



Looking For More: The Social Phenomenology of Play in World of Warcraft

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Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis/project is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and, ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

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Abstract

More and more, contemporary electronic games are transcending the player-versus-machine model, incorporating to varying degrees new types of social play, where individuals can interact with each other in a state of 'telepresence' in immersive, three-dimensional virtual worlds. Yet we are faced with the puzzle of adequately understanding the meanings of these experiences of play in the absence of the physical body. Given that in many cases players only interact with each other indirectly through their virtual player characters, how can we interpret the meanings of play within contemporary virtual game worlds? Using the popular game *World of Warcraft* as a case study, this thesis attempts to answer this question via an ethnography primarily informed by a revised conception of the phenomenological sociology of Schutz (1899-1959), and drawing upon other notable technology writers such as Heidegger, Ihde, and Dreyfus, to explore the nature of mediated social action in the virtual fantasy game world of *World of Warcraft*. Using auto-ethnographic evidence, the thesis examines some of the experiential aspects of play-as-practice, player knowledge and expertise, and social relations, contending that play in *World of Warcraft* can be typically understood as a substantial commitment by the player that is multifaceted and heavily contingent upon the game's design in regards to the richness of social exchange in the game world.



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“In this world where time is your enemy, it is my greatest ally. This grand game of life that you think you play in fact plays you. To that I say... Let the games begin!” – Nefarian

Introduction

Since I was a young boy I have enjoyed playing computer games, from my *Atari 2600* game console in the early 1980s to the *Xbox One* I acquired late in 2013. Yet, I have never been interested in a game as much as *World of Warcraft*. The first time a friend showed me the game I was fascinated. *World of Warcraft* presented an entirely novel experience for me. I could share a virtual world with other players, and could involve myself in the experience of events in real time and with a degree of detail and complexity far greater than other multiplayer games I had played. In this game you could make friends, trade virtual items and work collaboratively with other players to achieve common goals, while being absorbed by the rich audio-visual experience of the game environment. Needless to say I went out and purchased the game later that day. I joined an in-game guild and was a few months later engaging in 40-player raids that were highly organised events. As I played I often reflected on the level of immersion I found myself in, like the hours I was dedicating to the game, or why I was thinking about playing the game when I was doing other things, and I began to wonder

why this was the case. I had trouble understanding how this computer game in particular drew me in so much, and how it had held my interest for so long given I am the sort of person that tires of things easily. Typically, once I “finish” a game, or if it becomes repetitive and mundane, I lose interest and move on to something else. I was curious as to why I found the experience of playing *World of Warcraft* so compelling in comparison to the single-player games I had played. What was different about the experience of playing single-player games to massively multiplayer ones like *World of Warcraft*? Fast forward a few years and I found myself having completed my undergraduate degree in the social sciences, with the opportunity to pursue further postgraduate study in the form of a Ph.D. I was still casually playing *World of Warcraft* and still intrigued by my experiences of playing the game, so I decided to transpose my interest in the game into a well-crafted and sustained research project.

Released in 2004, *World of Warcraft* was the fourth sequel to the massively popular *Warcraft* computer game series and quickly gained traction as a prominent Massively-Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Game alongside similarly-styled games like *EverQuest*, *Ultima Online* and *Star Wars: Galaxies*. At the height of its popularity, this “MMORPG” (often shortened to MMO) *World of Warcraft* boasted a monthly subscriber base of 12 million players worldwide (Blizzard Entertainment 2010), roughly the population of Greece. In the academic literature, it is a heavily researched game with published books and peer-reviewed journal articles dedicated to the game well into the hundreds.

The broader significance of a game like *World of Warcraft* is that online electronic entertainment like this is a cultural pastime of the “information age”. Robust statistical data on the scope of the usage of online games globally are difficult to find. However subscription statistics published from a range of game developers and electronic gaming platforms start to suggest an indicative picture of this emerging market. For example, Microsoft’s *XBOX* console range had 30 million “LIVE” (online) subscribers as of January 2011 (Microsoft 2011). The mobile phone and tablet PC-based puzzle game *Candy Crush Saga* boasted over 500 million downloads as of late 2013 (King.com Ltd. 2013). Even unfinished games can find themselves super popular: in just two months after open

release, the massively-multiplayer apocalyptic survival game *DayZ* saw over 1.5 million players purchase and download the alpha version,¹ according to the game's website in February 2014.

The rapid expansion of this market and associated cultural practices associated with online gaming in particular raise some problems for the social sciences. There seem to be some puzzles about understanding why and how people play games like *World of Warcraft* and how as researchers we are to interpret those experiences. What are the types of meanings associated with play in *World of Warcraft*, and are contemporary social research methods up to the task of examining the meanings of play in large multiplayer virtual worlds like those found in *World of Warcraft*?

In developing a Ph.D. proposal I began to think about how to establish a research project that could address these kinds of questions and soon determined that I would first need to ask what type of vocabulary and what type of methodological framework would be suited to answering questions like these. A robust methodological framework would have to be adequate for understanding “meaning” in virtual worlds. Using existing social science methods, how could I explicate the typical, everyday understandings of actions and behaviours of people I had no physical access to? How could I make sense of virtual action in virtual worlds by virtual characters in a way that had a meaningful connection to this? It was about here I realised that much of the existing social research had failed to clearly articulate what I want to explore.

Key Research Questions

The key research question for this project is:

How can we best interpret and understand the experience of play in the virtual social game world of *World of Warcraft*?

I have “unpacked” this large to question to reveal a series of smaller questions:

1. Firstly, what is problematic about current approaches to researching on-line games like *World of Warcraft*?

¹ An *alpha* release means the game is still in development phase, but is open to the public for testing. This occurs prior to a *beta* release where the game is more or less complete but there are still bugs to be ironed out, however with the relatively recent ability for software developers to patch and update software on-the-fly via the Internet, concepts of alpha and beta in this regard have become fuzzy with some programs believed to exist in ‘perpetual beta’.

2. What value if any does phenomenological sociology have when asking how we can think about player experience in *World of Warcraft*?
3. What sense can we make by thinking about the experience of playing *World of Warcraft* in terms of a concept of mediated action and the subsequent interpretation of mediated action in the virtual game world?
4. How is action framed by the technological interface? What is the relationship between player action, technology and the virtual world in *World of Warcraft*?
5. How is mediated action in *World of Warcraft* contextualised as a type of play?
6. How do actors gain expertise in *World of Warcraft*? What is the role of expertise in play in *World of Warcraft*?
7. How does the game influence the experience of social interaction in *World of Warcraft*, and what is the role of social interaction in motivating play in *World of Warcraft*?

My interest in addressing these questions is warranted by a series of problems I see in the body of recent and current research work. While I will develop these points later in the thesis I can briefly summarise these concerns here. While there is a large and diverse body of existing academic literature on *World of Warcraft*, little work has been done in examining the game from the perspective developed in this thesis, with one of the key issues concerning how the meaning of play is understood. Much of the existing literature discussing *World of Warcraft* as a site of play frames the concept of play in a more “traditional” manner in reference to the work of Huizinga (1955) and Caillois (2006). While this work is and has been useful for scholars exploring traditional forms of embodied play, its value as a frame for understanding electronic forms play such as computer games has been questioned (Calleja 2010; Consalvo 2009; Zimmerman 2010). One of the key problems is the ways in which some forms of modern electronic entertainment no longer present themselves clearly as “games”, understood in traditional ways. While earlier, simple electronic games like *Pong* have a clear set of rules and objective for winning, alongside contemporary puzzle games like *Candy Crush Saga* or computer games based on sports or racing simulations, Massively Multiplayer Online virtual worlds like *World of Warcraft* that offer the player an enduring kind of play experience do not readily conform to older ideas about “games”. Much of the action that players undertake in the virtual world of *World of Warcraft* is not a competitive or “frivolous” type of traditional play. Indeed it has been argued that *World of Warcraft* exhibits qualities more associated with work

(Lukacs, Embrick & Wright 2010; Silverman & Simon 2009). To further complicate treating *World of Warcraft* as a traditional game, it has no “end” so to speak adding to the ambiguity of being able to clearly define when “play” begins and “non-play” stops.²

Stemming from this ambiguity, a second critical aspect of the academic literature on *World of Warcraft* is concerned with how the meanings of player actions have been researched and understood to date. None of the literature reviewed has explicitly considered the *intentionality* of action on the part of the player and the typical contexts of meaning of these actions. Instead, research into associated issues like player motivations attempts to establish taxonomies of player ‘types’ (Yee 2006a, 2006b, 2007) or tries to categorise players based on a variety of health and other socioeconomic factors (Williams, Yee & Caplan 2008). While such research has merit, it assumes that players themselves are reflexively aware of their motivations for play, and that these reasons are in some way able to be captured by the research methods employed. As a player I still find myself puzzled by the reasons for my own play or the meanings of this play. It seems likely that these perplexing questions concerning the meanings of play are not easily solvable.

These considerations led me to turn my sights towards the underlying nature of the relationship between human actors and virtual worlds. The question of how we are able to understand the boundaries between the “real” and the “virtual” is one that has been examined by some scholars (e.g. Bainbridge 2010b; Calleja 2010; Castronova & Falk 2009) parallel with a range of associated questions of embodiment and presence (Bishop 2001; Klevjer 2007, 2012; Schultze 2010). This set of issues leads to a central methodological question: how can mediated action in virtual worlds, especially action that is concerned with or directed at another player in a virtual game world be understood as meaningful on the part of the actor and how can this be captured and adequately interpreted by social research? Virtual worlds like *World of Warcraft* are not places of solitary play, but are intensely *social* worlds whose meanings and structures are intersubjectively experienced, that is, to deploy a phrase used by Zhao (2003, 2005), ‘telecopresently’ experienced alongside other players in front of geographically remote computer systems. An important primary question in regards to this is *how* we are to establish an appropriate method that is able to explore the questions

² I use the term “non-play” here to highlight an initial binary of play and other forms of action that has not been clearly established, although much of the literature assumes a binary between work and play - a binary that I feel is unsubstantiated and will be critiqued.

of meaning in *World of Warcraft* from a sociological perspective. This is one reason for spending some time in this thesis undertaking a methodological discussion of useful social research methods for addressing the research questions.

Research Method

In thinking about my project I began with an assumption and a puzzle. I assume that “play”, whatever that means, is a form of considered, intentional action on the part of the actor. In chapter three I consider the problem of observable meaningful action in virtual spaces by player characters, that is, the key phenomenological differences between human action in the physical world and the virtual space of *World of Warcraft*. Players control characters *intentionally*, therefore the observable actions of player characters must in some way be indications of the intentions of the player. The player must also necessarily negotiate the hardware interface (i.e. keyboard and mouse) in order to successfully make manifest their intentions in the game world via the player character. These intentions exist as part of a motivational context for engaging in virtual action in the game, which up to now we would traditionally define as a form of play. However as mentioned one of the puzzles I confronted with was that it was not clear whether or not actions in *World of Warcraft* can be easily or clearly interpreted as “play”, or whether or not *World of Warcraft* can easily be defined as a “game”. Nonetheless, players must learn how to “play”, and generally strive to meet social expectations of proficiency and expertise in cooperative situations. The influence of the social aspects of the game, including the more structural aspects of social exchange, as well as an adequate understanding and interpretation of how they are an aspect of the overall motivational contexts for action, are critical in understanding the typical experience of play in *World of Warcraft*.

These considerations shaped my approach to the problem of how I would do my research. In order to address the key research questions, this research will use ethnography and auto-ethnography to account for both the meaning and the texture of the mediated action and social experience of players engaging in *World of Warcraft*. That said, I also need to indicate how I see this ethnographic method lining up with the phenomenological approach which as I now indicate I decided would help me engage with my research project.

Phenomenology

During my time actively thinking about the most appropriate research approaches and methods for this project, I came across the work of Alfred Schutz. After reading *The Phenomenology of the Social World* (Schutz 1967) I was confident that subject to some revision and reframing, Schutz's work offered a relevant approach to examining and interpreting the typical meanings of the experience of play in *World of Warcraft*. My research project makes extensive use of Schutz's phenomenological sociology, subject to making some necessary revisions to incorporate the Internet and virtual worlds adequately.

Sometimes research categorised under the banner of 'phenomenology' isn't clearly associated with the thinkers, concepts or practices of the phenomenological method, but is instead more associated with the category of 'experience' (Katz & Csordas 2003). In the wider literature on *World of Warcraft* presented as ethnographic research papers, often little focus is given to establishing how an ethnography of a virtual game world could be suitably carried out. Indeed, ethnographies in virtual worlds have been conducted that purport to be based on Schutz's phenomenology (Chee, Vieta & Smith 2006), but yet only refer to a small and particular portion of Schutz's writings that don't offer the reader a clear understanding of the methodological frame. A clearer link between theory and practice is important in regards to my research question, and needs to be clearly articulated in regards to the meanings of experience and action.

Is there a useful link between phenomenology and ethnography? Does ethnography suit the phenomenological perspective as a suitable research method? As Katz and Csordas write:

What, then, does phenomenology mean for sociological ethnography? It means the study, through various participant observation-like methods, of the structures of the life-world, meaning the forms, structures or features that people take as objectively existing in the world as they shape their conduct upon the presumption of their prior, independent existence. Phenomenology is a natural perspective for ethnographic research that would probe beneath the locally warranted definitions of a local culture to grasp the active foundations of its everyday reconstruction
(Katz & Csordas 2003, pp. 284-5)

In a phenomenological ethnography, the researcher undertakes a bracketing of the experiences they are writing about and subjects them to the relevant phenomenological method employed in the project. In this case using Schutz's phenomenology (1967) includes the particular stratification of

the life-world in which the experience occurs, how the use of the computer system influences the ways in which actors act in the virtual world and interact with each other, how players interpret shared experiences on the screen, the motives of the actor in regards to action in the virtual world including their attitudes and interests towards the situation, with all of this subject to a explication of the relevant ideal-typical concepts that influence player behaviour and render it typically meaningful.

With a revised phenomenology in hand, the research relies on ethnographic and auto-ethnographic techniques increasingly used in online social research, particularly in virtual game worlds.

Ethnography

In essence, ethnography is *writing about people* (Angrosino 2007). Ethnography in its contemporary form finds its roots in cultural anthropology, with its establishment as a professional field generally attributed to the work of anthropologists Malinowski and Mead during the early twentieth century (Angrosino 2007). Ethnography is not a research method in itself but it can employ a range of research methods suitable for the task at hand. The primary method used is participant-observation where the researcher involves themselves in a researched event or case study, observing and documenting it while subjecting it to interpretation (Seligmann 2005). Participant observation is typically complemented by interviews, discourse analysis, historical documents, interpretation of cultural artefacts, and so forth (Jupp 2006). It can also seek to establish a 'thick description' (Geertz 1973, p. 6) of the subject matter. Ethnographic research methods are also by their nature reflexive, meaning that the researcher can identify and work alongside limitations and draw upon supplementary data sources if required.

Online forms of ethnography are different due to the necessarily mediated nature of social exchange using communications technologies. Phrases such as 'digital ethnography' (Murthy 2008) or 'cyberethnography' (Robinson & Schulz 2009) have been employed in an attempt to account for forms of online content such as social media, online video, blogs and forums. Nevertheless a problem remains in that these extended definitions of ethnography are predominantly *content-based* rather than *action-based*. Much of the contemporary uses of online ethnography find a common root in the foundational work of Turkle (1994, 2005) who undertook ethnographies of

text-based Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs) of the 1980s and 90s, a forerunner to today's MMOs (Murthy 2008; Robinson & Schulz 2009). A problem remains in that these kinds of text-based virtual worlds still rely on a narrative representation of player action, rather than giving the researcher the opportunity to observe player action in a three-dimensional virtual world like *World of Warcraft*. This problem reinforces the need for a robust discussion of the phenomenology of player action in the virtual game world to ensure that the ethnography is able to adequately engage with the key research questions of the project. Additionally this research makes use of the reflexive nature of ethnography, drawing upon multiple sources as evidence to build upon observations of player behaviour in the game world by including for example aspects of the game's interface and external sources such as websites and forums.

Auto-ethnography

Auto-ethnography incorporates the role of the ethnographer in the research space. Combining elements of ethnography and autobiography (Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2011), auto-ethnography incorporates the "I" into research and writing, yet analyses self as if studying an "other" (Ellingson & Ellis 2008, p. 448). Incorporating the researcher into the research space is certainly a likely point of contention among the champions of other areas of sociological method, however from the perspective of phenomenological sociology it is particularly helpful. In the contemporary literature, auto-ethnography is divided into two branches. The first, *evocative auto-ethnography* focuses on the thoughts and feelings of the researcher's experiences and documents them in narrative form (Muncey 2010) while *analytic auto-ethnography* seeks to reconcile auto-ethnography with symbolic interactionism (Anderson, L 2006) to ensure broader sociological goals are retained. In the case of an online ethnography of a virtual game world that seeks to acknowledge and incorporate the researcher's own experiences of play, a more analytical approach is warranted. In drawing on the phenomenological tradition the researcher can *bracket* their experiences from in the phenomenological attitude and subject them to the depth of analysis needed. In the case of this research project, in my role as virtual auto-ethnographer and player-observer in the virtual game world, I am inescapably part of the social fabric of that world and recognise that I am part of a relationship with others in the game, contributing reciprocally to the constitution of typical experiences of "play". As an analytical auto-ethnographer I am able to incorporate my experiences

as a form of evidence, analysing the constitution of intersubjective (social) meaning using a phenomenological framework.

Summary of the Research Project

The field research took place over a period of about one and a half years from February 2012 through till July 2013. Although I had been a casual player since 2006, I returned from a long break from the game after being invited back to play by a colleague at the time, whose in-game “guild” also comprised of members whom I worked with. With my initial study of Schutz’s phenomenology nearing completion for the purposes of the research project, I decided this would be a good time to begin my fieldwork. During this time I was a casual but active member of a guild on the *Dreadmaul PvP* server, aside from a break of a few months during the middle of the year due to teaching commitments. I managed to develop three player characters to maximum level during my time with the guild, including one that was started soon after the *Mists of Pandaria* expansion released in September 2012. The members of the guild were made aware of my academic research project.

I began taking notes of my own experiences in the game, including how other players may have reacted to my actions and my musings on the observations of the interactions between others, all of which was subjected to further phenomenological explication. My field notes, importantly, also reflected upon how I *felt* about my experiences in certain situations, which in turn have a bearing on the attitudes and interests that may influence my later actions. Such considerations then fed back into how I paid attention to the game, including the various frames from which I could interpret the likely motivations, attitudes and interests of others in the game world, which, following the structure of the acquisition of the stock of knowledge in the everyday life-world (Schutz & Luckmann 1973, pp. 99-241), how the meanings I attributed to my experiences were *typical* in the game world, and if they weren’t, what then in contrast was considered typical and in what context.

As for ethics and privacy, nothing another player verbally said has been expressed verbatim (nor do I have any record of this anyway). Equally no player character names will be identified or associated with any point of view, statement or attitude expressed in this research. Finally it should be noted that the *World of Warcraft* game account structure functionally anonymises players through their character names. Any information in this thesis that may be considered “identifying information” is

drawn from publicly available material on the World Wide Web. It should also be noted that I did not aim to conduct structured interviews and then infer some mode of causality to a broader social context. Rather, I aimed to establish what the typical ideas, contexts and actions are in the mundane virtual life-world before applying these to the interpretations of actions to “test” their adequacy. This is not to say I don’t believe that structured interviews have their place, rather one must be sure of what is needed to be asked before asking it: I would argue that interviews would be better done after the research had established some knowledge of the social contexts of the person or persons being interviewed. For example, in the case of potential future research projects, structured interviews would be suited to examining in greater depth some of the claims made in this thesis.

As part of the explication process of typification, I will at time refer to external sources of data relevant to the game environment, in particular sources that are authored by players reflecting on their own experiences and practices in the game world. Data gathered from external websites, including blogs and forums, cannot be de-identified as they are public material.

Chapter Overview

The thesis is divided into two key sections. Part one, comprising chapters two to four, focus on the phenomenological considerations of player action in the virtual world to assist in developing a robust vocabulary to use during the ethnographic analysis. The remaining chapters in part two undertake this analysis, focusing on three aspects of the experience of play in *World of Warcraft*: in broad terms, what players do, how they learn to do it, and how they do it with others.

Chapter One: A Review of the Literature

This chapter provides a focused analysis of the key literature concerning *World of Warcraft*, expanding on the issues previously identified and providing a solid grounding and justification for the research questions asked. I examine how the literature has framed particular aspects of *World of Warcraft* such as embodiment, play, identity and social exchange. Critically, I justify the research questions by identifying the clear gaps in the literature that warrant the adoption of this research method.

Chapter Two: A Primer on Play in *World of Warcraft*

In chapter two I introduce *World of Warcraft* to those unfamiliar with the game or its associated style of play. Constructed as a kind of genealogy, I trace the genesis of the key aspects of the game's structure, including its links with the turn-based table role-playing game *Dungeons and Dragons*, its links with some of the earliest multiplayer computer games developed prior to the commercial Internet and lastly to the development of the fictional *Warcraft* universe as a series of popular computer games, and how *World of Warcraft* has built upon ideas from other Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games.

Chapter Three: The Phenomenology of Player Characters in *World of Warcraft*

In chapter three I develop a revised phenomenological framework for thinking about intentional action in virtual game worlds like *World of Warcraft*. I begin with a discussion of the aspects of Alfred Schutz's phenomenological sociology central to this project, before discussing how Schutz's phenomenology can be revised in light of the salient aspects of *World of Warcraft*. I focus on how we are to revise the stratifications of the life-world in regards to the mediated nature of social exchange across the Internet, how we are to be able to make sense of the mediated actions of virtual player characters (avatars) in virtual game worlds, and accordingly, how these actions are observed by other players to interpret the intentional actions of the controlling player.

