower skill than themselves, thus giving them the opportunity to win many games in a row, quickly. This kind of *farming*, in contrast with the *farming* in GW2, is an offence that can result in a ban from the game (Blizzard Entertainment, 2010; Blizzard Entertainment, 2013).

- (18) a. “Farming champions in Queensdale is so boring” (constructed example, MJ).
- b. “Portrait farmers ruin the game” (constructed example, MJ).

*Farming* does not exist in Quake, mainly because there are no rewards to be gained from this action. OED defines *farming* as “[t]he business of cultivating land, raising stock, etc.” (“Farming,” 1895). The adoption of the word into games has changed the original meaning through the process of widening.

The word *macro* exists in both GW2 and SC2, but not in Quake. The OED definition is “[a]n instruction written so as to be equivalent to a chosen set of several instructions” (“Macro,” 2000). GW2 has the same definition as OED, and using *macros* is considered cheating (ArenaNet, 2012). In SC2, the term *macro* is usually used to describe every action done relating to a player’s economy, abbreviated form *macro-management* (“Macro,” 2014), and can be used as both a noun and a verb (19a-b).

- (19) a. “Nada's macro is so gosu<sup>1</sup>, he manages to outnumber all his enemies” (Xeo, 2005).  
b. “You need to macro better if you want to reach Master league” (constructed example, MJ).

In SC2, the word *macro* has gone through both a process of widening and of conversion from the OED definition, while remaining the same in GW2. The term probably does not exist in Quake due to the fact that performing multiple actions at the same time is not possible.

The word *Zerg* is a term invented by Blizzard Entertainment for their release of StarCraft in 1998, and it is the name of one of the three playable races in the game (Blizzard Entertainment, 1998). The word *zerg* now exists in MMORPGs as both a noun (20a) and a verb (20b), and involves “attacking an enemy (or a group of enemies) with a far bigger group of weaker units” (“Zerg,” 2010). In GW2 specifically, the aspect of “weaker units” has been removed, and the word simply means a large mass of players sweeping from objective to objective (ArenaNet, 2012).

- (20) a. “Zerg is the hardest race to play” (constructed example, MJ).  
b. “Everyone target the boss, and zerg it” (Xeal, 2004).

The term *zerg* is a neologism created by Blizzard Entertainment and does not exist in OED. However, the term is still interesting to discuss since it is a clear example of how new words enter the world of computer games. In the case of *zerg*, the origin of the word is known without doubt, and has later been adopted into other gaming genres. It is, however, unclear if the word first appeared in other games as a verb or a noun. Liquipedia and Wowwiki both discuss the concept of *zerg* as a verb (Definitions, 2014; “Zerg,” 2010), indicating an initial conversion of the word into a verb, and then again into a noun with a different meaning from the race *Zerg*.

#### 4.4 Concluding Remarks to Results and Discussion

Games are invented with certain mechanics and players find and adopt certain techniques within the possibilities limited by the invented mechanics. Many of those techniques are not pre-labelled. As such, players of said games will have to invent a terminology in order to be able to communicate with each other in an efficient way. From my analysis, the most common

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<sup>1</sup> Romanized Korean term for a skilled player.

ways for words to enter a gaming context is either through the semantic change of widening, or through the word formation process of conversion. However, the amount words present in this study are too few to draw any major conclusions from regarding the most common word formation processes and semantic changes within games. As Ensslin points out, each game comes with its own unique terminology (2012, p. 68), and therefore it could be argued that neologisms should be very common as a word formation process. I, however, set out to investigate words that existed in more than one game, assuming there would be differences in the usage of the words due to the different natures of the games. Therefore, neologisms are few in my study. Only the word *zerg*, which exist in both SC2 and GW2, is a neologism.

All of the words in this study are either verbs or nouns, or both. New concepts require nouns, and new actions require verbs and the gaming industry frequently develop new concepts and techniques with each game release (Ensslin, 2012, p. 70). This is probably the reason for the high degree of verbs and nouns, although 20 words is a too limited material to draw any major conclusions from.

My hypothesis was that many of the words should differ in meaning between the games, due to the games being so different. However, this seems to not be the case. One explanation for this could potentially be that gamers seldom play only one online game. They move between games and genres and take terminology with them. This conclusion can be supported, for instance, by the term *zerg*, originally from SC but adopted into GW.

## 5. Conclusion

My hypothesis was that there would be differences in meanings of the words within the different games of GW2, SC2, and Quake since the games, in themselves, are different from each other. My research questions asked for which words had been adopted into the genres of MMORPG, RTS and FPS, how the adopted words had changed from their OED definition, and what the differences were between game genres in terms of how a certain word is used. Of the 20 verbs and nouns, only 8 had different meanings between the games, and this might be explained by the fact that gamers seldom play only one game. Bringing definitions from one game to another would decrease similarities. Most of the words have changed from their OED definitions through widening or conversion, however, 20 gaming terms is not enough to draw major conclusions from, regarding the different semantic processes at play. A larger study including more games from each genre used in this study, as well as more genres in

general, would be able to draw more concrete conclusions as opposed to just potential trends pointed to in this essay.

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