Chapter Four: Embodiment and Intentionality in *World of Warcraft*

Chapter four is dedicated to understanding the relationship the player has with the computer system as an aspect of play in *World of Warcraft*. Incorporating the work of Heidegger (1977) and Idhe (1990) among others, I propose a taxonomy of the various aspects of the relationship the player has with the virtual game world while playing *World of Warcraft*, including the sensory aspects in the audio-visual stimuli provided by the game, symbolic aspects like the fantasy-based game narrative and the mediated aspects of the relationship between players in the game world. I also briefly discuss how the actor's relationship with the personal computer and associated hardware is a key aspect of the broader culture of play in the context of *World of Warcraft*.

Chapter Five: Play as Productive Practice in *World of Warcraft*

In starting to draw upon the ethnographic data, in chapter five I tackle the difficult question of understanding play in *World of Warcraft*. I examine what the game requires the player to do in order to “win”, and how play has been previously interpreted in the literature in a variety of ways. I attempt to answer the question of how player action in *World of Warcraft* is conceptualised as play, and how existing definitions of play require some revision in order to adequately understand the meanings and significance of this form of play. I suggest that play in *World of Warcraft* should be understood as a form of committed “productive” play that engages players in a manner that challenges traditional concepts of play.

Chapter Six: Knowledge and Expertise in *World of Warcraft*

In chapter six I explore the development of player expertise in *World of Warcraft* including how players learn to play. As the game’s design sets the rules for what is or isn’t possible, focus is placed on the social expectations of player expertise in *World of Warcraft*. I examine the role of player proficiency in being able to achieve success and status in the game and how measures of player proficiency can be used to grant or deny access to game content, via both the game design and by player conventions. I also examine the relationship between the concept of productive play and player expertise.

Chapter Seven: The Social Experience of Play in *World of Warcraft*

Building upon our developed understanding of play in *World of Warcraft* and the influence of player expertise, in chapter seven I examine in greater detail the role of social interaction and relationships in *World of Warcraft*. Social interaction is a key aspect of play in *World of Warcraft*, and in this chapter I detail the variety of ways in which player interact in the game world using Schutz’s phenomenological stratifications of the life-world and Zhao’s conception of *consociated contemporaries* (2004, 2006) to offer a typology of social interaction in the game. I also draw upon Schmitt’s *Concept of the Political* (2008) to examine how the game’s fantasy narrative encourages certain forms of player interaction. I summarise by arguing that the role of social interaction is an essential but often overlooked element in player motivation.

Conclusion

The conclusion revisits the key research questions and synthesises the key points from the thesis. Overall I argue that *World of Warcraft* provides something of a unique experience of productive play, one that does not easily fit within the boundaries of traditional scholarly ideas. I claim that the relationship the player has with the relevant technology is also a key aspect of our generating an adequate understanding of the experience of play in *World of Warcraft* and other virtual social worlds by a reframing of mediated social experience. I further claim that *World of Warcraft* is a realm of meaningful social interaction, where the existence of and interactions with other player characters in meaningful ways provides a unique context of play that is itself framed by the rich fantasy narrative of the game world. Far from being a frivolous exercise in escapism, the experience of playing *World of Warcraft* can be summarised as a *commitment*: a commitment to developing a player character or characters in a virtual game world of friends and enemies, where players develop lasting cultural and social capital through their actions in the game.

It is my goal that anyone will be able to pick up this thesis and read it; from academics to those with a general interest on the subject be able to gain a deeper understanding of the typical social experiences of play available in the game. *World of Warcraft* players themselves should be able to pick up this thesis and read it, and to be able to (hopefully) agree with my analysis as a test of adequacy, as Schutz states:

Each term in a scientific model of human action must be constructed in such a way that a human act performed in the life-world by an individual actor in the way indicated by the typical construct would be understandable for the actor himself as well as for his fellow-men in terms of common-sense interpretation of everyday life
(Schutz 1962, p. 44)

Chapter One: *Flying on the Backs of Gryphons: Literature Review*

World of Warcraft's popularity, persistence and accessibility have provided a rich research space for researchers from a variety of disciplines since the game's release in 2004. In this literature review I seek to critically establish the broader gaps in the literature in regards to our contemporary understanding of play, with particular attention given to how play is conventionally understood in *World of Warcraft* and some other types of games more generally. I begin by establishing how the concept of play has been understood and used in the literature and identify some of the lingering issues. Next, I examine how technology has been framed in the literature in regards to the ideas of the "real / virtual" boundary and the role of the game interface in play. Finally I interrogate the literature on embodiment, presence and social interaction in virtual worlds like *World of Warcraft*. As yet, we do not have a clear understanding of the typical forms of play in *World of Warcraft* when considered in the context of the technological relationship a player has with the virtual game world.

Introducing the Literature

It might be surprising to those not familiar with the field of game studies or "ludology" (as it is known in some circles) that research into electronic games has grown so quickly as to no longer be a niche area of study. Over the last decade or so, a handful dedicated scholarly peer-reviewed journals have emerged, including *Game Studies*, *Games and Culture*, and *Eludamos*. Articles concerning electronic games and gaming culture are also often found in journals such as *CyberPsychology & Behavior*. More generalised research and articles on behaviour in virtual game worlds can also found in traditionally-themed journals like *Human Studies*, the *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*, the *Journal of Information Technology* plus a range of conference proceedings.

There are a number of prominent books that have been published and often cited in journal papers (e.g. Adams, TL & Smith 2008; Bainbridge 2010b; Castronova 2005; Corneliussen & Rettberg 2008; Fine 1983; Sageng, Fossheim & Larsen 2012; Steinkuehler, Squire & Barab 2012; Turkle 2005). As a multidisciplinary area of study, articles come from sociology, psychology, economics, philosophy, anthropology, computer science, and medical backgrounds. Some game studies researchers have also found themselves employment at major computer game studios. Due to the expanse of research literature that either focuses specifically on *World of Warcraft* or at least refers

to it, my review will be generally limited to articles that deal with *World of Warcraft* by people working in areas like sociology, psychology and economics. Articles concerning the more technical aspects of *World of Warcraft* such as programming and computer science have been omitted. Articles are also limited to those written in English.

It is clear that broader perspectives on the role played by the Internet and electronic games in Western societies have evolved considerably over the last fifteen or so. Towards the end of the last century, as many of us were still browsing the World Wide Web on dial-up modems, questions were starting to be raised concerning this new interactive technology's influence on health and wellbeing (Kraut et al. 1998; Scherer 1997; Shapiro 1999; Young & Rogers 1998), identity (Donath 1999; McKenna, Katelyn Y. A. & Bargh 1998; McKenna, Katelyn Y A & Bargh 2000; Riva & Galimberti 1998; Turkle 1994, 1999) and philosophy (Anderson, TC 2000; Cass 1998; Coyne 1998), to cover a few. Over the last ten years or so this list has further expanded to include a greater range of academic perspectives, including gender and feminist issues (Ferree 2003; Subrahmanyam, Smahel & Greenfield 2006), the impact of the Internet on democratic politics (Bohman 2004; Chen, P, Gibson & Geiselhart 2006; Slater 2001; Weber 2001), Internet addiction (Allison et al. 2006; Block 2007; Charlton 2002; Morahan-Martin 2008), identity and social exchange, particularly alongside the emergence of social media (boyd 2008; Caplan 2003; Donath & boyd 2004; Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe 2007; Jones 2010; Lampe, Ellison & Steinfield 2007; Mazalin & Moore 2004; Parsell 2008), philosophical questions of embodiment and ethics (Anderson, TC 2000; Dreyfus, HL 2009; Schultze 2010; Selinger 2003; Steinkuehler & Duncan 2008; Zhao 2004, 2005, 2006) and, importantly, questions concerning social science methodology in cyberspace (Barak & Suler 2008; Rybas & Gajjala 2007; Teli, Pisanu & Hakken 2007; Ward, KJ 1999; Wittel 2000). The sheer diversity of the existing literature has fostered robust debate regarding the broader role and influence of the Internet on contemporary society. However, more recent research does seem to be more "accommodating" of the pervasiveness of the Internet in contemporary social life. Although a general theme of the literature is the interest in examining the ways in which the Internet influences our daily lives, not a great deal of this is grounded in a sociological perspective. A lot of the literature comes from people working in the discipline of media and communications. While this is appropriate for a perspective focused on web content, there is a potential lack of attention on the

manner in which people engage with each other using the Internet and the consequent development of typical norms and practices of these kind of mediated social relationships.

As a distinct aspect of this research area, electronic game studies is an emergent academic field in the 21st century, with *World of Warcraft* standing as one of the games that has received the most attention by scholars. At its peak in 2010, *World of Warcraft* had 12 million paying subscribers worldwide (Blizzard Entertainment 2010), the previous year picking up the Guinness World Record for *Most Popular MMORPG in the World in 2009* (Schramm 2009), complimented in a later year with the Guinness World Record for the *Fastest Selling PC Game for their 2010* game expansion pack *Cataclysm*, selling 3.3 million copies in the first day of release (Daniel 2012). The international scope, accessibility and popularity of *World of Warcraft* contribute to its appeal and ease of access for researchers. The game was initially released in 2004, and by around 2006 academic articles began to be published in peer-reviewed journal articles. The October 2006 issue of *Games and Culture* (Vol.1 No. 4) was dedicated purely to studies concerning *World of Warcraft*. One of the featured articles was written by a group of researchers who began playing the game and collecting data soon after its initial release (Ducheneaut et al. 2006). In later years, an international conference concerning the potential for online worlds to be “laboratories” in which to study human behaviour was actually held online in *World of Warcraft* (Bainbridge 2010a). This idea was inspired by Edward Castronova, who argued that virtual worlds could be used as kinds of ‘Petri dishes’ in which social experiments can be conducted and controlled (Castronova & Falk 2009), notwithstanding the ability for researchers to construct suitable virtual environments in which research participants can engage.

Whilst massively-multiplayer role-playing games like *World of Warcraft* are a popular focus of social research, these games only represent a fraction of available game types that could be researched through a social lens (Corliss 2011). The diverse range of games currently available on the market and the consequent scope of possible interactive experiences is an example of the importance of conceptualising different games in light of their specific qualities, rather than just lumping “videogames” into one category. Elverdam and Aarseth from the *IT University of Copenhagen* have attempted to develop a typology of different game types, incorporating elements such as space, time, player relation & composition, game state, challenges and goals (Elverdam &

Aarseth 2007). Their work reinforces the scope of the different types of electronic games available, and the types of play experiences that can be had.

Accepting that such a range of different types of games exist reinforces the need to question the suitability of existing research methods in online spaces. In regards to multiplayer games where players interact with each other in some sort of virtual world, we first need an understanding of the space in which play is taking place, and which method is appropriate for the question at hand, with more traditional social science methods in the firing line. We surely need to ask how well existing methods capture the nuances of these different kinds of interactive experiences. As some game researchers recently argued, ‘with a subject matter such as digital gaming, a survey can only provide one with a knowledge on a general level, and the quantitative results could thus be considered merely indicative’ (Kallio, Mäyrä & Kaipainen 2011, p. 330). For example, asking a group of “gamers” questions about their experiences, without a suitable grounding of knowledge regarding the structural aspects of the game in question, may lead to inaccurate data or misleading claims. However, as it seems that the majority of game researchers are also gamers, studies where this occurs do seem limited. Articles written by academics unfamiliar with the culture and practice of gaming do tend to stand out as of a poor standard.

Considering the saturation of interactive technology in Western societies, a recent discourse analysis on ‘video game culture’ in academia and media by Adrienne Shaw suggested that it may be more useful to talk about video games ‘in culture’ rather than ‘as culture’ (Shaw 2010). We only have to consider the prominence of the smartphone games *Angry Birds* or *Candy Crush Saga* to appreciate this perspective. Gaming in one form or another has infiltrated contemporary society to the point where it is no longer a niche subculture but a mainstream pastime. It is no longer restricted to “pimply teens in their parents’ basements” but an activity also enjoyed by older generations (see De Schutter 2011; Pearce 2008). An American survey of 2,000 households across the United States published by the Entertainment Software Association (ESA) reported that the average gamer is 30 years old, with a 53% / 47% split between male and female players, with 38% of people using their smartphones as a game device (ESA 2012). 62% of gamers in the report also played games with others, either in-person or online (ESA 2012), indicating the extent that

electronic games are perhaps shifting from a form of solitary interactive media to a more social activity.³

This shift from interactive media to social activity is one of the phenomena facilitated by “Web 2.0”. A transition from the passive consumption of information and media to a model of consumers-as-producers is exemplified by social media sites like *Facebook* and *YouTube*, but also extends to virtual social worlds like *World of Warcraft* and *Second Life*, leading to some unprecedented social, economic and even legal questions (Kienle et al. 2010). As content is produced by consumers / users / players, so are typical social meanings regarding that content. Highlighting this, Klastrop proposes a theoretical framework of ‘worldness’ that attempts to encapsulate a range of concepts such as aesthetics, performance, interaction, culture and experience in order to uncover the social construction of meaning in regards to online game worlds (2010). Similarly, ‘synthetic’ worlds like *World of Warcraft* have been understood as sites where individuals can produce various forms of capital (e.g. material, social, cultural) in these realms (Malaby 2006).

Following on from Klastrop’s point regarding the need to uncover the social construction of meaning, it is apparent from the literature that there is still no dominant or agreed method in which to conduct social research in virtual game spaces. That said, ethnography seems to be emerging as a key method in projects that attempt to examine player experiences. The unique nature of virtual game spaces may also explain why much of the key research in *World of Warcraft* and other similarly-styled games have adopted an ethnographic approach. Many research articles covered in this review are to some degree mixed method (ethnography alongside qualitative or quantitative, for example.) It is also apparent that some studies mentioned (predominantly those coming from the mental health sciences) don’t deal particularly well with some of the more pressing questions regarding the distinctions between offline and online action. One example is a survey question offered in a research study into dissociation in MMORPGs: ‘Events in *World of Warcraft* feel like they are really happening’ (Snodgrass et al. 2011b). What does it mean when an event *really* happens? How is this qualified? Before discussing how we can answer such a question, we need to first examine how the concept of play is framed in the literature, and how play has been understood (and in many cases problematized) by other researchers.

³ Although from a typological perspective one would have to decide whether *Facebook* games like *Farmville* and *Mafia Wars* are truly ‘social’ activities.

Understanding Play

What is Play?

As the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga writes in the first paragraph of his book *Homo Ludens*, ‘all play means something’ (Huizinga 1955, p. 1). Yet ninety years on play is something that has proven difficult to clearly define, just as defining what constitutes a “game” is difficult. The definition of play is something elusive and still part of a wider scholarly debate – especially when the focus is on play in contemporary computer games. Despite its age, Huizinga’s work continues to influence scholarly thought in the games studies literature (Consalvo 2009; Golub 2010; Lastowka 2009; Rodriguez 2006; Zimmerman 2010), also influencing standard texts on the field of computer game design (e.g. Salen & Zimmerman 2004).

First published in the late 1930s, Huizinga’s seminal work *Homo Ludens* offered a wide-ranging morphological account of the relationship between play and culture. Huizinga argued that many elements of culture evolved from play (Rodriguez 2006). In attempting to define what play is, Huizinga argued that it is ‘stepping out of a “real” life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own’ (Huizinga 1955, p. 8), into a “magic circle” that suspends the rules of everyday life and allows the actor to engage in behaviours and actions governed by a different set of rules. Huizinga set out the key aspects of play as follows:

Summing up the formal characteristics of play we might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside “ordinary” life as being “not serious”, but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds in its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means

(Huizinga 1955, p. 13)

Huizinga sets out in this paragraph some key ideas about play that have been commonly used to define play. This includes the ideas that play is trivial or frivolous, that it produces nothing and is bound by a ‘space’ of rules. French sociologist Roger Caillois argued in the late 1950s that Huizinga’s definition is both ‘too broad and too narrow’ (Caillois 2006, p. 123), arguing that he failed to suitably incorporate some forms of activity, such as gambling, as play. Otherwise,

Huizinga's and Caillois' perspectives on play are thematically similar in their core aspects, such as the idea that play is 'tense' (Huizinga 1955, p. 11) and hinges upon there being doubt as to the overall outcome (Caillois 2006), that play should be a free activity (Caillois 2006, p. 128; Huizinga 1955, p. 7), that there is a 'space' for play (Caillois 2006, p. 128; Huizinga 1955, p. 10), and that the play should be 'unproductive' (Caillois 2006, p. 124) in that the player should have no material interest in the outcome (Huizinga 1955, p. 13).

While this seems superficially to be clear there is still ambiguity as to precisely what constitutes play especially when we consider the recent development of human technology to generate virtual worlds involving computer screen-based representations of a three-dimensional digital world. Even though there are arguments against the 'real-world' / 'virtual-world' dichotomy (Lehdonvirta 2010), maintaining a distinction between real and virtual worlds is important in examining the meaning-contexts of action (Schutz 1967; Schutz & Luckmann 1989; Zhao 2004, 2007) in regards to player characters, a point that will be further examined in chapter three. Even though both the meaning-contexts of action and the perceptual experience of play in computer games (Brey 2000; Ihde 1990; Schultze 2010; Verbeek 2008) are phenomenologically different from 'real world' scenarios, there still salient aspects of the way play is done in computer games that still conforms to traditional ideas of *game* and *play*.

So what makes a computer game a *game*? As a response to Wittgenstein's account of games in his work *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), Bernard Suits' *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia* proposes a revised definition of a 'game' as 'the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles' (Suits 2005, p. 55). He unpacks this formulation when he writes:

To play a game is to attempt to achieve a specific state of affairs [prelusory goal], using only means permitted by rules [lusory means], where the rules prohibit use of more efficient in favour of less efficient means [constitutive rules], and where the rules are accepted just because they make possible such activity [lusory attitude]
(Suits 2005, pp. 54-5)

Suits' definition reinforces some of the key contemporary ideas of play, in that it is 'bound' by a particular 'space' be it geographical or otherwise by the 'magic circle' of play rendered by the game rules, and that these rules are accepted voluntarily.

While these definitions of play and games appear nice and neat, their helpfulness as adequate explanations for forms of action in contemporary computer games is questionable. Castronova draws on Huizinga to examine play but questions of the difficulty in delineating virtual and real, arguing that in this case the membrane is quite 'porous' and the term 'virtual' is in this sense problematic (Castronova 2005, p. 148). For example, in considering the case of cheating in games like *World of Warcraft*, Consalvo (2009) argues that the concept of the magic circle is much too narrow in scope, ignoring the wider contexts of available behaviours in the game, and the ambiguity of what constitutes the 'rules' of play. For example, are they merely the Terms of Service as outlined by the game developer, or the inherent limitations of the software programming, or the unspoken conventions of good social practice amongst players? Zimmerman (2010) is also critical of the concept of the magic circle in that the range of potential actions in a virtual game world like that of *EverQuest* or *World of Warcraft* fail to take into account 'mundane' practices in these spaces, arguing that 'the presence of the mundane in computer games highlights how vague the boundaries between the real and the virtual have become' (Zimmerman 2010, p. 248).

There is a key puzzle here. As Huizinga, Caillois and Suits among contemporary thinkers appear to frame play as something of a frivolous activity that can be clearly contrasted with that of an 'ordinary life' that is oriented towards productive work, to what extent does *World of Warcraft* fit into this definition, and if not, how can we interpret what players do in that virtual game world as play or otherwise?

Rules of Play?

Although the boundaries between the 'real' and the 'virtual' appear problematic in regards to play, the 'rules' of play should serve to further separate play from other forms of action. According to Huizinga 'all play has rules... they determine what "holds" in the temporary world circumscribed by play' (Huizinga 1955, p. 11), even though it is argued that not all forms of play have clearly defined rules (Caillois 2006). In *World of Warcraft*, the game "rules" as outlined in the Terms of Service are moderated by "Game Masters" who oversee servers and respond to player requests and complaints. One of the more researched aspects of a transgression of these formal rules is the 'gold farming' phenomenon (Keegan et al. 2010; Roy et al. 2012; Steinkuehler 2006) where people are employed to play a game like *World of Warcraft* or *Lineage II* for many hours per day, generating

virtual currency that is then sold in the real market to players for real currency, which aside from contravening the Terms of Service can also damage the in-game economy and annoy other players, producing interesting consequences. In the game *Lineage II*, in a response to gold farming, players organised a 'Farm the Farmers Day' where players banded together to hunt down and kill gold farmers (only in the game, of course) (Steinkuehler 2006).

Even though a player enters into a contractual agreement with the game developer when entering into the game world, this is quite a different context to the rules of play that shape or regulate player behaviour in the game world itself (Lastowka 2009). Lastowska argues that 'for all its high fantasy and technological flash, the rules that constrain play in *World of Warcraft* are not all that different from the rules that govern the gridiron, the golf course, the base-ball field and the game board' (2009, p. 393). This is however considered through the lens of Huizinga's 'magic circle' which draws a neat line around play, leaving aside critiques of the porous nature of real-virtual interaction, or the manner in which open-world games like *World of Warcraft* allow considerable player agency in regards to their character's virtual actions in the game world. Calleja further elaborates on this theme by arguing that tactics employed by players in response to events in the game world may not always lie in the limits of game rules (Calleja 2007). The process of trying out new tactics, learning and internalising the interactive processes involved and communicating these practices to other players in the game environment Calleja calls *incorporation*, in contrast to the existing concept of *immersion* (Calleja 2007). Behaviours such as strategy are not built into the rules of the game, but are shared between players in a variety of means both inside and outside the game environment. This allows players to develop novel solutions to game challenges, or be used to exploit weaknesses in the game's code,⁴ but is also an important factor in establishing socialised standards for distinguishing good practice from poor practice. This aspect suggests that there is more for us to know about games like *World of Warcraft* beyond the tangible 'rules' of the game.

How to Play?

Aside from the Terms of Service of the virtual world, and the "rules" of the game including what a player can or cannot do and associated social conventions, the process of how "good practice" or

⁴ One of the most popular examples of this was the ability to kite (basically have a monster chase you) former world boss Doom Lord Kazzak from the Blasted Lands to Stormwind, where due to his self-heal abilities he was practically unkillable: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fWZyw1xRY58>

player mastery is learned has also been examined by researchers. The relationship between play and social interaction in *World of Warcraft* leading to the idea of good practice (in terms of achieving game goals) goes much further than a simple mastery of keystrokes. Players often use external software called “AddOns” to modify the game mechanics. The development of this ‘theorycraft’ which involves using methods of mathematical calculation to determine optimal strategies (Choontanom & Nardi 2012) has changed how some players engage with the game and has also influenced game designers’ decisions of what to include or modify for later game expansions (Paul 2011). AddOns (or ‘mods’) augment the game mechanics in an effort to improve a player’s performance, but are also used to monitor the performance of other players in group situations (Taylor 2006). The use of mods has been argued to be an example of users deconstructing the immersive game-world designed by the developers in order to focus on the deeper practices of collaborative play, such as that required by raiding (Golub 2010). It reinforces the idea that players themselves have a role in establishing what “good” practice is in the game and what players should expect from each other in situations that require interaction. These practices also extend to how some players receive rewards in the game. Although now often restricted to elite raiding guilds, practices such as the use of a ‘DKP’ (*Dungeon or Dragon Kill Points*) system for distributing loot in guild raid situations was introduced by players in an effort to establish a system to offset perceived fairness issues with game mechanics (Malone 2009) and reward dedication to guild activities, while reinforcing social group rules.

From another perspective, such practices concerning social play evolve from what Steinkuehler calls a ‘mangle’ of game rules involving player agency in a broader context of cultural and social settings (Steinkuehler 2006). Players engage in their own creation and distribution of knowledge in response to challenges and changes in the game world, particularly as the game designers regularly introduce new content. One study found that from a random sampling of discussion threads in the *World of Warcraft* forums regarding the Priest class, 86% of discussions could be regarded as ‘social knowledge construction’ (Steinkuehler & Duncan 2008) through meaningful discussions concerning in-game practices concerning things such as character customisation, tactics, equipment and skills. This kind of social learning is also evident in the game world itself. Collaborative play with other players, making mistakes, learning through observation and contradiction all contribute to processes of social knowledge construction in the game environment (Ang & Zaphiris 2008).

Some initial findings from research into expertise in *World of Warcraft* supported the idea that ‘expert’ players often source external knowledge from forums and websites in contrast to players who rely merely on trial and error (Schrader & McCreery 2008). This adoption of external sources of community information to inform game practice is a noteworthy point, as it provides a potential goldmine for researchers as these forums are effectively a library of forum threads of players discussing their experiences since *World of Warcraft* was first released.

Why Play?

The question of “why people play games” is one that has been undertaken from a range of disciplines and perspectives. The motivations for play in electronic games have been one of the more heavily researched areas of game studies so far. Many studies refer to an early taxonomy of player motivation by software engineer Richard Bartle, who holds a PhD in artificial intelligence and was co-creator of the first Multi-User Dungeon (MUD) *MUD1* in 1978, running over the predecessor to today’s Internet, the *ARPAnet*. Bartle’s (1996) heavily referenced work was based on his own discussions as administrator for one of his later MUDs. Drawing on discussions with some highly-experienced players, he proposed a taxonomy of types of players who play MUDs, distinguishing between *Explorers*, *Socialisers*, *Killers* and *Achievers* (Bartle 1996).

Bartle’s taxonomy is often cited in the game studies literature on motivation. Yee is one researcher to refer to Bartle’s taxonomy, whose research into *World of Warcraft* explored the different demographics and motivations for play of gamers (Yee 2006a), basing his research on a quantitative framework. Yee’s work in this area is also heavily referenced by later game researchers. For example, Yee’s three-factor motivational framework for play (*Achievement*, *Social*, *Immersion*) (2006a, 2007) is used by Snodgrass et al. (2012) who conducted research to examine the *positive* aspects of gameplay in *World of Warcraft* using a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods. They argue that players motivated primarily by the element of ‘Achievement’ were more likely to report stressful or other negative experiences, whilst players motivated by ‘Social’ or ‘Immersion’ aspects were more likely to report positive experiences (Snodgrass et al. 2012). In response to their conclusions in the context of existing literature, the authors suggest that games like *World of Warcraft* deserve their own ‘distinctive subclass of Internet usage’ (Snodgrass et al. 2012, p. 24) to distinguish between motivations for other forms of Internet use such as social media. In other

contributions to the literature on motivation, researchers have used a mixed-methods approach to suggest a heuristic of player types, arguing that ‘in contrast to common belief, the majority of digital gaming takes place between “casual relaxing” and “committed entertaining”’ (Kallio, Mäyrä & Kaipainen 2011, p. 347), and that mentalities of players are not necessarily related to game type.

The commonplace idea that digital games provide a form of “escapism” from “real” life has also been disputed as problematic, in that it produces unwarranted and negative connotations valuing “physical” games over digital ones in ways that do not seem all that credible (Calleja 2010). Calleja argues that this is in part due to the common use of the term ‘magic circle’ to distinguish the boundaries between real and game, yet this does not automatically confirm that one plays digital games primarily to ‘escape’ reality (Calleja 2010). Following an extensive ethnography examining different types of social interaction in *World of Warcraft*, Nardi and Harris argue that ‘social activity in *World of Warcraft* challenges discourse that asserts that the internet leads to isolation or is simply community moved online’ (Nardi & Harris 2010, p. 408). Again, the need to more adequately understand the differences and similarities between offline and online social spaces is reinforced.

In contrast to the theories incorporating personality types or escapism from the ‘real’ world, the quality of social interaction has become increasingly significant in research exploring motivation for online play with others. Research into ‘baby boomer gamers’ suggested that players over the age of 40 were more motivated by communal, supportive social interaction alongside other ‘mature’ gamers, sometimes in response to poor experiences when playing amongst younger gamers (Pearce 2008). Other research into mature gamers found similar results with social interaction again proving to be an important factor (De Schutter 2011). Supporting this perspective, fieldwork conducted in two gaming centres in Stockholm, Sweden found that sociality was a key motivator for engaging in online games (Frostling-Henningsson 2009). The authors of this study argued that players were ‘motivated by a “hallucination of the real,” enabling them to do things and try out behaviors that would be impossible to do in real life’ (Frostling-Henningsson 2009). From this literature it does not entirely seem that players play games where other people *happen* to be, but more that players perhaps want to play where others *are*, signalling a much deeper social dynamic at play that needs to be further examined. Socialisation as a motivating factor for play is something

that needs to be further considered in the context of *World of Warcraft*, especially in consideration of research that suggests that the majority of players play with someone they know outside of the game as well (Williams et al. 2006).

Problematic Play

Finally, an ongoing controversy in the literature is whether or not some forms of problematic play can be categorised as mental health issues like addiction. An Australian survey of just over two-hundred players using a questionnaire method and statistical analysis suggested a correlation between game engagement and social supports understood as meaningful relationships in *World of Warcraft* (Longman, O'Connor & Obst 2009). However, the study argued that excessive gameplay had the potential to override these in-game supports (Longman, O'Connor & Obst 2009). It has also been suggested that a moderate correlation exists between those who do play the game excessively and certain personality factors that may predispose them to psychological or social problems offline (Billieux et al. 2011; Peters & Malesky Jr 2008). Other research has supported this (Achab et al. 2011), however this study was methodologically problematic as it did not consider player motivation or in-game social relationships leading to an arguably incomplete analysis. Other researchers have tried to link motivation to problematic play. Using statistical analysis of online questionnaire responses from German players, Wolf (2007) examined the relationship between communities of practice in *World of Warcraft* and the potential for game addiction through excessive play, claiming that those who played the game for reputation and knowledge, rather than community, were more likely to exhibit recognisable symptoms of addiction.

The constructed category of computer game addiction itself is one aspect of problematic play that eludes a clear and useful definition. For example, a survey of 438 *World of Warcraft* players asking them to report on their own interpretation of their behaviour in the context of video game addiction found that while over 40% self-reported a degree of addiction relying on their own understanding of game addiction, only about 6% were rated as being “addicted” according to a modified *Internet Addiction Scale* (Oggins & Sammis 2012). Karlsen (2011) notes that while *World of Warcraft* appears to incorporate problematic elements typically associated with gambling addiction (*entrapment* and *near miss*), excessive play was more likely to be identified among players with strong social ties in the game.

Some Problems with our Understandings of Play in Virtual Worlds

The literature highlights some key areas of our understanding of play in virtual worlds that are either incomplete or problematic. The first is that the boundaries of play are not clear in regards to electronic games like *World of Warcraft* (Calleja 2010; Consalvo 2009; Zimmerman 2010). In returning to the key puzzle in regards to defining play, it may be the case that Huizinga and Caillois' conceptions of play are somewhat impractical when it comes to *World of Warcraft*, and that perhaps different ideas need to be explored.

Evidence for this comes from discussions examining the relationship between work and play in *World of Warcraft*. One perspective in the literature draws on a Foucauldian frame understanding 'power gamers' engaging as 'player-workers' (Silverman & Simon 2009). This concept has been extended by Moberly who argues that:

What *World of Warcraft* sells players is not liberation and fulfilment, but a spectacular version of the present tense in which the race and the class-based antagonisms that define the status quo of late capitalism are represented (fetishized) as magical and fantastic

(Moberly 2010, p. 217)

This is a point also made by Golumbia (2009) and Kücklich (2009). Indeed, even player characters can become commodities, and can be transferred to other players *outside* of the game by selling or trading one's *World of Warcraft* account (Lukacs, Embrick & Wright 2010). Players may also share their characters with other players by allowing them to access their account (Wong et al. 2009). Other research proposes the idea of *World of Warcraft* being a kind of simultaneous work and play environment (Lukacs, Embrick & Wright 2010). The critique of MMORPG games as commercial products offering an illusion of true agency is also supported by other authors (Charles 2009).

Secondly, there are the issues concerning the association between computer games and aggressive behaviour. One of the most well-known examples of this was the link made between the Columbine High School massacre and the computer game *Doom* (Simpson & Blevins 1999), which later saw victims' families attempting to sue game developers (Ward, M 2001). In more recent times, the 'Sandy Hook' incident saw a renewed link between violence and violent computer games, with a community group offering a 'buyback' of violent video games (Caulfield 2013) and rest-stops

in neighbouring municipalities removing violent games from its display stands (Lovering 2013). Yet a recent literature review on the subject by Ferguson (2010) suggested that many existing studies on the link between aggression and violent video games were sometimes methodologically questionable and often influenced by existing prejudices and moral panics.

An article proposing a psychological theory of motivation argued that the acting out of violence in a video game alone was not a significant predictor of motivation to play, however individuals who reported higher levels of aggression before play were more likely to choose games with more violent content (Przybylski, Rigby & Ryan 2010). The authors also found that frustrations arising from a poor 'mastery of controls' such as the interface with the game world, or a tangible device like a hand-held controller, sometimes led to higher levels of short-term reported aggression (Przybylski, Rigby & Ryan 2010). What is missing from the literature here is an understanding of the typical *meanings* of actions in games like that incorporate "violent" actions which is needed before being able to make causal associations between two drastically different kinds of complex behaviours. For example, players who do not follow rules, particularly social conventions of strategy are often the cause of distress and anger amongst players. Barnett, Coulson and Foreman suggest a typology of anger-causing scenarios: *Raids/Instances*, *Griefers*, *Perceived Time Wasting*, and *Anti-Social Players* (Barnett, Coulson & Foreman 2010, p. 157). All of these types of players may be following explicit "game rules" however in a social context their behaviours may not be acceptable.

Overall, the literature suggests that neither the *social* aspects of play or how player action in *World of Warcraft* can be interpreted as a type of play have as yet been adequately researched. It is not entirely clear how significant social interaction is in the experience of play, how the nature of this social interaction may be particularly different in a mediated virtual environment or how this may influence player motivation. With some of the literature suggesting that social interaction may play a role in this, further examination of this is warranted. Yet before this can be undertaken, some questions of the role of technology in play and social interaction also need to be addressed.

Player Action and Technological Mediation

The Real / Virtual Boundary

An ongoing academic debate concerning electronic games and the Internet pertains to an adequate understanding of how we are to understand the bounded space of a computer game world. An emergent theme in recent literature is that our understanding of the distinction between the “real” and the “virtual” is still problematic. As Gordon Calleja writes:

Virtual worlds are not the sites of migration from the real, as Castronova claims, but artefacts that are intimately woven into contemporary reality. Accessing virtual worlds, like any other form of virtual environment, does not automatically imply escapism, much less escape. Erasing the boundary between the virtual and the real is a first step toward exorcising the commonly held, but erroneous assumption that digital games, as forms of virtual environments, are fundamentally escapist in nature
(Calleja 2010, p. 340)

Calleja is essentially arguing that when we typically *think* about virtual spaces, including electronic games, we inadvertently “bracket reality” as such, introducing the notion that actions and events in virtual spaces are “less real” than physical phenomena. Virtual environments such as *World of Warcraft* cannot be simply conceptualised in terms of the dichotomy of “real / offline” versus “virtual / online” as social practices and ideas often transcend into other aspects of life both on the Internet and in physical space (Boellstorff 2008 in Golub 2010, p. 23; Lehdonvirta 2010). One example of this is *Machinima*: player-generated media content such as movies using video capture of in-game experiences constructed as unique stories which are an example of how players ‘use computer games to create their own narratives, culture and performance’ (Lowood 2006, p. 363). These narratives are not confined to the game world, or the Internet, but can end up manifesting in real-world culture and practice. One example of this is found in the subculture of costume play, or *cosplay*.⁵ The existence of a wider culture of “gaming” can also bring together like-minded individuals, who are able to congregate and associate in both worlds. In the context of the formation of social relationships and cultures that begin in the online sphere, Munn argues that we need to be careful not to so easily distinguish online virtual worlds from the physical world (Munn 2012). According to Munn, in contrast to social media sites like *Facebook*, immersive virtual game

⁵ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cosplay>

worlds like *World of Warcraft* more easily allow the formation of friendships through shared *experience*, a key factor in the development of a relationship.

On the other hand, the game world doesn't just influence the offline world. The offline world can also influence culture and practice in the game world. *World of Warcraft* game servers (or *realms*) can have their own unique cultural twists, dependent on the geographical location influencing the nationality of the players, the international time-zone, also whether the server is *player-versus-environment* (PvE), *player-versus-player* (PvP) or *roleplay* (RP) (Taylor 2006). This point has been made in ethnographic research examining the experiences of Chinese players on Chinese game servers drawing comparisons with Western servers and players (Lindtner & Dourish 2011). At the same time, whilst geographical cultural ideas influence game experiences, elements of the game itself (such as storyline, game rules of play etc.) in turn influence player understandings of other cultures, introducing an avenue of transnational identity construction (Lindtner & Dourish 2011).

The mediated relationship between players in the game world and the fantasy setting in which action is contextualised introduces some further problems for consideration. While the virtual game world is a site for exploring the broader meanings of play augmented by the broader cultural aspects of physical space and place, the 'equipment' (to borrow a term from Heidegger) we use to access this virtual world must also be considered as part of the meaning of the experience as well.

The Role of Hardware & Software

In *World of Warcraft*, physical inputs by players into the computer system become outputs rendered as viewable actions by the player's character, or avatar, acting out the will of the player as 'an imperfect intermediary between player input and its on-screen representation' (Rush 2011, p. 249). The keyboard and mouse, in this instance, become an 'extension' of the body (Klevjer 2012) allowing the player to master the control over their player character, without needing to actively think about the myriad of clicks and keypresses needed. Outputs by the computer screen and speakers relay sensory information back to the player who can then use this information to make decisions, providing that "immersive" aspect of play. For example, sound and music in *World of Warcraft* is often contextual, providing specific signals to players about events in the environment that may or may not be in the player's field of vision, as well as giving indications of what the player should be doing in response (Jørgensen 2008).

As players progress through the virtual game world via their player characters, the game becomes increasingly complex, requiring greater physical mastery of keyboard and mouse. When a player is faced with a perhaps unforeseen challenge in game space, the largely unconscious act of physical interaction with the computer system (keyboard, mouse etc.) can jump out of relief causing a player to re-evaluate the technological interaction itself in order to ensure the avatar is able to meet the will of the player (Rush 2011). This is what Rush refers to as an ‘embodied metaphor’ where the awareness of the connection between player and avatar is made apparent, as opposed to the more ‘mundane’ sense of avatar in the game world that comes with mastery (Rush 2011). Another technological mediation that shapes the player’s interactions with a game world is found in the game’s visual User-Interface (UI), typically in the form of a kind of “heads-up” display that offers the player important and useful information (the most predominant being the character’s health bar). Research by Jørgensen found that gamers generally now accept some form of UI as a convention in electronic games, as long as it provides useful information whilst still retaining some sort of aesthetic that doesn’t detract from the game environment (Jørgensen 2012). Even though it is part of the game, it is itself still an aspect separate to the virtual game world or other player characters inhabiting that space.

The Problems with our Understanding of Action and Technology

In order to adequately develop an understanding of the meaning of play in *World of Warcraft*, the role of the computer interface in mediating player action needs to be an aspect of consideration. Just as a sportsperson or tradesperson must master a ball or hammer respectively, the successful *World of Warcraft* player must master the computer interface in order to expertly control their player character. It is not clear how this takes place, particularly in the context of *social* play, where players must cooperate and coordinate in a mediated virtual space. How does the *physical* aspect of virtual play contribute to the meaning of play? How does the computer system mediate social interaction, and how is this taken-for-granted by players? How do players expect each other to use their respective computer equipment appropriately?

Mediated Social Interaction

Player and Character

The key contribution of the computer system in regards to play in virtual worlds is the representation and control of an avatar or player character, alongside the visual construction and representation of the game environment. While we have briefly discussed the technological aspect of the relationship between player and character, there is also the extent to which the player character is an 'embodiment' of the player. The player character allows the player to have a 'presence' (Schultze 2010) in the virtual world in a variety of forms. This allows the player to intentionally interact with and manipulate elements of the virtual game world. Gee argues that this can be seen as a 'projective stance' where the player's goals coexist alongside the goals of the 'avatar' and are contextually dependent on the avatar's situation in the game world, meaning that in certain scenarios the player's goals become the avatars, and vice versa (Gee 2008). There is also the feature of social interaction in a virtual world and what sort of presence the avatar is afforded (Schultze 2010; Zhao 2003, 2005).

Identity / Roleplay

The manner in which the computer system allows the player to control the avatar or player character leads to a host of questions concerning identity. To what degree does an avatar incorporate the identity of the controlling player? One of the earliest researchers in this area was Sherry Turkle (Turkle 1994, 1999, 2005) whose initial work with MUDs proposed that this new form of interaction allowed people to explore new forms of identity, and examined how players represent themselves online through varying veils of anonymity. Later studies have suggested that players will create an avatar that holds greater similarity to a person's 'ideal self' than their 'real self' (Bessière, Seay & Kiesler 2007). Other studies suggest that those that created avatars that incorporated more aspects of their 'actual' selves were more likely to become immersed in the virtual world (Schultze 2010). An experimental study into player avatar creation found that differences in regards to similarities with the player were related to factors such as one's life satisfaction (Trepte & Reinecke 2010), supporting Turkle's concept of identity play. Identity play can in cases go much deeper, particularly in developing a narrative concerning the player-character's constructed identity. For example, some *World of Warcraft* servers are dedicated role-playing (RP) servers where it is a

requirement that players converse with each other “in-character”. Using a mix of theoretical approaches grounded in identity theory alongside ethnographic & quantitative data, Williams, Kennedy & Moore argue that online role-players, those who engage in full narrative construction of their character are a ‘small, vibrant, and unique class of game players’ (2011, p. 196). Indeed, whilst *World of Warcraft* is covered by the rubric of role-playing game, it is only really a small number of players who do engage in “traditional” roleplay.

Another interesting avenue of enquiry is in what happens to a player’s character or avatar when the player is not actually playing the game. In *World of Warcraft*, each character has a publicly available dossier that provides information about that character, distinct from any other qualities held by the player themselves. External websites such as the *World of Warcraft Armory* allow players to review their achievements and share these achievements with other players, as well as provide an avenue of self-reflection in terms of future motivations for gameplay (Medler 2011).

Association with Player Character

While the concept of identity play between player and avatar may suggest something of an intimate relationship between the two, this may not always be the case. In an investigation into character sharing between *World of Warcraft* players, Wong et al. (2009) found that the attitude towards character sharing greatly changed depending on the player’s perspective towards their own avatar, aside from any Terms of Service or trust issues associated with the practice. Some survey respondents reported a strong connection to their avatar and worried about things like their in-game reputation whilst their avatar was in control of another player, whilst others who saw their avatar as more of a possession of sorts were more worried about another player deleting their inventory (Wong et al. 2009, p. 358). It is important to consider here the idea that such perspectives towards one’s character are dynamic, often dependent on a player’s attitude towards the game at particular points in time. Players who become bored with a game sometimes consider selling their characters or account as suggested in one ethnographic study (see Lukacs, Embrick & Wright 2010) rather than just leave their avatars dormant on the realm.

Essentialism

One final issue of social identity is raised in terms of the choices available to players to construct their characters. It has been argued that the distinctions between selectable races in *World of*

Warcraft limit the game's ability to be truly progressive in that it more or less essentialises the race and ethnicity of avatars (Higgin 2009; Monson 2012). This is also supported by other research that argues *World of Warcraft's* avatar creation options are biased in favour of reinforcing racial and gender stereotypes (Higgin 2009). While such research does acknowledge the role of game lore in available playable character options, this position needs to be further qualified. Concepts such as essentialism and stereotyping are seldom held in a positive light, therefore it is fair to say that these authors are critical of the reinforcement of existing racial and gender ideas. However these studies fail to examine whether or not, in parallel to the physical world, such ideas regarding race and gender (as they exist in the game environment and lore) impact on an avatar's ability to engage in the game. Yee, Bailenson & Ducheneaut (2009) conducted a statistical analysis on automated data gathered from three *World of Warcraft* servers over one week, finding that taller, more attractive avatars tended to be of higher character levels. It is not noted precisely which servers were used – many *World of Warcraft* servers are unbalanced in terms of faction (Horde versus Alliance) and thus server selection could skew results.

Social Structures and Conventions

The nature of mediated social exchange in *World of Warcraft* and associated player conventions is an aspect of the experience of play that warrants further consideration. Guilds, in particular, are player-created entities available since the beginning of the game, allowing players to organise themselves collectively in enduring partnerships in order to tackle difficult game content. Guilds play an important role in achieving success in the game, as well as a space for forming and reinforcing social relationships (Williams et al. 2006) and developing forms of social capital (Steinkuehler & Williams 2006). Rather than limiting social interaction, the game's mechanics allow and structure the formation and continuing existence of guilds as the basis for enduring relationships between players. It has also been argued that *World of Warcraft* is just as social as any physical team sport (Williams et al. 2006).

It has been suggested that guilds play a role in socialising players into a virtual world like *World of Warcraft* (Kang, Ko & Ko 2009). Other research has suggested that the majority of players belonged to a 'social' guild which often included friends they knew in the physical world, which was particularly the case in regard to smaller guilds (Williams et al. 2006). This is also supported by

other ethnographic research that found the majority of players play with someone they know in real life (Nardi & Harris 2006). Yet guilds are not homogenous institutions. Guilds can publicly promote themselves to different levels and “types” of player in order to customise themselves for a range of reasons (Chen, C-H, Sun & Hsieh 2008). It has also been argued that guilds in *World of Warcraft* represent a form of ‘neotribalism’ (Brignall III 2008; Brignall III & Van Valey 2008). Guild membership and the dynamics of player movement between guilds have also been studied, with research comparing the evolution of L.A. street gangs to *World of Warcraft*, proposing a mathematical model to describe players joining, leaving and switching guilds (Ahmad et al. 2011) although authors found that this model was inadequate when compared to another popular MMO, *EverQuest 2*. This suggests that we should pay attention to the unique aspects of *World of Warcraft*’s design that influence and mediate how players engage with each other.

Problems in our Understanding of Mediated Social Interaction

With all the existing research on identity and socialisation in *World of Warcraft*, there are still questions in regard to understanding how social interaction and social structures influence the meaning of the experience of play. This is especially important when we include the lingering questions of embodiment and presence. How can we adequately conceptualise mediated social interaction in virtual spaces in the context of a fantasy game world? If some of the literature suggests a strong relationship between player and character, and others suggest a weak relationship, how can this be reconciled? What is the role of social interaction on motivations for play? As numerous authors point to the importance of social interaction, friendship and camaraderie in gameplay (Chen, M 2009; Nardi & Harris 2010), what can we learn about the nature of these social interactions? How can we think about how people interact in immersive virtual worlds like those found in *World of Warcraft* when this interaction is framed by some form of play?

Justification of the Research Questions

While the various elements of this literature review may appear on the surface to be thematically distinct, they are related by an all-inclusive approach to interpreting action in the virtual game world. Research into play in *World of Warcraft* and similar electronic games often frames play using the traditional ‘magic circle’ approach, and / or compares play in these games to contemporary forms of work. Little consideration has been given to the adequacy of these terms from the

perspective of the players' experiential knowledge: do players themselves even think in terms of work or play, and if so, what do these terms mean in regards to engaging in *World of Warcraft* with others? Similarly, much of the literature on the question of the distinction between the "real" and the "virtual" has not spent enough time discussing whether or not this distinction is meaningful to players, or how the experience of playing *World of Warcraft* itself could help determine how this binary is to be treated as a credible distinction, if it is even at all useful in the context of play. Finally, the literature on embodiment and presence does not consider in enough depth how this is experienced by players immersed in the game world, and particularly in the context of players interacting, cooperating and engaged in virtual combat with others.

In short what has not been clearly captured by the literature are the typical *meanings* of play as generated and experienced by players, and particularly, how some aspects of play can be framed as *social action*. From here we can return to the key research question: *how can we best interpret and understand the experience of play in the virtual social game world of World of Warcraft?* As such, I wish to augment and expand on the work by authors such as Nardi and Harris in regards to the importance of and generally unique nature of social interaction in *World of Warcraft*, and to further explore the 'mangle' of play suggested by Steinkuehler. I also wish to build upon the work of Zhao whose foundational work on applying the sociological phenomenology of Alfred Schutz to virtual worlds has been invaluable.

But first, it would be useful as a starting point examine how *World of Warcraft* exists as a kind of historical entity. Where did it come from? Where can it trace its lineage? What aspects of game design did the developers borrow from, and how does this influence the forms of play available in the game world?

PART ONE: UNDERSTANDING WORLD OF WARCRAFT

Chapter Two: A Primer on *World of Warcraft*

One of my favourite computer games as a teenager was the turn-based strategy game *Warcraft: Orcs and Humans*. The object of the game was to collect resources to build “units” to attack or repel enemy forces. The popularity of this game led to the development of two other strategy-based sequels and to the ultimate development of the Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game *World of Warcraft*, with *World of Warcraft* an unprecedented leap forward for the popular computer game series. Drawing on ideas from a variety of other types of computer games whilst expanding on the popular fantasy narrative of the *Warcraft* universe, *World of Warcraft* became and continues to be one of the most popular MMO games. In order to start to explore the experience of play in the game, we could first use a basic understanding of how can we contextualise *World of Warcraft*'s popularity and success in computer game culture: what is the general “style” of play in *World of Warcraft*, and how has it come about? Before discussing this research project's methodological paradigm for exploring the experience of play in *World of Warcraft*, it will be useful to examine how the game can be situated as a particular *type* of electronic game, and how this can be historically contextualised, alongside offering the reader an introductory discussion of the style of play found in *World of Warcraft*.

Structured as a sort of genealogy of electronic forms of play, this chapter explores the central aspects of play in *World of Warcraft* and how they can trace their lineage to key ideas and / or paradigm shifts in the computer game industry over the last forty years. An understanding of this material is important as it helps to contextualise the endeavour I am undertaking for the reader. *World of Warcraft* has a heritage that is founded on some of the earliest multiplayer computer games that predate the commercial Internet, alongside drawing on game rules developed for table-based role playing games. These games have evolved alongside advances in computer technologies to develop immersive, three-dimensional virtual worlds in which players control player characters alongside and in conflict with other players. The style of play that *World of Warcraft* offers is one that is both complex and immersive. This chapter helps to highlight some key aspects of this and further

reinforce some of the problems with undertaking social research in virtual game worlds. It highlights some of the initial puzzles faced in explicating social meaning in games like *World of Warcraft* in part because of the style and complexity of play.

Warcraft: Orcs and Humans

World of Warcraft's early predecessor, *Warcraft: Orcs and Humans* (often simplified purely as *Warcraft*) was released as part of the "real-time strategy" (RTS) game genre that was becoming increasingly popular during the early to mid-1990s. Although real-time strategy games had been around for about a decade in one form or another, games like Westwood Studios' *Dune II* and *Command & Conquer*, as well as Blizzard's *Warcraft* solidified the core gameplay structure of the genre (Adams, D 2006).



Figure 1: *Warcraft: Orcs and Humans* screenshot (Source: http://us.blizzard.com/_images/games/legacy/wc2.jpg viewed 11th August 2012)

This style of real-time gameplay is one that is still more or less used in present strategy games such as *StarCraft II* and *Halo Wars*. Figure 1 above shows an example of the player's screen in *Warcraft*, with a mounted knight selected as indicated by the green square. The player's base is currently under attack, with some of the player's units trying to prevent a large demon from destroying one of

the player's buildings. The sidebar on the left shows the actions available to the selected unit, while the bar above displays the resources available to the player which are used for building structures and deploying military units like knights and catapults. Players must send villagers (or peons if playing as the Orcs) to collect these resources by either cutting down trees or collecting gold from mines. Each game "level" has a particular objective or set of objectives that the player must complete in order to win and progress, such as destruction of the enemy's base. *Warcraft* also includes provision for players to connect with their friends over dial-up modem or local-area network, allowing some multiplayer capability. At the time this greatly expanded the game's potential and introduced a social aspect to gameplay. As one IGN columnist writes 'what was once a game of patterns became a battle of wits' (Fahs 2009, para. 8). Yet aside from this limited multiplayer aspect, the scope of play was overall quite simplistic. Players needed only to react to the pre-determined actions of the virtual on-screen enemy and respond accordingly.

This real-time strategy form of play in which players use a mouse to "point-and-click" on a typically top-down representation of the visual game world was a popular formula among gamers in the 1990s, with game studios of the time pushing the limits of affordable consumer PC technology. Competing with Westwood Studios' similarly styled real-time strategy game *Command & Conquer*, Blizzard released *Warcraft* sequel *Warcraft II: Tides of Darkness* in December 1995, selling over a million copies in the first nine months after its release, with an expansion pack entitled *Beyond the Dark Portal* released in April 1996. Importantly, a third-party program called *Kali* (www.kali.net) had recently been made available, allowing many games with local-area network (IPX) capabilities to connect over the then early consumer Internet, giving players the opportunity to compete with strangers from across the world: players with Internet access were now able to further engage in a more dynamic, unpredictable style of play.

Six years later in 2002, the third real-time strategy game in the series *Warcraft III: Reign of Chaos* was released, further expanding the *Warcraft* universe and introducing new character races to the story, as well as re-tooling the graphics to create a more 3D effect, while still incorporating the real-time strategy form of play as its predecessors. Selling a million copies in the first month alone, *Warcraft III's* story and dialog became much more integral to the gameplay (Fahs 2009), contributing depth to the rich fantasy narrative of the fictional *Warcraft* universe. At the same time

as *Warcraft III* was enjoying commercial success, the fourth sequel in the series, *World of Warcraft*, was in development. Blizzard had decided to change direction with the *Warcraft* franchise and this future sequel would not be a real-time strategy game as the previous titles but instead developed as a Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game.

The Evolution of the MMORPG

Dungeons & Dragons: The Genesis

While the rich, immersive audio-visual experience found in contemporary Massively Multiplayer games is often tied to the availability and affordability of consumer hardware, the style of play in which players assume ‘roles’ in a fictional game world is one that has been around for many decades.

Although *World of Warcraft* traces its commercial lineage back to the successful real-time strategy games it shares a fictional universe with, the game mechanics that determine the outcomes of player actions in the game find many parallels with the conceptual rules and conventions of ‘table-top’ role playing fantasy games. In 1974, Gary Gygax (1938-2008) and Dave Arneson created and released the tabletop fantasy role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons*, which was based on the miniature “wargame” *Chainmail*, a table-top medieval strategy game also developed by Gygax that was played with military figurines. While *Dungeons & Dragons* shared a similar format of gameplay and rules in regards to the determination of a player’s actions based on dice rolls, it served as a critical juncture in the genre by making the player in charge of a *character* instead of an army, and was structured in such a way that players worked together in a party to work through a “campaign”. In this respect it was an early form of the typical style of play in electronic role-playing games including *World of Warcraft*. Fine’s (1983) ethnography of *Dungeons & Dragons* argued that role-playing games are rich social worlds. The popular paradigm of shared role-play in *Dungeons & Dragons* owes much of its immersive qualities not just to the rich fantasy “Tolkien-esque” narrative, but to the fact that it is *social* play, relying on a shared experience and input from others to build and frame that ‘magic circle’ of play, to borrow Huizinga’s terminology (1955).

To summarise an extremely complex game quickly (and perhaps poorly to experienced players), players come together in a physical space to play *Dungeons & Dragons* with one player acting as “Dungeon Master” who acts as a game adjudicator of sorts. Other players decide for themselves to

role-play a character with a particular race and class, based heavily in the fantasy genre (human, elf, wizard etc.) Base “stats”, or character attributes such as intellect, strength, wisdom, charisma and so forth are then decided using the rolls of a die.⁶ Character stats are able to increase as players “level” their characters through experience points awarded through game encounters. Game encounters (such as a fight with a goblin, for example) are narrated by the Dungeon Master, with outcomes of events determined by the rolls of a special set of different-sided dice, influenced by a range of “modifiers” such as character abilities, spells, armour etc. Players can also bring and use previously created characters (whose stats are written down on paper) and continue developing them.⁷ While the game incorporates existing methods of chance through dice rolls as found in board games like *Monopoly*, it incorporates the pseudo-identity of the player as part of the game narrative.

Whilst this is an (extremely) cursory overview of *Dungeons & Dragons*, it is important to note the two elements of the play that have been adopted by many electronic games, including *World of Warcraft*: social role-playing and the mathematical chance structure of game mechanics.

Trubshaw and Bartle’s MUD1

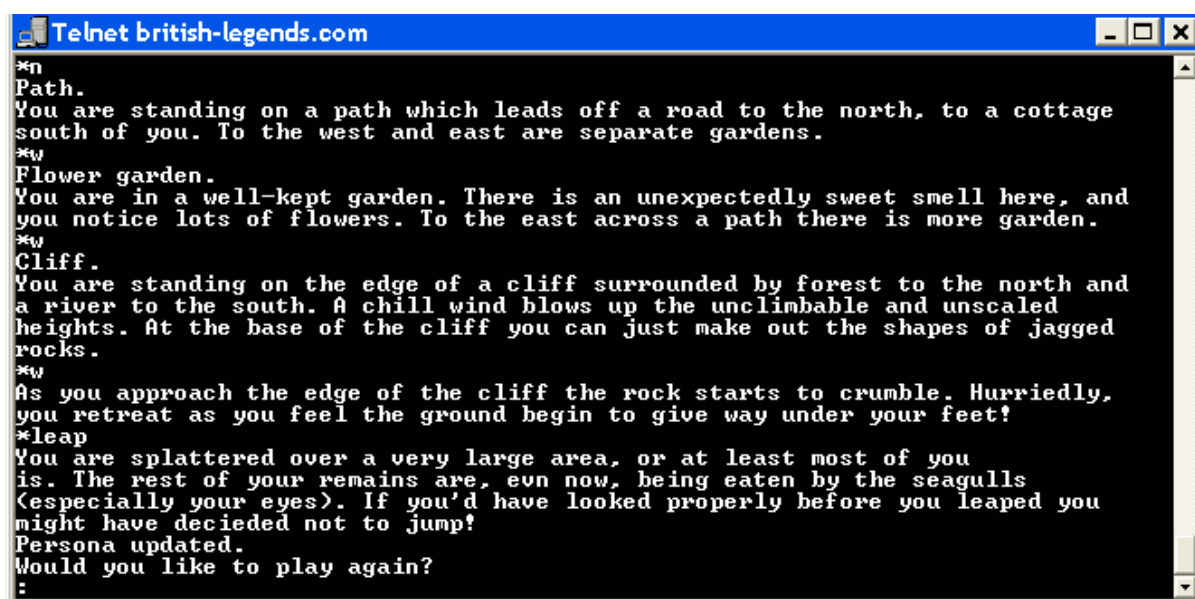


Figure 2: Screenshot of MUD1 text from its current home at british-legends.com (Source: http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/6/64/MUD1_screenshot.gif viewed 11th August 2012)

⁶ The term “roll” is still in common parlance today in electronic games like *World of Warcraft* – someone is said to *roll* a new “toon” when they start a new character.

⁷ For a much more in-depth description of D&D gameplay, the of rules for the latest edition is available by the current game publisher *Wizards of the Coast* at <http://media.wizards.com/downloads/dnd/DnDBasicRules.pdf> (July 2014)

One of the earliest electronic games to incorporate both of these aspects was Roy Trubshaw's *MUD1* in 1978. Trubshaw passed the reins to colleague Richard Bartle a few years later. Figure 2 shows a screenshot of the game *British Legends*, the commercial name for *MUD1* after it was licenced to CompuServe in the late 1980s. The primary purpose of play in *MUD1* is to gain enough points to level up to 'wizard' and thereby become immortal. When a player logs in, the black-and-white text-based game requires the player to first create a player name and select their gender. Players can then navigate the text-based world by text commands such as north, south, east, west, talk, use, kill, among many others. Figure 2 shows the example of a player using the compass point commands to move between 'rooms' which are described to the player upon entering, although in this instance the player character inadvertently falls of the edge of a cliff and dies.

Although text-based games like *Zork* already existed at the time of *MUD1*'s release, it was the first virtual world of its kind that allowed multiple players simultaneously over the early Internet,⁸ allowing geographically remote players to interact with each other through the game via a textual interface. Using computers, text-based MUDs were also able to instantly calculate the outcomes of virtual dice rolls and associated modifiers that determined the outcome of a player's actions in relation the text-based game environment, such as when one was attacking a monster or another player. The role of the 'Dungeon Master' was removed and replaced by software code and text / graphics on the computer screen that relayed information about the player's environment and associated actions. Player characters (a form of avatar) were represented by their character name, with more detailed information available through the corresponding computer commands. Players could "look" around the virtual room they were in and interact with objects via text, and critically, interact with other players in the same way. MUDs were also the first kinds of virtual worlds to attract academic attention, for example in by Bartle (1996) who suggested a taxonomy of player types, or in Sherry Turkle's comprehensive research on identity in MUDs and other virtual worlds (Turkle 1994, 2005).

Ultima Online

With advances in commercial computer technology during the late 20th century, games were able to take the leap from text-based interaction to audio-visual interaction. Consequently, the scope of

⁸ At the time known as the ARPANet, with access restricted mostly to universities.

virtual game worlds also evolved. Building on the well-established genre of the multiplayer text-based MUDs, one of the first visual Massively Multiplayer Role-Playing Games was released in 1997 in the form of Origin Systems' *Ultima Online*, offering players a graphical role-playing game experience with thousands of players able to interact with each other in real time in the game. The scope of the game as a social realm was unprecedented and reportedly led to unpredicted outcomes. A post-mortem of the game by Raph Koster, one of the game's developers, considers how some player behaviours were completely unexpected by the developers, nor were they able to predict what would happen in building a game with a pre-existing expectation of social behaviour, drawing into question Bartle's earlier taxonomy of MUD players (Koster 2000).



Figure 3: *Ultima Online* screenshot (Source: <http://mmohuts.com/wp-content/gallery/ultima-online/ultima-online-town.jpg?cc9f9b> viewed 11th August 2012)

Figure 3 shows a screenshot of *Ultima Online* showing the top-down view of the virtual game world with some player characters and *non-player characters* (NPCs) (computer-controlled players) present. On the bottom left is the “chat” pane which alerts the player to events in the game world and those that affect the character – in the example, the player’s “focus” skill is improving. On the bottom right is the contents of the player’s inventory, while the top left shows the player character’s portrait and health.

Ultima Online for all intents and purposes set the precedent for much of the format for the up-and-coming Massively Multiplayer Role-Playing genre. It offered a “persistent” virtual world like those available in MUDs: a virtual world where players could log out and come back later to find world time had progressed but their character was where they left it. This reinforced another important aspect of play in multiplayer online role-playing games as this type of play appeared less as a set of discrete rule-based events with clearly defined boundaries of play, and instead such games were starting to focus on the mediated forms of social interaction made possible by the available computer technology. This formula was expanded on by Sony Online Entertainment’s 1999 release *EverQuest* which drew more substantially on fostering the opportunity for players to create and develop their own personalised character, allowing a broad selection of character races, character classes, and of course gender.

EverQuest



Figure 4: *EverQuest* character creation menu screenshot (Source: <http://www.11.onrpg.com/gamepics/articles/everquest/Character-Creation.jpg> viewed 11th August 2012)

Figure 4 shows the character creation screen in *EverQuest*. The character model is shown in the centre, with the left-hand menu allowing the player to select the race and gender of their character.

The right-hand menu allows the player to choose the class of the character and therefore the set of skills and abilities available to that player character. The right-hand menu also includes the provision for players to somewhat customise the basic appearance of their character and what city they start the game in. The character creation screen is essentially where players decide how they want to be represented in the game world to other players, introducing a much greater aspect of visual role-play in contrast to the text-based MUDs or top-down view of games like *Ultima Online*.

EverQuest soon overtook *Ultima Online* in terms of popularity. The paradigm of social role-play in virtual worlds had gained considerable traction as a popular form of immersive entertainment. Players were able to socialise in increasingly more productive ways, such as by forming guilds, trading in an open in-game economy or specialising themselves through their chosen character class to make their character more useful in different encounters.

Yet it was not all positive. The game's popularity and immersive style of play soon found itself under scrutiny, because of its link to one of the earliest popularised cases of suspected harm associated with an online role-playing game being that of the suicide of 21-year-old man Shawn Wooley, whose mother told media she blamed *EverQuest* (Spain & Vega 2005). The circumstances surrounding Wooley's death were never entirely understood. He had shot himself whilst sitting in front of the computer with *EverQuest* still running on the screen. The event also generated controversy about the possibility of computer games being 'addictive' and the legal extent to which game developers were responsible for the actions of players (Watson 2003) after Wooley's mother had threatened to sue the game's publisher Sony Online Entertainment. It indicated that these sorts of Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games were offering a kind of immersive play that could perhaps manifest itself in problematic and unforeseen behaviours on the part of players. It also highlights one of the salient complexities in understanding meaning-making in virtual social game worlds. While Wooley's mother blamed an addiction to *EverQuest* for her son's suicide (Spain & Vega 2005) it was never clear if there was a key in-game event that precipitated this young man taking his life, or an understanding of the personal significance of events in the game that may have contributed to his state of mind.

World of Warcraft

Although a much-anticipated sequel *EverQuest II* would be released in late 2004, it would be met by unparalleled competition from Blizzard Entertainment's *World of Warcraft*. Initially released on the 23rd of November 2004 after years of development and months of beta testing, *World of Warcraft*'s fictional story was a continuation of the events that transpired in *Warcraft III*, offering loyal players a continuation of the fantasy lore they had known. The basic game formula of *EverQuest* is one that reappears at the core of *World of Warcraft*.

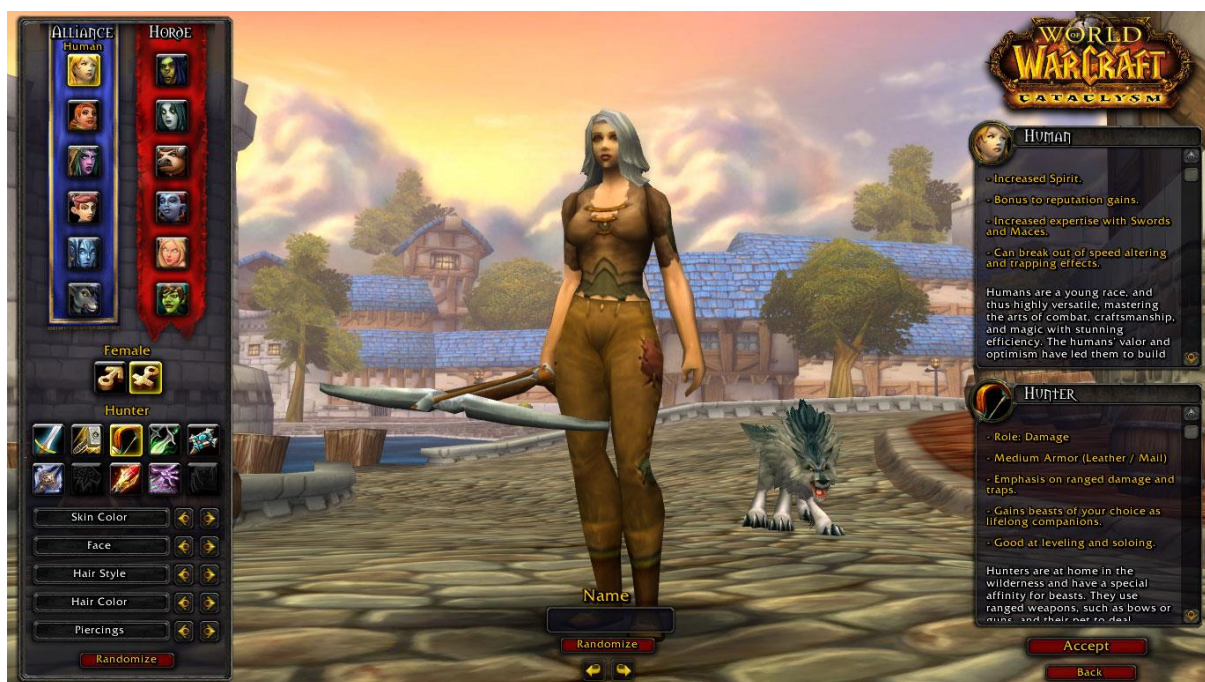


Figure 5: *World of Warcraft* character creation menu (*Cataclysm* expansion, patch 4.3.4) (Source: screenshot)

Characters and Specialisations

Figure 5 shows the *World of Warcraft* character creation screen from the *Cataclysm* expansion. In much the same manner as in *EverQuest*, players can choose the name, race, gender, class and appearance of their character as it will be displayed in the virtual game world. Blizzard Entertainment built *World of Warcraft* on the now proven successful model of 3D character creation and immersion, with players able to choose whether their character would be part of the Alliance or Horde faction, depending on the race of player character chosen, while players who choose the Pandaren race being able to choose their faction. Each race also provides its own minor benefits that can improve the characteristics of some 'classes' but not all classes are available to each

race. These character classes determine the available repertoire of skills and abilities of the player character. Each class also has a selection of three particular specialisations such as damage-dealing, tanking or healing.

These character specialisations modify the availability of skills and abilities of the player character, particularly in social play situations where players must group and coordinate to overcome game obstacles. The specialisation of the player character determines what role that player must play with a group situation, signifying the relationship between character creation and various social roles as is seen in games like *Dungeons & Dragons* and *EverQuest*.

To offer a brief overview of the character specialisations in *World of Warcraft*, the role of the *tank* is to ensure that the target monster or monsters are attacking them rather than other players in the group. Tanks have specialised abilities to wear heavier armour and to generate and control “aggro” (amount of threat), which is essentially the amount of interest the monster has in attacking a player. The tank (or tanks, in some situations) must keep the target monsters attacking themselves by ensuring they have the greatest threat level, a mathematical game mechanic that influences the amount of threat on a target. The *healers*, therefore, must usually ensure that the majority of their healing is directed at the tanks as they are likely to be taking the most damage in a group encounter. Finally, the *damage-dealers* (usually called DPS, short for damage-per-second) must kill the target or targets whilst making sure they do not steal aggro from the tank by generating too much threat (often via too much damage-per-second), and to also make sure that they are standing in the correct places in relation to the target monster or monsters to make sure they are not inadvertently killed.

Character specialisations, as mentioned, are mostly relevant to group encounters. However, for much of the time players are not in groups with other players and are engaged in solo play. *World of Warcraft*'s dual-specialisation feature introduced in a 2009 game patch allows player characters to swap specialisations based on what they are doing. For example, a druid in “resto” (healing) specialisation is going to be grossly ineffective in combat, a key aspect of solo questing or player-versus-player combat. This druid may opt for a second “feral” (combat) specialisation for these other types of encounters. While the character creation, selection and development may already appear quite complex to the lay-reader, upon adding the fact that different types of actions are available in *World of Warcraft* and as such different types and contexts of play, the richness and

complexity of action and the multitudes of meanings for such actions in cooperative or competitive player interaction is further reinforced. Yet while the player must master their character in terms of their race, class and specialisation, there is also the expectation that the player is also fluent in the more technical features of player character development that influence the outcomes of player actions in the virtual world.

Character Stats and “Theorycraft”



Figure 6: A screenshot of one of my *World of Warcraft* characters, showing some of the different character ‘stats’ on the right that affect combat outcomes (*Cataclysm* patch 4.3.4) (Source: screenshot)

Figure 6 shows the character screen of one of my *World of Warcraft* characters “Ulthuan”. Each of the icons surrounding the player character is a weapon or armour “slot” where players can equip various items in order to improve their base character stats as shown on the left. The character’s core attributes of strength, stamina, agility, intellect and spirit influence the outcomes of different aspects of a player’s actions, by modifying how such outcomes are calculated by the game, depending on what class that character is. Characters that use magic, for example, will require their armour

and weapons to include bonuses to intellect, as intellect will increase the amount of “mana” available to a character (the resource diminished by the casting of spells). In contrast, Ulthuan was a “sword-wielding death knight” therefore needing gear with bonuses to strength in order to improve overall damage, with overall strength influencing the measures shown in figure 6 of “attack power” and “DPS” (damage per second). Factors such as “haste” (how quick the player character can attack), “hit chance” (the percentage improvement to a character’s chance to hit) and “expertise” (the improvement to the chance for a blow not to be dodged or parried by the enemy) all influence the player’s efficiency in the game. These factors combine in intricate algorithms behind the scenes to calculate the outcome of a character’s actions in combat, much in the way that a dice roll in a *Dungeons & Dragons* game would do the same, yet with a much greater degree of sophistication and speed.

Another aspect adopted from *Dungeons & Dragons* and MUDs is role-play on the part of the player. *World of Warcraft* game servers are available to players in three different types: *player-versus-environment* (PvE), *player-versus-player* (PvP), and *role-play* (RP), which can also be available in (RP-PvP). On role-play servers, players are expected to engage with other players “in-character” using language that would be considered appropriate for the fantasy narrative of Azeroth.⁹ Yet the numbers of role-play servers available in *World of Warcraft* are few, with the majority of players on “general” PvE or PvP servers. On general servers there is no requirement for players to engage with each other in any sort of narrative role-play, nor is there any specific requirement for players’ character names to be constructed as such. Hence the way the term role-play is used to describe *World of Warcraft* is quite loose, typically describing how players engage with the game world through their avatar while not “acting” as a specific fantasy character.

The Basics of Play in *World of Warcraft*

It has been argued that *World of Warcraft*, unlike similar role-playing games, offers a much softer learning curve (Fahs 2009). Upon deciding character class, race, gender and name as shown in figure 5, players enter the world at level 1 in their character’s relevant racial starting zone with the bare minimum of skills and equipment. Figure 7 shows a human mage player standing outside

⁹ A more detailed description of social conventions for RP servers can be found at <http://us.battle.net/wow/en/forum/topic/2016793577>

Northshire Abbey, the starting zone for players choosing a human character. The sparse action bar interface at the bottom of the screen indicates a limited number of spells and abilities are available to the character. The simple, nondescript robe the character wears acts as an outward indication of the character's low level. Some player actions and character customisation options are visibly "greyed-out" (unavailable) until the character reaches a higher level.



Figure 7: *World of Warcraft* human starting area, showing Northshire Abbey in the background. Note the sparse nature of the spell-bar at the bottom (*Cataclysm* Patch 4.3.4). (Source: screenshot)

For the human character class, the starting zone of Northshire Abbey represents a safe zone where players can learn the initial actions of their chosen player character. One of the first quests (the quest-giver can be seen in figure 7, off in the distance standing outside the abbey) is for the player to kill a number of level 1 wolves nearby. The player must use the limited abilities of the player character to do so (in the case of a level 1 mage, either by throwing a fireball or by hitting it with a staff). Once the required number of wolves is killed, the player can then turn in the quest for a small reward of copper coins and experience points before being pointed to the next quest giver. Quests generally increase in complexity and difficulty as the player "levels up" and acquires more skills and abilities.

Parallel to many other role-playing games including *Dungeons & Dragons*, a key aspect of play in *World of Warcraft* focuses on the development of the player character through playing the game

and receiving rewards, with a key reward being that the character levels up. Initial quests are structured to allow the new player to gain some familiarity with the controls and game flow. As players engage with the game by completing quests, they are rewarded with experience points (XP) which form the basis of the character's progression to higher levels. Each level requires an ever-increasing amount of XP to reach the next level. In figure 7, only 400xp is required to reach level 2: at the highest character levels the amount of XP required reaches into the millions. As players level their characters, they are offered a successively greater range of spells and abilities as well as armour and weapon rewards. The game also demands more of the player in terms of expertise, which is the focus of chapter seven.

The virtual environment in *World of Warcraft* is broken up into level-centric zones that contain appropriate-level quests for characters. As players progress, they are presented with opportunities to improve their character and opportunities to engage in game content that requires a minimum character level. As in *EverQuest* and many other MMORPGs, players can form guilds in which to make friends, and importantly, to organise social engagements in order to tackle difficult game content. *World of Warcraft* also includes an in-game auction house (one for each game server) that allows players to trade goods on a more or less free market built on the ideas of supply and demand, using in-game currency.

While *World of Warcraft* shares a long heritage with multiple branches in role-play and single-player and multiplayer strategy games, it has also established quite distinct gameplay experiences incorporating elements from many genres. A social realm framed as a fantasy game world, the concept of role-playing game is loosely interpreted as there is no specificity as to what these roles are beyond those dictated by the game rules. It can't even really be called a simulation, as there is no real-world context or situation which it is imitating. It may be possible to consider *World of Warcraft* as its own *simulacra* (Baudrillard 1994; Frostling-Henningson 2009), a kind of "hyperreality" that offers unique experiences not available in the "real" world, but for all intents and purposes having "real" outcomes.

Patches and Expansions

Being ten years old at the time of writing, *World of Warcraft* has lasted particularly well. This could be attributed to the fact that the game has been continuously evolving since its release in late

2004. Game patches are released incrementally which players are required to download in order to continue playing the game. These patches address game issues (bugs) and occasionally introduce new content. Including the patches during beta testing prior to the game's release, about 108 patches had been released for the game as of late 2012, with 22 of those patches being major content patches including new world zones and areas for players to explore. Some patches are part of *expansion packs* released for the game and require players to pay an extra one-off fee to access this content. Chronologically, these expansion packs are *The Burning Crusade* released in January 2007, adding the continent of Draenor and two new races; *Wrath of the Lich King* released in November 2008, adding the continent of *Northrend* and the death knight hero class; *Cataclysm* released December 2010, adding seven new major zones and two new races; and the most recent patch in late 2012, *Mists of Pandaria* including one new continent and one new race and class. Late 2014 saw the release of the *Warlords of Draenor* expansion introducing a new continent.

Game developers have constantly faced a challenge in incorporating new content and keeping existing players interested while at the same time trying to not introduce so much complexity that the game becomes much too difficult to master. It is evident from years of reading and contributing to the official *World of Warcraft* forums that players are not a homogenous group, nor are they easily pleased. Announcements of patches and updates are often met with polarised opinions, particularly in the face of significant changes to the game's mechanics of play. An example of this is the "talent tree" system, where players can customise their character class into three core "specs" (specialities) dependent on what class they play. For example, a priest can be a damage dealer or a healer, while a paladin can be a tank, healer, or damage dealer. A "pure" DPS class like warlocks can customise for PvE or PvP, damage-over-time, crowd-control, and so forth. The talent system introduces an added level of both customisation and complexity for player characters, and points that can be spent in talent trees are earned sporadically as the character levels.



Figure 8: Priest talent tree showing the three available “specs” of Discipline, Holy and Shadow – *Cataclysm* Expansion. (Source: <http://www.gkick.net/wp-content/uploads/2011/11/World-of-Warcraft-talents-cata.jpg> viewed 15th August 2012)

Figure 8 gives the example of the priest talent tree from the *Cataclysm* expansion. The three “specs” allow the player to further customise their character by selecting which “trees” to select skills from, which in turn gave bonuses to the skills and abilities of the player character. Originally, players could spend their talent points wherever they saw fit. This continued up through the *Wrath of the Lich King* expansion, where over time the original tree depth of 31 points had expanded to 51 points with the inclusion of the extra levels available to the character (level 60 was now level 80), arguably becoming much too cluttered (Perry 2011). In an effort to address this, the *Cataclysm* expansion in 2010 saw a reduction in the number of available talents, but also required players to use 31 points in one tree before being able to place talents in another tree, which for the most part backfired in that “cookie-cutter” character builds were much more prevalent (Perry 2011). The 2012 expansion *Mists of Pandaria* saw a drastic shift in the talent mechanics as shown in figure 9. The complex talent tree was removed and a simplified model was introduced where players choose a character specialisation at level 10. Spells are automatically learned and players can choose a talent every 15 levels from level 15, totally revamping the process of character progression. The new changes split the *World of Warcraft* community in two, with over 11,000 polarised comments to a 2011 blog announcement on the proposed changes (Blizzard Entertainment 2011).



Figure 9: Beta Priest talent calculator for *Mists of Pandaria* expansion. (Source: <http://us.battle.net/WorldofWarcraft/cn/game/mists-of-pandaria/feature/talent-specification#X!> viewed 15th August 2012)

This is but one example of the complexity of play to be considered in *World of Warcraft*. *World of Warcraft* is not a static environment, but a dynamic one where experience shifts over time in a ‘mangle of play’ (Steinkuehler 2006) between the game developers, corporate interests and the opinions of the millions of players of whom many have considerable time invested in the game. From a business perspective, a lasting novelty of play is critical in ensuring that *World of Warcraft* players keep renewing their monthly subscriptions. Keeping players interested, while adhering to the limitations of the game design is a constant source of tension in the evolution of *World of Warcraft*. One of the key ways that novelty is consistently introduced is through new and revised content in the form of quests, dungeons and raids.

Quests, Dungeons and Raids

The active gameplay structure of *World of Warcraft* closely follows the gameplay found in many MUDs, single-player role-playing games and other Massively Multiplayer Role-Playing games. The fictional story of *Warcraft* begins much earlier than the events in *Warcraft: Orcs and Humans*, including events set ten-thousand game years before the original game, with the universe even having its own creation myth. Through quests, cinematic cut-scenes and in-game objects like books and scrolls, players in *World of Warcraft* are able (if they are so inclined) to learn about the myth and legend concerning the fantasy world. It also seems that there have been considerable attempts

at preserving a continuity of story between games and associated expansions. The five game expansions currently available in *World of Warcraft* draw heavily on much of the existing playable story and fictional legend of the Warcraft universe. Players have the opportunity in some instances to travel through time and involve themselves in some of the events that occurred millennia ago in the game world. Whilst the literature review examines some conflicting ideas regarding the importance of the story in game experience (eg. Krzywinska 2006; Shivel 2010), reward-driven quests need to be contextually relevant, that is, relevant to the enduring fantasy narrative.



Figure 10: Example of *World of Warcraft* quest-givers with floating icons. (Source: <http://us.battle.net/wow/en/game/guide/how-to-play> viewed 21st August 2012)

As previously stated, new players begin by creating a character as their in-game avatar that begins at level 1 with the barest of spells and equipment. In order to progress through levels, players are required to gain experience points or “XP”. This can be done in a number of ways: completing quests that are offered by non-player characters (NPCs), killing level-appropriate monsters (“mobs”) or the collection of resources (“mats”) for character professions. Quests are the core method of levelling one’s character, with large XP rewards usually

available at the completion of a quest and sometimes with an accompanying equipment reward. As shown in figure 10, quest-giver NPCs can be identified by the floating yellow icons above their heads, with an exclamation mark signifying that the NPC has a quest available for you. Once the tasks of the quest have been completed, such as killing the required number of monsters, the player then returns to the quest-giver (or other required NPC) to “turn-in” the quest. NPCs and other objects that have a floating yellow question mark are available for players to turn-in and subsequently complete a quest and claim the offered rewards. Quests are sometimes offered in “chains” so that upon completing a reward with a quest-giver, they may automatically offer you the next quest in the chain or send you to another NPC in another area to continue the quest. An in-game quest log allows players to accept multiple quests at any given time and track their progress.

As the game progresses and player characters level up, quests may be offered that require players to enter a “dungeon” (otherwise known as an “instance”).¹⁰ Dungeon quests are offered as group quests, meaning that players must form a group of five (for traditional dungeons) in order to tackle the content, as dungeon mobs are generally more powerful and contain “bosses”, or named enemy NPCs that require a group effort to defeat. This also requires that players fulfil a required class role – damage, healer or tank, as previously discussed in regards to character specialisations.

While only a brief overview, this is the core structure of groups and raids in *World of Warcraft*, with 5, 10, 25 and 40 player instances available, each requiring players to have solid knowledge of their class and spec role, otherwise a “wipe” may occur when the player group is killed, often through some players in the group failing to meet role expectations. Although instances require player expertise and cooperation, the rewards are also much greater with quest and loot¹¹ rewards offering more powerful items from regular-level dungeons, and “epic” level items from raids and some “heroic” level dungeons. Raid instances generally form the basis of what is talked about as “endgame” material, requiring well-gearred top-level players with adequate expertise to successfully tackle endgame raids of superior difficulty. It points again to the importance of the social aspect of play – a player’s success is often contingent upon the actions of others. Yet unlike a game of chess which has strict rules and limitations of actions, or perhaps the determinate dice roles of a *Dungeons & Dragons* battle, players in *World of Warcraft* have the capacity to *choose* to follow some game rules and social conventions whilst still remaining in the game world. The *manner* in which a player can choose to undertake or not undertake an action in a game world can have a direct influence upon dozens of other players. It adds another interesting dimension to the concept of play, and reinforces the need to further explore the experience of play in the game world.

With a much greater degree of freedom in this type of play, certain puzzles come to light. In light of the importance of the player character in this style of play, what influences player decisions in *World of Warcraft*? What are the contexts for these decisions? How do players understand and coordinate with each other in light of both the complexity of character creation and play, and the mediated experience of electronic play in a virtual world?

¹⁰ In contrast to the persistent world environment offered in WoW, instances are named as such as players are transported to a one-off *instance* of an area of the game such as a dungeon or raid that has no persistent location and is generated upon a group of players entering it.

¹¹ Boss mobs in dungeons and raids generally drop usable equipment (loot) on their defeat.

Conclusion

It should be clear by now that *World of Warcraft* is a complex game. It has also evolved considerably from its early text-based and point-and-click forerunners. By exploring a genealogy of *World of Warcraft*, this chapter highlighted two key areas critical to the style of play: role-playing in the game world as a player character, and mediated social interaction. While this chapter has attempted to provide the reader with some context of the history and play experience of *World of Warcraft*, without having engaged in the game itself it may be difficult to gain a full appreciation of the depth and complexity of experiences available to players. It does, however, help highlight some of the key puzzles faced by this researcher. The complexity of the game, particularly in relation to character development, contributes to the myriad of factors that need to be considered in explicating the meaning-making of players in *World of Warcraft*. When we consider that the process of character development is ultimately stacked towards developing player character roles that are useful and integral in group situations, it reinforces the idea that social interaction likely plays a key role in the experience of play in *World of Warcraft*. In order to begin to answer these questions, the next chapter explores what sort of phenomenological research approach we can employ to undertake this endeavour.

Chapter Three: The Phenomenology of Player Characters in *World of Warcraft*

I flew my Winged Steed of the Ebon Blade over Wintergrasp after winning a bloody battle with the Horde which guaranteed control over area for the next few hours. Wintergrasp was a player-versus-player zone in Northrend; every few hours there was a battle for Wintergrasp Keep, allowing the winning faction access to the Titan-built Vault of Archavon.

While no battle was taking place in the area, various ‘elementals’ roamed the open areas of Wintergrasp, who could be killed and looted for different types of valuable crystallized essence upon their defeat. In the south-west corner of Wintergrasp lay an area called the Cauldron of Flames, inhabited by fire elementals and flame revenants (see picture) who also dropped a quest item



Figure 11: Flame Revenant. Source: <http://wow.zamimg.com/uploads/screenshots/normal/261051.jpg> viewed 21st August 2012)

upon their death. As I flew down into the area I noticed others were “farming” here, including players from the opposing Horde faction. With a limited spawn rate of the flame revenants, there would be much competition over who would be able to get the kill first. As I hovered above the area on my flying mount, I noticed that others were also hovering over the area, waiting for an opportune moment. Some of the players on the ground stopped running around momentarily and paused, appearing to take stock of the other players in the area.

We all watched each other from a distance silently. It became clear that this was akin to a “Mexican Standoff” – players wanted to farm the elementals in the area, and were competing with each other for these limited resources. Those on the ground knew that continuing to farm the elementals left them open to attack by a player from the opposing faction, yet to attack an opposing player meant another player could take the opportunity to kill and loot an elemental once it spawned.

This narrative highlights some key puzzles in understanding action in virtual worlds like those in *World of Warcraft*. Each player in the situation must rely on the information on hand in the event in order to interpret the situation and respond accordingly. Yet in virtual games worlds like *World of Warcraft* we are faced with a problem: how can players interpret or even try to predict each other’s actions in the absence of the physical body? In the example above, the locations of the

players in the game world, the apparent “body language” of the player characters, the factions of the player characters and the situation in which the event occurred, i.e. farming mobs in Wintergrasp, are aspects of the event which are interpreted by players who must respond accordingly.

As a gamer, this is all straightforward and a taken-for-granted aspect of the experience. As a sociologist, however, there is a challenge in describing and interpreting these types of events in a way that the social sciences might recognise as a coherent account relying on a credible methodological paradigm and using an appropriate vocabulary or discourse. The complexity of play in *World of Warcraft* means that an appropriate vocabulary needs to be one that is accurate and takes into account the important distinctions between action in the physical world and actions in a virtual world. While the previous chapter highlighted a need to acknowledge the complexity of play in a game like *World of Warcraft*, this chapter questions how this complexity can be understood from the perspective of a sociological phenomenology, and consider how an interpretive ethnography can employ a phenomenological framework to understand this complexity of play. I first discuss how ethnography has been employed previously in *World of Warcraft* before discussing the relationship between phenomenology and interpretive sociology. I then outline the relevant aspects of Schutz’s phenomenological sociology, before developing a critique of this that suggests some revisions for conducting interpretive sociology in virtual game worlds like *World of Warcraft*.

Ethnography, Phenomenology and Interpretive Sociology

The merits of ethnography in online spaces (or, as some have termed it, “cyberethnography”) have been debated since the late 1990s (Rybas & Gajjala 2007; Teli, Pisanu & Hakken 2007; Ward, KJ 1999; Wittel 2000). A considerable amount of the existing research in *World of Warcraft* has adopted an ethnographic perspective. It is curious to note that many of these studies are guided by research questions related to experience or action, such as social collaboration and culture (Nardi 2010; Nardi & Harris 2006), understanding social interaction in the game (Chen, VH-h & Duh 2007), cooperation and camaraderie (Chen, M 2009), playing with real-world friends (Snodgrass et al. 2011a), motivations for play (Snodgrass et al. 2012), the experience of play as work (Lukacs, Embrick & Wright 2010), cultural considerations based on geographical area (Taylor 2006) and the significance of play relating to collective projects of action (Golub 2010). As yet, there appears to be little consensus on about what precisely an ethnography in an online space should look like, or what

conceptual framework should underpin this kind of research in the context of the phenomenological differences between physical and virtual spaces.

We need to ask if the same “rules” apply to interpretative sociology in virtual worlds as they do in the physical world. The emergence of virtual worlds has given rise to a new set of problems for the social sciences. Traditional assumptions about the nature of the physical world have been subverted by the way virtual world destabilise our understanding of the significance of embodiment (Ajana 2005; Bayliss 2010; Schultze 2010) and or related issues of anonymity and identity (Donath 1999; Parsell 2008; Turkle 1999). In light of these sorts of problems, researching play in a virtual world must pay appropriate attention to the unique phenomena present. Incorporating ethnography as a research method, how can we be satisfied with our interpretation of observed action that is itself virtual and undertaken by an actor who is for the most part inaccessible to us? To answer this, I will briefly cover some of the key considerations of both interpretive sociology and phenomenology, before discussing Schutz’s attempts to reconcile the two.

Considered one of the founding fathers of contemporary sociology, Max Weber’s work signified a critical turn away from the positivist approach adopted by the social sciences and championed by August Comte. Instead we saw scholars like Dilthey, Rickert and Weber taking a more anthropocentric view of humans as masters of their own meaningful existences (Kalberg 2003). In this interpretivist tradition and using hermeneutics as a method to interpret human action (Bryman 2004, p. 13) we find the idea that all human action is purposeful to the actor, who “ascribes” meaning to it. It assumes that social action is *intentional*, even though we could consider intentionality on something of a sliding scale (Munch 1975).

This became the basis for the development of a sociology of *verstehende* (understanding) by Max Weber. While an intentional action carries with it a subjective meaning on the part of the actor, this does not mean that the ability to “make sense” of an observable action is beyond the capability of an observer in everyday life. We don’t all wander round doing completely odd things. According to Weber, our actions are meaningful insofar as they can be meaningful to others. As Munch explains:

According to Weber, sociology (in particular, comprehensive sociology) is concerned with the kind of human conduct which is “sensible,” “meaningful,” and “comprehensible” *in terms of established expectations*, that is, in terms of norms

and standards for “reasonable” conduct and behaviour shared by the actor and the actor’s audience

(Munch 1975, p. 62)

This idea of established expectations and of norms and standards for behaviour, Weber called *ideal types* (Kalberg 2003). Ideal types can also be applied to things like how to use particular tools or even the conventions of different forms of government. To adequately interpret action, a social scientist needs to build a sufficient understanding of the ideal types present in the research space, or in other words, ‘to explain a social phenomenon means to identify or recognize the total situation in which a corresponding type of action “makes sense”’(Munch 1975, pp. 62-3).

At this point we are faced with a question: how can an interpretivist / hermeneutical method be employed in a virtual world? As it stands, do the phenomenological assumptions about the physical world hold good in a virtual world? Alfred Schutz dedicated considerable effort to undertake a phenomenological revision of Weber’s *verstehende Soziologie* (Rogers 2003). Yet as is clear this this was undertaken long before the Internet had been developed. But before engaging in a discussion of Schutz’s work, we must first ask: why is the incorporation of a phenomenological discussion important?

Broadly, there are two main branches of phenomenology – transcendental (Husserlian) and existential (Heideggerian) (Schmicking 2010). In phenomenology, the *experience* of an event is the primary focus. As Max van Manen argues, ‘phenomenological research is the description of the experiential meanings we live as we live them’ (van Manen 1990, p. 11). In his work, van Manen sets out a comprehensive research ‘method’ for phenomenology, with a strong emphasis on *writing* (phenomenological description)(van Manen 1990). The ability to ‘write well’ is deemed fundamental to being able to clearly narrate, describe and explicate a particular phenomenon. In considering the hermeneutic phenomenological reflection, van Manen acknowledges the role of the different *life-worlds* (an idea often ascribed to Husserl) in the meaning of an experience. He identifies four ‘existential’ life-world themes: *lived space, lived body, lived time and lived human relation* (van Manen 1990, p. 101). He argues that

these four existentials... can be differentiated but not separated. They all form an intricate unity which we call the life-world – our lived world

(van Manen 1990, p. 105)

This brings us back to our key question in regards to virtual game worlds: how do players interpret each other's actions in the absence of the physical body? We can immediately see that van Manen's concepts of 'lived space' and 'lived body' become problematic, and consequently lived time and lived human relation are also rendered problematic. Given that all four of van Manen's existential life-world themes are to different degrees modified by interaction with a virtual world, we return to our secondary problem: can an interpretivist / hermeneutical social research method be employed in a virtual world? To resolve this, we first need to consider how social action in a virtual world is different from social action in the physical world. In order to do so I turn to the work of Alfred Schutz.

Schutz's Phenomenological Sociology

Alfred Schutz' phenomenological project is outlined in his first major work *Der sinnhafte Aufbau der sozialen Welt* (*The Phenomenology of the Social World*) published in German in 1932. In it Schutz adapted the transcendental phenomenology of Edmund Husserl (Walsh in Schutz 1967, p. xvii) to critique Max Weber's sociological theory of rational action and develop a robust phenomenological underpinning to Weber's method. Schutz wanted to establish a phenomenological sociology able to illuminate how experience is interpreted, how actions have meaning and how the different stratifications of the "life-world" are distinct from each other in our everyday social life (Schutz 1967). For Schutz that life-world was comprised of both 'directly experienced social reality and a social reality lying beyond the horizon of direct experience' (Walsh in Schutz 1967: p.xxvii). Following his journey into exile in the USA in 1939 (where he worked for the rest of his life as a lawyer in a European bank while teaching part-time at the New School of Social Research) Schutz continuously worked to cultivate a subtle and far-reaching social phenomenology. The fruits of that work was mostly published posthumously (eg. Natanson & Breda 1962-66; Schutz & Luckmann 1973, 1989).

There are two reasons for choosing Schutz's phenomenological sociology for this project. Firstly, as Weber's interpretive sociology is his core focus, Schutz's work offers a comprehensive discussion of the relationship between the transcendental Ego, ideal type, and intentional action in the everyday life-world. Secondly, Schutz's phenomenology provides a solid starting point for solving some of

the problems in a phenomenological explication of the meanings of virtual action, specifically through his development of the *stratifications* of the life-world.

The Stratifications of the Life-world and the Concept of Typicality

Schutz's stratifications of the life-world are a key aspect for understanding the contexts of meaning in which social action can be interpreted. In Schutz's phenomenology, they determine the overall meaning-context in which we interact with each other, and how these meaning-contexts can be understood as typical in a particular space and time. Schutz's phenomenology makes a number of ontological assumptions about the world. One key assumption is the existence of a 'common world' that is shared by actors, which is presented more or less the same to all, allowing the development of *typification*, that is, typical modes of conduct, behaviour, ideas, meanings and so on (Turner 1991, p. 388). We interact in this world meaningfully, with both objects and other people. In the *umwelt* of direct social experience we encounter our 'consociates' with whom we share 'a community of space and a community of time,' in a face-to-face or 'Thou-orientation' (Schutz 1967, p. 163). As a starting point of his sociological phenomenology, Schutz emphasises the importance of the embodiment of the *We-relationship*, embedded in our face-to-face experience with another person or persons as the core of all meaningful experience (Schutz 1967, p. 165). However this is not to claim that other forms of experience are less meaningful, rather the establishment of much of our stock of knowledge via experience comes from our face-to-face interactions with others in the world.

In the *We-relationship*, the existence of the "Other" is taken for granted. They are given to us as a living object in our immediate experience that is conscious and not unlike myself in its constitution of meaning. This means that the Other more or less experiences the world as I do, the *same* world, and that they are experiencing me in much the same way as I experience them. This is what Schutz regards as *the general thesis of the alter Ego* (Schutz 1967, p. 97),¹² or the taken-for-granted existence of other people. This dimension of direct social experience is what Schutz calls the 'realm' or 'world' of *consociates* (Schutz 1967, pp. 163-76). In the *We-relationship* in the realm of consociates, people can share an experience through the 'simultaneity' of 'streams of consciousness', meaning that parties to the experience *grow older together* (Schutz 1967, p. 103; Schutz &

¹² Schutz went into more detail about the concept of the alter ego in his 1942 paper *Scheler's Theory of Intersubjectivity and the General Thesis of the Alter Ego*

Luckmann 1973, p. 62). However, in such an experience, the Other may or may not be aware of me in the same way, meaning that the Thou-orientation can either be one-sided or reciprocal (Schutz 1967, p. 164). Even though my attention may be directed at you, yours may not be directed at me yet I can still perceive my flow of experience as co-existing simultaneously with your own.

In a We-relationship such as a conversation, the meaning-contexts of the encounter become our intersubjective meaning contexts. As Schutz explains, 'when you and I are immediately involved with each other, every experience is colored by that involvement' (Schutz 1967, p. 167). Two people interacting in conversation seek to understand each other through the shared intersubjective experience, and the We-relationship itself demands a Thou-orientation toward the other for it to be a shared experience. If this is not so, any act of self-reflection (in the form of an Ego-orientation) causes the conversational partner to become a 'mere object of thought' (Schutz 1967, p. 167), such as when we give pause to carefully measure our responses to a question asked. Another example could be a student daydreaming in a lecture: they may be watching the lecturer while not paying attention at all.

In the intersubjective experience of the We-relationship a range of interpretive schemes are employed, such as personal knowledge of the other person, if they are familiar to us, or in other circumstances perhaps a more general *type* of person, including 'their habits... the taken-for-granted in-order-to and because-motives of others as such and of this person in particular' (Schutz 1967, p. 169). What is also taken for granted is the environment in which the experience of the We-relationship is taking place, not limited merely to the physical environment but the wider spatiotemporal context of the event including the where, why and how. Through shared experience, people enrich their stock of knowledge of the world and of each other, which in turn contributes to the context of meaning of the experience and of the typical interpretation of future experiences. This is how in the We-relationship, two people are able share experiences to *grow older together*.

In a reciprocal We-relationship, the greatest amount of information or 'symptoms' (Schutz & Luckmann 1973, p. 73) are available to interpret the subjective meaning-contexts of my partner as they are also oriented to me. However, in a case where I may be Other-oriented but my partner is not oriented to me, the context of interpretation changes. I often sit silently on the train on the way

to the city, observing other passengers and interpreting what they do. There is for example a distinction between engaging in a conversation with another passenger on a train and merely observing their behaviour from across the carriage. As Schutz writes:

Say that I am observing someone else's behaviour and that he either does not know that he is being observed or is paying no attention to it. Now the problem is, how do I know what is going on in his mind? Well, even if I am merely observing him, his body is still a field of expression for his inner life. I may, as I watch him, take my own perceptions of his body as signs of his conscious experiences. In so doing, I will take his movements, words, and so forth, into account as evidence. I will direct my attention to the subjective rather than to the objective meaning-contexts of the indications I perceive. As a direct observer I can thus in one glance take in both the outward manifestations – or “products” – and the processes in which are constituted the conscious experiences lying behind them. This is possible because the lived experiences of the Other are occurring simultaneously with my own objective interpretations of his words and gestures

(Schutz 1967, p. 173)

In observing the behaviour of another person or persons, we are still able to some degree to interpret the intersubjective meaning-contexts of the behaviour of the Other. We are no longer in a reciprocal We-relationship and cannot rely on the Other's orientation towards ourselves as a source of information. This marks the beginning of a transition from one stratification of the life-world to another, where the transition from the realm of *consociates* to *contemporaries* begins. I am aware (or in fact assume) that I inhabit a world of billions of other people who share what Schutz understood as a 'community of time' with me but not a 'community of space' (Schutz 1967). These are people we can understand as contemporaries simply because exist alongside them in time but not immediate space. Unlike people who belong to the past (*Vorwelt*) or who are yet to be born and live in the future (*Folgewelt*), these contemporaries are able potentially to become consociates. I am able to sometimes interact with these people in indirect ways, like sending them a letter or email, or maybe they are a child I sponsor in a third-world country.

Through my everyday experience in the life-world, I have knowledge both of the likely existence of these people (although I cannot always empirically verify it) and of the (social) *types* of people they are. As our “distance” from others increases, be it social or geographical, or as others our knowledge of particular Others become more and more anonymised, we enter into the realm of contemporaries. We can say we “know” they exist, yet our interactions with them are ‘inferential

and discursive' and 'stands, by its essential nature, in an objective context of meaning and only in such' (Schutz 1967, p. 184). My interpretation of the meaning-contexts of the actions of another person who I am not intimately familiar with is much more reliant on my previous experiences, cultural typifications and cumulative stock of knowledge than in an ongoing face-to-face relationship. As Schutz says:

... the farther out we get into the world of contemporaries, the more anonymous its inhabitants become, starting with the innermost region, where they can almost be seen, and ending with the region where they are by definition forever inaccessible to experience

(Schutz 1967, p. 181)

The world of consociates starts with people who I may have previously had direct experience of (such as a friend whom I recently had coffee with, but can now only assume they continue to exist as they are no longer present) to anonymous people I rely on for various functions in everyday life, (like people in the public transport system or tax officials) to anonymous objects and concepts whose creator I will never know.

One central question for sociologists is precisely the problem of how we are to make sense of the world that exists outside of direct experience and yet render the various dimensions of it meaningful. Both Schutz and Weber propose that the natural attitude of everyday life enables us to continue living somewhat orderly lives by relying on our certain taken-for-granted assumptions of others about whom we have no concrete knowledge. This *contemporary* of ours is only indirectly accessible and any inference of their subjective experiences 'can only be known in the form of *general types* of subjective experiences' (Schutz 1967, p. 181). Our typical understandings of other people in the world whether in the form of direct experience or indirect, anonymous interaction rely on pre-established ideas gathered through prior experience:

... all experience (*Erfahrung*) of contemporaries is predicative in nature. It is understanding is formed by means of interpretive judgements involving all my knowledge of the social world, although with varying degrees of explicitness

(Schutz 1967, p. 183)

These interpretative judgements, for better or worse, are engaged in our initial interaction with another person of whom we have no prior knowledge of, but are also employed upon indirectly interacting with a contemporary. As Schutz writes, in this situation:

The subjective meaning-context has been abandoned as a tool of interpretation. It has been replaced by a series of highly complex and systematically interrelated objective meaning-contexts. The result is that the contemporary is anonymized in direct proportion to the number and complexity of these meaning-contexts. Furthermore, the synthesis of recognition does not apprehend the unique person as he exists in his living present. Instead it pictures him as always the same and homogenous, leaving out of account all the changes and rough edges that go along with individuality. Therefore, no matter how many people are subsumed under the ideal type, it corresponds to no one in particular. It is just this fact that justified Weber in calling it “ideal”

(Schutz 1967, p. 184)

As such, we enter into any new social experience carrying with us both our previous experiences and a stock of knowledge, categorised into types. On one hand, we carry knowledge of the physical world that allows us to interact with it in meaningfully, by using the right tools for the right purposes. To use the traditional example of the hammer, it has a typical purpose which is generally understood as hammering nails. To use it to fix a computer would be an absurd and atypical use of that particular object. But the use of types is not limited to actions, but also to types of people, or *personal ideal types* (Schutz 1967, p. 184). Coinciding with an understanding of the types of actions or behaviour that a person engages in is what *type* of person engages in such and such a behaviour. Incorporating these ideal types into the relevant interpretive schemes, we can then start to interpret others using typical social or cultural categories such as teacher, police officer, criminal, bigot and so on.

As previously mentioned, Schutz and Weber argue that it is through the use of ideal types that we navigate through the social world from discrete experience to discrete experience. We do not apprehend each new experience or situation in its entirety but merely take for granted the objective meaning-contexts that exist for each situation. These *objective* ideal types drawn from prior experience influence how we intersubjectively engage in the social world. An objective ideal type is one comprised of ideas and symbolic objects that are meaningful but located outside or beyond an actor’s direct experience, including language, mathematics or a concept like the “nation-state”. In other words, the meaningfulness of these objective ideal types are not contingent on the event of a unique Other employing these ideas, but are instead anonymised. When meeting a new person, for example, I may be told that he or she is a medical practitioner. I can then orient myself towards them in an appropriate manner by drawing on my prior experience and stock of knowledge and can

then engage in a reciprocal We-relationship using an appropriate expressive scheme, as ‘the objective meaning-context defining the subjective experiences of an ideal type can be translated back into a subjective meaning whenever I apply it to an individual in a concrete situation’ (Schutz 1967, p. 186). Any new information gained during the course of the We-relationship with this new person can then be added to my existing stock of knowledge and can contribute to the ideal type under which this person falls, which can be drawn upon in the event of meeting this person again, or applied as an initial interpretive scheme upon meeting another doctor of whom I am not familiar.

In assuming (in ways Piaget’s theory of object permanence illuminated) that people we meet are likely to endure after our interactions with them, we are able to establish “invisible” anonymous types who affect our everyday lives even though we may seldom meet them because we have learned how to deal with them through the use of types such as ‘police officer’, ‘postal worker’ and the like. This orientation towards these anonymous Others is different in essence to the experience we have in a face-to-face relationship. We may still be able to indirectly engage with them through various social structures but are mostly unable to enter a We-relationship with them. Instead we will interpret their *likely* behaviour through the use of ideal types, or as Schutz explains, in this form of Other-orientation called a ‘They-orientation’ we have *types* for partners (Schutz 1967, p. 185), someone who as a contemporary ‘appears to us in principle in the form of an ideal type with neither freedom nor duration’ (Schutz 1967, p. 191).

We can start to see here the beginnings of how Schutz’s phenomenology attempts to revise and bolster Weber’s interpretive sociology. However up to this point we have only discussed the stratifications of the life-world and ideal-typical forms of knowledge from the perspective of the subjective actor who is interpreting the world around them. Next we need to consider how ideal types contribute to the motivational contexts of observable action.

The Meanings of Action

The interpretation of the meaning of an experience depends on whether the experience itself is one in which the actor is the subject of an event, or instead where the actor engages in a course of action itself. Schutz emphasises in his discussions of the nature of the meaning of what I call “passive” experience that meaning is often “given” to an experience *after the fact*, once the encounter has passed and the actor has been able to ‘lift’ it out of the flow of experience, reflect on it and

contextualise it (Schutz & Luckmann 1989, p. 3). Yet this is only when an action or event is 'over and done with', in contrast to a plan of action which an actor constructs before the event. These experiences find their meaning-context in relation to a *project*, or the motivated acts of an individual (Schutz & Luckmann 1989, p. 4). The nature of a project is a "plan" that is first imagined (or *phantasied*, to use Schutz's spelling) in the *future perfect tense* (Schutz 1967, p. 61), in that it is envisioned in the mind of the actor as over and done with in the future, yet lies temporally in a state of "past-ness" in that the project itself, once decided upon, is recallable in the mind of the actor. The motivation for an action or project, while on one hand locked away in the mind of the actor, inaccessible to anyone other than the actor themselves, is not typically not unique in its constitution of intersubjective meaning, as the actor necessarily already lives in a social world, and whose stock of knowledge is drawn from his or her life experiences.

Schutz argues that the meaning an actor "gives" to an action, either as part of one's own project or the interpretations of the actions of another is to be found in the motivational context for engaging in the overall project (Schutz 1967, p. 61; Schutz & Luckmann 1989, p. 18). In other words, there is a *reason* why an actor will decide to engage in *this* project over another at a particular point in time and space. It is first imagined in the future perfect tense, and then enacted to bring about some sort of change in the world. In Schutz's phenomenology, the actions that make up a project have as their motives *in-order-to motives*, or that which determines how the end goal is achieved. The in-order-to motive forms the expected future outcomes of an Act and its corresponding actions, in a kind of 'motivation-chain' (Schutz & Luckmann 1989, p. 20) where the project encompasses the necessary steps *in-order-to* fulfil the end goal. This stands in contrast to the *because-motive*, which 'apply to an irreversible state of affairs' (Schutz & Luckmann 1989, p. 20). The genuine because-motive is not related to the individual actions subsumed under the project, but is found temporally prior to the decision to envision a project and then carry it out in such-and-such a way. It belongs to a much higher category of motivation, including things such as the actor's prior lived experience of the world and associated stock of knowledge, their personal identity in the life-world, including their held attitudes towards aspects of the situation at hand (Schutz & Luckmann 1989, pp. 19-21). Projects, as a form of "rational" action (understood as that which can be rationalised by an actor) are influenced by a number of things associated with an actor's stock of knowledge, including their

attitudes and interests. An actor's attitudes influence the decision to enact *this* project and not another, and are often taken-for-granted in that they are not apparent to the actor at the point in time that the project was first undertaken. It is often only after self-reflection that the actor can find the genuine because-motive. Consequently, there are two distinct aspects of understanding when it comes to action. One is the meaning associated with the actions themselves, or in performing tasks in such-and-such a way, which is socially (objectively) meaningful. The other lies in the broader subjective meaning-context of the overall project itself, including why this project was chosen as relevant in this situation and what motivated the actor's project in this way. In Schutz's posthumously published works, he discusses how an actor's attitudes influence the because-motives of action. He uses an example of a situation by the Greek philosopher Carneades, in which a man enters a darkened room and notices an object in the corner which, by virtue of his senses, he determines could either be a coiled rope or a snake (Schutz & Luckmann 1973, p. 185). Schutz uses this example to examine how this uncertainty between two types of object leads to a course of action used to determine what the object actually is. What is important here is that Schutz recognises that the motivation for the goal of determining whether the object is a snake or a coiled rope incorporates the actor's *attitude* towards different types of objects, indicated for example by the man's fear of snakes (Schutz & Luckmann 1973, pp. 215-23). According to Schutz, attitudes are determined by various elements of our stock of knowledge, arranged as a 'syndrome', including 'expectations, hypothetical relevances, plans for acts, skills, and other elements of habitual knowledge, as well as "frames of mind"' (Schutz & Luckmann 1973, p. 217).

Another factor that influences the motives for action is the *interests* that an actor has. Schutz acknowledges that the basis for any project (i.e. a plan of action that has a projected goal, envisioned in the future perfect tense) rests in the fantasising of possibilities for one's future. He is careful to distinguish pure fantasy from the actual planning of a project. *Mere* fantasy, such as a daydream, does not necessarily sit in the limits of what one understands from prior experience as possible. The closer a fantasy aligns with what is possible, the more likely it will be able to form a project: 'in short, a project seems practicable when the actor assumes in the mode of hypothetical relevance that he could transpose what he happens to be fantasising into reality' (Schutz & Luckmann 1989, p. 25). The transition from fantasy to project, Schutz explains, is determined by the *interests* the actor has. As he explains:

When we speak of interests, we do not mean just one's own past as it continues to affect action, but also the essential future-orientation of this past. The project is by nature oriented to something future, but even its genesis – from interests – has a complicated time-structure. Interest is, indeed, a sediment of the past. However it is oriented by a future that is relevant for the actor

(Schutz & Luckmann 1989, p. 31).

An actor's interests lie in their prior lived experiences, but importantly, their prior lived experiences in the social life-world. Although each person's interests are subjective, determined in concert with what they fantasise for the future, interests often incorporate an aspect of typicality in that they contain meaning-contexts that are intersubjectively comprehensible: 'this prior history of interests, projects, and acts has led to the formation of certain attitudes that in given situations "motivate" typical projects on the basis of typical interests' (Schutz & Luckmann 1989, p. 30). Fantasies-come-projects have the nature of being perceived as possible in the everyday life-world that the actor finds themselves in. While such projects are based on the subjective attitudes and interests by the actor, it needs to be recognised that the actor is seen 'not as an unhistorical individual person, but as a member of a historical society', and that the prior experience and stock of knowledge are influenced by 'intersubjective processes' (Schutz & Luckmann 1989, p. 43). Schutz recognises that choice, whilst being contextualised socially, is not entirely deterministic in consideration of an actor's projects and actions. On the matter of choice between problematic possibilities, determined by a pre-given interest, Schutz writes that 'He must decide for a particular future for *himself*, which future – if it should come about – will have the characteristic of having been wanted by *him*' (Schutz & Luckmann 1989, p. 35).

Essentially, Schutz is arguing that choice is ultimately determined *subjectively*, even if influenced by intersubjective ideal types, therefore some things are more important to the self than others: 'according to what standards, however, should one choose between beef and a girl's smile?' (Schutz & Luckmann 1989, p. 40). Such a decision finds its genesis in interest, which being biographically determined is also spatiotemporal – the "right" decision one week may be the "wrong" decision the week after. This is not to say that the actor does whatever he or she likes at any given point in time. Just like the potential for a project to be realised if practicable, choice exists in an intersubjective meaning-context and stock of knowledge. To this extent the social world is not deterministic of behaviour, nor does it set fixed limits on what is possible (the laws of physics often take care of this),

but may instead be understood as contextual guidelines for the possibility of a realisation of an individual goal. From the perspective of the individual, that which may exist in the future is necessarily fantasy, and the ‘performance of consciousness’ of expectations of the future are of the ‘fantasying presentation (*Darstellung*) of something that is not and never has been on hand’ (Schutz & Luckmann 1989, p. 42).

Social Action

Schutz dedicated a lot of time to Weber’s concept of social action and to critiquing it thoroughly. Social action, as Schutz outlines, is distinct from action which is socially framed or learned. Actions that seek to modify the environment in some manner can be considered “socialised”, in that they are planned by an actor who is “‘always already” in society’ (Schutz & Luckmann 1989, p. 66). Even in our own self-reflection of a prior action or project, or in our discussion with others about a historical solitary action, the use of learned language-structures in both self-narrative and verbal communication again reinforces this. Yet *socialised* action needs to be distinguished from *socially oriented* action, where the actor’s project has at its ‘thematic core’ a specific Other or others (Schutz & Luckmann 1989, p. 68). This socially oriented action can also take distinct forms. For example, the difference between oriented towards another in terms of reading a letter they have written me, to my engaging in a project that directly seeks to influence the consciousness of another person, or ‘affecting-the-Other’ (Schutz 1967, p. 150).

Social action takes many forms. It may be direct action such as a face-to-face conversation with another person. It may be indirect action that seeks to influence another person outside of an immediate We-relationship, such as writing a letter to someone. The form that social action takes is dependent on whether or not the Other included in the thematic core of an actor’s project inhabits the world of consociates, contemporaries, predecessors or successors. This ‘mode of givenness’ influences the actor’s attitudes and interests in the Other and how we structure action concerning them (Schutz & Luckmann 1989, p. 70). This could range from an intimate friend in direct face-to-face contact, to an abstract social concept like the working class. It can also take different forms, being one-sided or reciprocal, but can importantly take the character of being immediate (as in the face-to-face situation) or mediate (directed at contemporaries), although Schutz does also include the use of communications technology under the category of mediate action (Schutz & Luckmann 1989, p. 71).

As Schutz argued, mediated social action is 'based on the mere *assumption* that the other exists' and it not part of the simultaneous 'streams of consciousness' of the actors (Schutz & Luckmann 1989, p. 88). Yet it needs to be considered here that it was quite unlikely that Schutz would have been considering visually three-dimensional immersive virtual worlds, where actors engaged in reciprocal action must assume the existence of the other, yet for all intents and purposes are able to engage in simultaneous experience. However, he does state that 'depending on the state of communications technology, the symptoms whereby the Other is apprehended can still, to a certain extent, be maintained' (Schutz & Luckmann 1989, p. 90), leaving space for further discussion of virtual worlds in this context.

Schutz argues that 'social relations originate in social action' (Schutz & Luckmann 1989, p. 95) in that nature of social action influences the way in which actors will interact in the future. The expectations of typical social action by typical actors in typical circumstances, categorised by the objective anonymity consequent of the nature of typicality, contribute to the objectified social structures in a society. The *meaning* of an objective social structure, in the case of phenomenology, is thus determined by the intersubjectively meaningful social actions by actors who "live" it in the mundane life-world, not by its formal textbook definition.

Criticisms of Schutz's Phenomenology

There are several important critiques of Schutz's work that need to be considered before moving on. Two of Schutz's core assumptions, namely the assumption of the existence of the alter Ego and in his later writings the assumption of the existence of the social world or life-world are important aspects of his phenomenology. In assuming the existence of these two things *a priori*, Schutz is able to then focus on how an individual constitutes the social world out of shared lived experience through intersubjectivity. This approach sets his work apart from the existential tradition, yet simultaneously leaves the door open for criticisms of his work while distancing his perspective from theorists whose focus is on how the individual is constituted from social experience (e.g. social constructionism).

One key criticism of Schutz's phenomenology is that it doesn't adequately accommodate creativity by actors in the life-world. Etzrodt's comparative analysis of the theories offered by Schutz and

Mead argues that although both are interpretive sociologists with different starting points, neither can firmly resolve the issue of creativity (and thus to an extent freedom), with Etzrodt calling Mead's problem the *individuality problem* and Schutz's the *intersubjectivity problem* (Etzrodt 2008, p. 153, emphasis in original). Etzrodt's critique of Schutz establishes a main claim that Schutz's phenomenology is good for understanding typical actions by typical actors, but not for understanding creative expression such as forms of art or new kinds of technical or political activity. Consequently, Etzrodt proposes that by incorporating ethnomethodology into Schutz's phenomenology, the problem of creativity can be solved (Etzrodt 2008, pp. 169-70).

Giddens (1976) makes a number of critiques of Schutz's sociological phenomenology. He argues that Schutz, unlike Weber, gives little attention to the effect of power on social action because he is focusing on the meanings of action (Giddens 1976, p. 37). Giddens also sees Schutz's explanation of because-motives as still unclear. He gives the example of the distinction between Schutz's examples of the practical reasoning behind opening an umbrella because it is raining to a man becoming a murderer because of 'the influence of his companions' (Giddens 1976, p. 38) as being somewhat ambiguous.

Giddens also criticises Schutz's concept of adequacy as somewhat unsatisfactory in his idea that an ideal-typical construct as understood by the social scientist should also be understood adequately by the actors themselves. This becomes a contradiction on the part of Schutz. As Giddens puts it, 'the interests, and therefore the criteria, that guide the formulation of sociological concepts are different from those involved in everyday notions' (Giddens 1976, p. 38). It needs to be noted here that there is a distinction between what Giddens considers the purpose of sociology and what I have previously stated in regards to both Weber and Schutz. Giddens argues that:

The basic domain of study of the social sciences, according to the theory of structuration, is neither the experience of the individual actor, nor the existence of any form of societal totality, but social practices ordered across space and time
(Giddens 1984, p. 2)

In another key methodological difference, Giddens puts more emphasis on the *unconscious* motivation of an actor, stating 'unconscious motivation is a significant feature of human conduct' (Giddens 1984, p. 6). He argues that 'most daily practices are not directly motivated' and that the 'enactment of routines... sustain a sense of ontological security' (Giddens 1984, p. 282). My reading

of Schutz leads me to believe that his own understanding of the nature of human action was for the most part the same as Giddens. Typical modes of conduct need no explication further than what they are sufficient in purpose for, as Schutz argues:

Action often proceeds step by step from beginning to end. This does not mean that each actor must be clearly and distinctly conscious of every single step in every action... Someone walking home by a familiar route... pays absolutely no attention to the individual steps that bring him closer to his destination

(Schutz & Luckmann 1989, p. 53)

It is only when an everyday activity becomes problematic that it is drawn into conscious relief.¹³ In this sense, much of an actor's daily life in regards to the fine details of their actions is not given much thought. It is in precisely this point that we can appreciate the 'mundane' aspect of Schutz's sociological phenomenology. As previously mentioned, Schutz argues that the subjective meaning of an experience is often found 'after the fact' once an actor has had the opportunity to reflect on an event. The contest between an individual 'giving' meaning to an experience and a sociologist 'giving' meaning to an experience is premised on precisely the question being asked. If the research focuses on intersubjective experience as it is interpreted in a mundane life-world of actors, then a more descriptive approach that incorporates the appropriate discursive aspects of actors is warranted. If instead the research focuses on *unintended consequences*, a prominent aspect of Giddens' structuration theory (Giddens 1984), then there is arguably greater scope for the researcher to develop interpretations of these phenomena independent of the relevant actors. I, however, don't see these as mutually exclusive and would posit that there is space for overlap, given that the researcher should be aware of the limitations and boundaries of their research question and method.

Finally, other criticisms of Schutz are levelled at the problem of social action being inherently 'rational'. Gorman argues that Schutz's concept of the life-world constituting of actors engaging in rational action is unable to adequately account for behaviour and action in direct contest to social norms. He asks the question: 'how often do we "automatically" submit to induction [conscriptio] in a time of war, protest an official policy, participate in or support a strike, demonstration, or other organized movement, join a socially or politically active organization, or (on a different level)

¹³ Schutz elaborates much more on this in his discussion of knowledge in the life-world in *Structures of the Life-World Volume I*

promulgate an official directive adversely affecting thousands of constituents?’ (Gorman 1975).

This point also relates to Giddens’ critique of Schutz in terms of his lack of focus on power, and to Etzrodt’s criticisms of Schutz’s inability to account for creativity in the social world. Assuming, as Schutz does, that we live our lives mainly in the mundane life-world, when we pause to self-reflect, we in essence bracket the social world and experience ourselves subjectively. Gorman argues that this has repercussions for certain types of sociological method, as the ‘element of subjectivity thoughtful consideration entails eliminates, according to standards Schutz has established, any possibility the actual social act can be scientifically explained’ (Gorman 1975, p. 15).

This critique of Schutz’s (and by inference Weber’s) concept of rational action is quite characteristic of critiques of interpretive sociology. Rationality is a big problem. In considering Schutz’s explanation of the motives of action consisting of because-motives, if a because-motive essentially exists in the past, an argument could be made then that all action is in fact *reactionary*, always responding to a previous experience, whether that experience be an event in the natural world or based upon prior stock of knowledge. This leaves no room for freedom as such, for an actor to engage in action not whatsoever based in history but instead in pure novelty. Again, we may see here the echoes of the structure-versus-agency puzzle that Giddens attempted to solve. There is perhaps a helpful aspect of Schutz’s phenomenology that could help explain this, namely the role of fantasy and imagination in social action. He does go into some detail in making a distinction between ‘planning’ as fantasizing of a possible course of action that could be undertaken, i.e. a project, and ‘mere fantasizing’ of that which is ‘inscribed in the subjective stock of knowledge’ (Schutz & Luckmann 1989, p. 24). Potentially, some answers to this problem could lie in a discussion of the tension between that which is seen as practicable in the life-world and that which is not, and that perhaps creativity could be seen to lie somewhere in this tension, yet it beyond the scope of this thesis to do so.

These critiques point to some problems with Schutz’s phenomenology, especially in regard to his being able to account for the role of agency in social action. However, I argue that these are only problematic in regard to the question one is asking. In Schutz’s phenomenology, interpreting individual behaviour or action is done via the intersubjective ideal types present in the situation, which are themselves interpretative schemes employed by both actors and sociologists, the

difference being that the sociologists explicate these ideal types to a much greater degree of clarity than is required in the mundane life-world by subjecting it to scientific analysis (*Wissenschaft*). If one wants to engage in a discovery of the general themes and meanings of typical action and behaviour in an aspect of the life-world, Schutz's phenomenology proves a useful tool. For questions concerning creativity or other forms of atypical behaviour, or perhaps an examination of the unintended consequences of behaviour, an alternate methodological paradigm would be better employed. We can still be open to the capacity for a sociological phenomenological analysis to uncover such areas that may need further research with appropriate methods.

The Application of Schutz's Phenomenology to the Internet and MMO's

Stratifications of the Online Life-world and Telecopresence

Perhaps the most important problem in using Schutz's method is that the nature of action and interaction over the Internet renders his stratifications of the life-world problematic, as neither of the two core areas (*consociates* and *contemporaries*) align precisely with our understanding of virtual worlds. We are no longer interacting with each other in corporeal copresence, even if we are at the same time able to engage in forms of virtual interaction that allow a kind of 'in the moment' feel. Using Schutz's phenomenology as a foundation, this problem has been examined in detail by Zhao (2004), who argues that the Internet represents the emergence of a new realm of 'consociated contemporaries, where people interact face-to-device with each other in conditions of telecopresence' (Zhao 2004, p. 92). He defines telecopresence as the ability to engage in a shared experience mediated by electronic communications devices over vast distances (Zhao 2005). Telecopresence is still a technologically mediated form of direct experience, requiring direct interaction with an object (such as a telephone or a computer) in contrast to direct sensory experience of another person's voice. Importantly though, it fulfils a specific criterion of direct experience: by sharing a community of time in concert with an intersubjective (shared) experience, individuals can still *grow older together* (Zhao 2004, p. 99). Schutz states that 'actions between contemporaries are only mutually related, whereas actions between consociates are mutually interlocked' (Schutz 1967, p. 180). In the case of certain types of virtual worlds such as *World of Warcraft*, people interact in real-time in a virtual environment, reinforcing Zhao's conceptual

stratification of consociated contemporaries. In addition to this, Zhao also argues that such situations of telecopresence in cyberspace create two distinct subjective experiences – ‘one shared with the local people in geospace and the other with the distant individuals in cyberspace’ (Zhao 2004, p. 100).

The orientation of actors to Others in online situations is another important element we need to take into account when understanding virtual worlds and other social aspects of the Internet. As we recall, the Other-orientation is the recognition of the existence or potential existence of another Ego (Schutz 1967, p. 146). In this context, the distinction between the realm of consociates and the realm of contemporaries is a Thou-orientation (possibly as part of a *We*-relationship) where a specific person or persons are considered, and an anonymised They-orientation, where no specific person or persons are considered, but the They are instead considered as a *type* (Schutz 1967, pp. 183-4).

The specific context of an action on the Internet needs to be carefully considered before its meaning can be interpreted. A general forum comment on the web, Facebook status update, tweet or blog post would likely be considered in the They-orientation, that is, an action with no specific “target”. In contrast, a textual conversation with another person over instant messaging, a targeted response to a forum comment or even hunting down another player with a weapon in an virtual game environment all have at their core action which is oriented towards a *specific* Other, even if that Other is not corporeally accessible. Zhao claims consociated contemporaries can be defined as ‘intimate strangers or anonymous friends’ (Zhao 2004, p. 101), taking into account the “distance” between actors. In the realm of consociated contemporaries, there is a broad scope of different kinds of social relationships available, depending on the way in which the relationship is being mediated. Interactions with others over the Internet exist as a spectrum between people I may never know, to people I already know but are interacting with telecopresently and the scope of social relationships in *World of Warcraft* will be addressed in detail in chapter seven.

Zhao’s concept of consociated contemporaries proves to be a useful starting point in any discussion about applying Schutz’s phenomenological sociology to a virtual world. However some other key problems remain. Firstly, Schutz’s phenomenology doesn’t address the embodiment of an experience, and until the development of virtual worlds this was not really a problem that warranted

much thought in the social sciences. While I share in the assumption that all action is ultimately embodied, there remains a puzzle in understanding the intersubjective meanings of play in a virtual world in which the computer interface exists as a proxy between the physical gestures of the player and the resulting virtual actions of the player character. This is a question that has been examined by other researchers (e.g. Ihde 1990; Klevjer 2012; Verbeek 2008). I will examine the elements of this that relate specifically to understanding the meanings of play in *World of Warcraft* and their relationship to Schutz's phenomenological sociology in the following chapter.

We still lack an understanding of how players in virtual worlds like *World of Warcraft* interpret each other in the mundane life-world. In the flow (*Durée*) of experience in playing a multiplayer computer game, little attention is given to the phenomena of telecopresent interaction, however in order to adequately interpret observable action in virtual worlds we first need to have a solid foundational understanding of how the Other is interpreted with these virtual worlds. The remainder of this chapter is dedicated to discussing how Schutz's phenomenology can be suitably revised to incorporate how we can interpret telecopresent forms of action and illuminate the corresponding ideal types.

A Phenomenology of Player Characters in *World of Warcraft*

How social experience is constituted in an on-line setting is a major question when thinking about how we can understand player characters in virtual worlds like *World of Warcraft*. In order to determine how this can be interpreted, we might begin by returning to the constitution of experiences with other people.

In our "physical" We-relationship, we encounter other people not just as physical bodies but as embodied Egos, whose bodies provide a field of expression for their subjective thoughts, feelings and wishes. Although we can consider this experience 'immediate' in that it is happening *here* and *now*, according to Schutz there is still always an element of 'mediate' experience in the We-relationship. He acknowledges that we cannot directly grasp the subjective experience (interior) of another person but instead must interpret the outward expression of their embodied gestures or language as indications of their subjective flow of experience. This is what Schutz regards as a "transcendancy" of experience, in which part of the constitution of the experience is not immediately grasped (Schutz & Luckmann 1989). In the course of an intersubjective experience with another corporeal

person in the realm of *consociates*, both parties grasp the immediate physical elements of the experience such as shared space and time, while simultaneously experiencing the mediate flow of consciousness of the other person. But as the experience of the other moves into the realm of *contemporaries*, the constitution of the experience of the Other shifts from 'immediate-mediate' to a 'double mediate' kind (Schutz & Luckmann 1989, p. 114). The Other is no longer in immediate grasp, and the remaining mediate experience (i.e. my recollection of them from memory) becomes increasingly typified in its constitution of meaning (Schutz & Luckmann 1989, p. 115).

Although our experience of an actor through a virtual world is mediated, it is not appropriate to say that our experience of them in the realm of consociated contemporaries is therefore simply "double mediate" as some aspect of the experience must include the presence of the Other, even if they are only telecopresent, constituted by a visual representation of a player character. The player, player character, or the virtual world in which they "inhabit" are not part of my 'primary zone of operation' (Schutz & Luckmann 1973, p. 44), in the fact that none of these can be physically interacted with. At the Internet requires us to develop a novel stratification of the life-world, that of consociated contemporaries, the transcendent experience of an Other in a virtual world requires a further clarification of our vocabulary.

From a phenomenological perspective, my immediate experience in the primary zone of operation is located in my embodied sensory perception, which in the context of playing a computer game, consists primarily of audio-visual phenomena alongside my physical touch of the hardware interface (keyboard). At this point, the only indication I have as to the existence of the corporeal Other is the on-screen representation of the Other's player character. Through my stock of knowledge, I can reasonably assume from in the natural attitude that visual confirmation of another player character indicates the existence of a corporeal player. I can also assume that their computer interface represents the virtual game world in much the same way as it is presented to me (notwithstanding minor differences between computer systems). In this regard, my experience of the Other is entirely mediated in that I cannot directly apprehend their embodied self or subjective experiences. What I can immediately perceive, however, is the "actions" of their player character in the virtual game world, as given to me by the audio-visual stimulus via the computer interface. This aspect of

immediacy, however, is not entirely accurate in that the actions of a player character are temporally but not spatially bound, in that they happen *now*, but only in a virtual *here*.

Just as Schutz acknowledges the distinction between the mediate experience of the subjective interior of a physically present Other and merely recalling memories of them (Schutz & Luckmann 1989, p. 114), we perhaps here need to acknowledge a further distinction in a new *kind* of mediated experience in a virtual game world like *World of Warcraft*. This will take the form of a kind of telecopresence which incorporates the *virtual signs and symptoms* of the avatar or player character in a virtual space as part of the meaning-context of the interaction. This also needs to be distinguished from other forms of telecopresence, such as talking on the telephone, which is mediated in the form of *now* but not *here*. Three dimensional virtual worlds, metaphysically speaking, do not have an “anywhere” as a spatial point of reference, only a virtual *there*: they exist only as they are represented by the appropriate technological means. The same can be said for player characters whose existence relies on the virtual game world.

The corporeal player’s relationship with the player character in such a world is by its nature mediated by the computer interface. The player character is the player’s virtual agent in the game world, allowing the player to “act” in the game, albeit as an ‘imperfect intermediary’ (Rush 2011, p. 249). Unlike a puppet, which is physically controlled while providing varying degrees of tactile feedback, the player character is caught in a tension between both the controlling player and the game environment. The player’s experience of the game world is regulated by the programming code of the player character and the associated limitations of the player character’s capacities to interact with the game environment. In applying this theme to experiences between player characters, virtual interaction of the kind which occurs in the game world can be said to contain two distinct kinds of mediated experience: that of the player’s interactions with the virtual world via the player character, and that of the subjective intentions of the controlling player.

In bringing the discussion back to the constitution of the experience of the Other in virtual worlds, the player character in the virtual world adds a contextual layer of meaning. The constraints of the available sensory phenomena from the computer interface, as well as the constraints of the player character’s capacity to interact with the virtual game world, contribute to a heavily mediated experience of the Other. This raises questions regarding the mediated nature of the player character

in the game environment and in particular how sense can be made of observable actions by player characters in virtual environments. In considering the player character as the player's 'agent' in the virtual game world, the question can be asked: can we consider the observable actions of the player character in the game environment like movement or interaction with virtual objects and other player characters *symptoms* (Schutz & Luckmann 1973, p. 63) or signs of the intentions of a corporeal player? In other words, in the context of a telecopresent, mediated experience of player characters in a virtual world, what aspects of the experience are present that allow us to interpret the subjective meaning-contexts of the other players?

In using *World of Warcraft* as an example, players essentially spend most of their time interacting with the virtual environment through the player character. In this game much of this takes the form of quests, where a player is given a task by a non-player character (NPC) such as killing a number of monsters (mobs), gathering virtual resources, or travelling to other areas of the virtual world to interact with NPCs. These acts can be considered "socialised" in that they are planned by an actor who is "'always already" in society' (Schutz & Luckmann 1989, p. 66), and who likely learned how to perform such tasks either directly from other people or from others' intentional use of signs such as the textual instructions for a quest as written by one of the game programmers. This can be distinguished from socially oriented action, where a player would seek to influence or affect another player via their player character. It is where multiplayer online games can distinguish themselves from single-player games, in which an avatar interacts with a fixed, closed, virtual environment: many multiplayer online games allow for player characters to inhabit shared virtual space which then allows players to "act" towards each other through the player character. This begins to highlight the importance of the player character in the context of virtual worlds, as social action, on top of 'socialised' action, becomes a possibility in games like *World of Warcraft*. Indeed, Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing games are much more than just sets of single-player interactions that happen to occur alongside other player characters and games like *World of Warcraft* are highly social in this regard. *World of Warcraft's* design not just allows for social interaction in the forms of conflict and cooperation, it *encourages* it, and in some cases, *demands* it. Games like *World of Warcraft* are not just virtual worlds, they are virtual *social* worlds. These virtual worlds are obviously not inhabited by corporeal people, but by virtual player characters that

must interact and communicate in the limitations set by both the game's software and the capabilities of the hardware interface. This highlights the question of how players can interpret the "behaviour" of a player character through visual observation of, and interaction with, another player's character. While players in *World of Warcraft* can use the game's inbuilt chat system to textually communicate, or use an audio headset with a microphone to vocally communicate, such methods are not always employed. In many cases the player must rely on observation of other player characters in order to interpret the intentions of other players, and the virtual actions "expressed" by the player character becomes extremely important in the context of the associated experience. From the perspective of an observer in the virtual environment watching a player character interact with the virtual environment in such a way, the same interpretive problems exist in virtual worlds as they do in the physical world. The subjective meaning-context for the actor remains ultimately hidden from the observer, causing the observer to draw on his or her stock of knowledge of the observed action in question, alongside their available knowledge of the actor as well as the context in which the action is taking place in order to attempt to adequately interpret the likely subjective meaning-context of the actor in its typicality (Schutz 1967, pp. 113-6).

The human body, as a field of expression, is rich in facial cues, body language, scars, tics, as well as conscious expressive actions such as gestures and speech. All of these contribute to a rich intersubjective context of meaning in the situation of the face-to-face *We*-relationship, but also to the world of indirect social experience. Schutz gives an example of an observer noticing a man sitting on a park bench as a flock of ducks fly past. By paying attention to the man's outward expressions (indications) such as his bodily movement, whether or not he is sleeping, or even facing a particular direction, the observer can draw on his or her stock of knowledge of typical behaviour to make some basic predictions as to the *erlebnis* of the other person (Schutz & Luckmann 1989, p. 9), for example, whether or not the observed man has noticed the ducks, is counting them, or some other behaviour. Schutz is quite right in this regard to point out such interpretations are by their nature quite limited in their adequacy in regard to the subjective meaning-context of the observed man, although they may still remain useful indications in the context of *typical* behaviour.

In virtual worlds inhabited by player characters, players must rely on a relatively more limited set of visual signs as expressible by the player character. More or less gone are unconscious body language,

state of consciousness, facial cues, and so forth. In *World of Warcraft* for example, the range of expression available by player characters is limited to:

- a) *Active* movement, such as walking, running, jumping or combat
- b) Programmed *emotive* moment, such as dancing or blowing a kiss
- c) *Static* movement, which is the programmed “idle” movement for a player character not actively being controlled by a corporeal player
- d) Textual *communication*, even though the player character does not appear to “visually” talk

(Scriven 2013)

Aside from static movement, all other available expressions by the player character necessarily require input from the controlling player, in other words they are intentional. The player must decide where the player character should go, how the player character should interact with the environment in a way that meets the player’s goals, and where possible how to communicate with others effectively via textual or voice chat. With the removal of all unconscious behaviour on the part of the player character (i.e. body language, facial cues), it is possible then to claim that aside from idle static movement, observable action on the part of the player character are indications of the subjective intentions of the corporeal player, who necessarily must make ‘rational’ decisions as to the actions of the player character in the virtual environment as part of a *project* in the *future perfect tense* (Schutz 1967, p. 61; Schutz & Luckmann 1989, pp. 46-57). All forms of action on the part of player characters in virtual environments carry with them a subjective meaning-context on the part of a corporeal player, whose intentions are expressed by the player character. Player characters running around the game world, interacting with it, killing monsters and killing each other are doing so *meaningfully*.

It is only through the player character that the player is able to interact with the virtual environment in a game like *World of Warcraft*. It is also the only way I am able to infer the existence of other corporeal players by visual confirmation of their own player characters. Players rely on the symptoms expressed by player characters to interpret the intentions of corporeal players in the game environment. In light of this, the next task is to determine how these actions are interpreted in a way that is adequate in giving us an indication of the typical meaning-contexts in which action takes place.

Schutz and Luckmann devoted a great deal of time to discussing the nature of the constitution of the stock of knowledge, and in particular, how this stock of knowledge contributes to our making sense of the world from in the natural attitude of typical behaviour. The nature of typicality exists in the idealisations of ‘and-so-forth’ and ‘I-can-do-it-again’ (Schutz & Luckmann 1989, p. 241), in that my mastery of a situation before me, or my expectations of the behaviour of another, are generally predictable from in the natural attitude. Virtual game environments are generally constructed in a way that allows the player to engage with the game for the first time without being confronted by an absolute mess of sensory experience. Taking another example from *World of Warcraft*, players entering the world for the first time (let’s assume the player has chosen to play a human character) find on their screen their player character standing in front of an abbey, with a merchant’s cart to the left. Such things, typically, are instantly recognisable based on our prior stock of knowledge. Initially, the player is faced with a somewhat “familiar” scene upon which to start their adventure. Up to this point, the experience is not too heavily “thrown into relief” in that the player can suitably call upon their stock of knowledge of *similar* items (Schutz & Luckmann 1973, p. 229): a picture of a chair is still a symbolic representation of a physical chair, just as a virtual chair can be identified as a chair, although in a decidedly different meaning-context. Schutz also points out that typifications are by their nature imperfect, and only ‘relatively “definitive”’ and are often ‘provisional,’ (Schutz & Luckmann 1989, pp. 232-33) as new experiences over the course of ones’ life modifies existing types and creates new types to make sense of experiences.

As the game progresses, and the player character “levels up,” the increasing complexity of the game forces the player to acquire new knowledge, challenging the existing meaning-structures in the stock of knowledge of the player. This is something Schutz has acknowledged when he says that when faced with a ‘novel,’ or atypical experience, we first turn to our knowledge of types from in our prior lived experience to determine if we can render the experience (be it an object or a process) familiar, and not requiring any further explication (Schutz & Luckmann 1973, p. 146). However, in the situation where an experience is thrown into relief, where ‘the current experience finally appears not “sufficiently typical” for determination and mastery of the situation, processes of explication are induced in which new typifications on other levels of determination are rendered familiar’ (Schutz & Luckmann 1973, p. 146). This process of sense making finds its core in the ‘relevances’ of the situation in question in order to ‘master’ the problem at hand (Schutz & Luckmann 1973, p. 231).

In essence, only the relevant aspects of the situation faced by the actor are given thought until sufficient mastery, as required in the motivational context (the in-order-to motive) is gained.

Implications for an Interpretive Sociology in Virtual Worlds

In considering these revisions of Schutz's phenomenology for virtual spaces, some implications for interpretive sociology in the virtual game world of *World of Warcraft* need to be spelled out.

Firstly, due to the mediated nature of social action and interaction in virtual worlds, actors necessarily draw on ideal types overall to a much greater degree, as the more intimate face-to-face We-relationship is no longer possible. The physical environment is replaced with a virtual one that is purposefully constructed with a certain theme. In the case of *World of Warcraft*, the virtual Tolkien-esque fantasy world with imaginary characters is structured around a theme of entertainment and play. Consequently, observable actions on the part of player characters must also be considered in light of this. It means that interactions between player characters, while ultimately interactions between corporeal players, is heavily mediated in a variety of ways. Players often have no knowledge of each other besides the visual representations of the player character in the virtual world therefore attempting to explore these absent elements through an interpretative method would be folly. It would not be possible, for example, to make determinations of another player's physical attributes via observation of their player character.

We can, however, make inferences as to the *types* of players in the game, based on their behaviour in the game world as indicated by the actions of their player character. Typical patterns of observed behaviour by player characters could signpost a player's *personal ideal type*, or the type of person that would likely engage in such actions (Schutz 1967, p. 187). Existing research has suggested the existence of different player types, using different methods (e.g. Williams, Yee & Caplan 2008; Yee 2006a, 2007). An interpretive approach relying on a revision of Schutz's phenomenology would rely on observations of player behaviour in the game world in light of the discussions in this chapter. It needs to be pointed out that such inferences would only be contextually relevant insofar as the personal ideal type relates to the player's behaviour in *World of Warcraft*. It would not be possible, for example, to make inferences about any personal ideal types outside of the game world, such as when a player is at work, or at school. These claims wouldn't be contextually relevant, as the information required to make such interpretations is not accessible to the observer.

Similar considerations are needed when interpreting the meanings of action in the game world. As previously pointed out, the potential actions in the game world are limited by the game software. Stepping back for a moment, there is room for considering the intentionality of the game designers in regards to the game design by allowing player characters to do *this* but not *that*. Rather than being a limit of the laws of physics as it may be in the real world, these limitations are instead purposeful actions on the part of those who designed the game. This is not to say that action in virtual worlds is rigid in scope. On the contrary, gamers often find pleasure in pushing games to their programming limits and exploiting bugs for amusement or advantage. Over time, players will often find new ways to do things or new strategies to overcome game challenges and share this knowledge with others, generating typical courses of action for players to emulate. Consequently, given the potential differences in interpretations between designers and players, and in light of the massive size of *World of Warcraft* alongside the complexity of play there is scope for players to collectively establish their own typical forms of behaviour, actions, discourse and cultural norms. This makes *World of Warcraft* a rich site for the employment of an interpretive method informed by a revision of Schutz's phenomenology.

Before engaging upon our epic quest to understand the meanings of play in *World of Warcraft*, we must return to another core aspect of the play experience: the relationship between the player and the game world with respect to the technological interface. We have determined in this chapter that there are some key phenomenological differences between action and interaction in physical and virtual worlds, and have discussed the implications of these for interpretive sociology. The next chapter will examine the relationship between the gamer, the game world and the perceptual experience of play as part of the broader context of meaning in playing a computer game. Some key questions will be considered: how do players physically 'play' *World of Warcraft*? How can we understand the relationships between the player and computer system in regard to play and how does this influence the experience of play in the game?

Chapter Four: Embodiment, Intentionality and *World of Warcraft*

I entered the zone of Redridge Mountains like I had done so many times before. East of Elwynn Forest, Redridge Mountains serves as a quest hub for adventurers between the levels of 15 and 20. This time, I was levelling one of my alternate characters, a Draenei shaman who drew upon the elements of the earth to do his bidding.

Being at such a low character level, I was relatively inexperienced with this shaman, and was still getting used to the various skill and abilities the character possessed, including which keyboard commands to use and in which sequence. East of the Three Corners Crossroads along one of the main roads in Redridge sat a gnoll encampment. Gnolls are a humanoid hyena-like creature with limited intelligence but dangerous in groups; it was usually the case that a player would need to fight at least three gnolls at a time, as to ‘pull’ one meant pulling a few others also.

Although I had battled gnolls many times before, this encounter will forever stay in my mind. My shaman’s skills and abilities meant that I had to essentially alternate between attacking and healing myself, using the relevant ‘totems’ that the character could summon. Yet my character kept dying; over and over again I was messing up what I thought was the optimal sequence of keypresses, resulting in my deeper and deeper frustration. Every time I seemed to return to battle, something would go wrong. The frame rate of the computer was starting to slow due to the increasing amount of gnolls engaged in battle, meaning that it became harder to react to what was going on. To compound the issue, I noticed that the game was lagging at times – the connection between my computer system and the remote game server in the United States was intermittently dropping out for a few hundred milliseconds at a time. While this may not seem like much, when trying to coordinate the actions of my character in response to the actions of monsters it becomes like a lifetime between my keyboard presses and my character’s actions in the game.

After my sixth character death, I slammed my fist down on my laptop in frustration. A few moments later, I noticed an odd grinding noise from inside the computer and the screen would hang for seconds on end. It was then I realised I had damaged the hard drive which was slowly destroying itself as the moments passed...

My story highlights a common source of frustration in many computer games: the inability of the player to achieve their intentions in the game world. Notwithstanding one’s frustrations with other players in a multiplayer context, my tale of woe and frustration with my own performance typically

comes from two sources: my relative mastery (or lack thereof) the necessary skills required by the game (which I will discuss later) and the failure of the computer system to facilitate the experience of which the player comes to reasonably or typically expect of it.

One of the outstanding puzzles about the experience of playing computer games is in understanding the embodied relationship between the player and the game. Principal in the physical act of electronic game play, what role does the computer interface have in the experience of play in *World of Warcraft*? To use an analogy, neglecting to discuss the computer system as an aspect of play is like trying to examine the experience of being a racing car driver whilst neglecting the role played the car in all of its physical and mechanical attributes. While on the surface this may not immediately seem a relevant question in regards to a sociological examination of play in computer games like *World of Warcraft*, I argue here that the decoupling of the “meaning” of something from the “doing” of something would be ill-advised, even as this presents us with some further hermeneutic problems.

In this chapter I discuss the ways in which the player interfaces with the player character and game world via the computer technology. I start by describing *how* the player “plays” in regards to their physical actions, using the keyboard and mouse to control their player character whilst responding to the audio-visual feedback given by the computer system. I then examine how a variety of philosophical traditions and authors have discussed the relationship between humans and their technology, and highlight some of the key problems in these, paying particular attention to what all this means for understanding computer game play. Finally I outline the different ways in which the player is involved in an embodied relationship with *World of Warcraft* and how this is significant for our understanding of the experience of play.

How does one Play *World of Warcraft*?

In straightforward terms, in order to play the game effectively, a player must institute a number of courses of action. The player needs to interpret signs and symbols on the screen proficiently, perform virtual actions by hitting keyboard buttons and moving the mouse in useful / meaningful sequences and communicate and interact with other players, directly or indirectly.

There is no aspect of the game that does not require some type of interaction with the computer system, the device that mediates the entire experience. Even things that are not directly associated with the game itself, like talking to friends or guild mates over a third party communication program like *Skype* or *Ventrillo* is a mediated form of interaction as this is also mediated via the computer system, in contrast to a face-to-face discussion.

In *World of Warcraft*, the game software is pre-programmed with specific “keybinds” that map which keys on the keyboard correspond to the visible actions the player character takes in the three-dimensional virtual world (such as character movement) or the interactions of the player with the game interface (like opening the map of the world or textual chat with other players). If the player wishes, they have the opportunity to customise this control scheme more or less as they fit by modifying the keybinds and programming macros, wherein a keypress can correspond to a number of actions in the game. For context, a brief summary of the default core controls are listed below:

W – Move forward

S – Move backward

A – Turn character left

D – Turn character right

Q – Strafe left

E – Strafe right

Space – Jump

X – Sit or stand

Tab – Cycle targets

M – Open map

/ + s, c, g, p, w, etc. – Choose chat channel

Number keys 1 to 0 – Action bar abilities

Standard mouse movements:

Mouse movement – move mouse cursor

Right button hold – look around (move camera position), strafe using A and D keys

Right and left button hold – move forward

Essentially, any of the player's physical interaction with the game involves using the directional keys to move the player character around the game environment while using the mouse cursor to click on both objects in the environment and the head-up display. Both hands are employed to navigate the player character throughout the game world. The player character (or player character's perspective) is located in the centre of the screen, allowing the "camera" to pan around the player character and / or look around at the player's input. In concert with the player character and virtual environment is the head-up display or User Interface (UI). As shown in Figure 13 below, the UI gives the player important information about the current state of gameplay as well as provides them with an interface to perform actions inside the game world by using the mouse. The action bar is generally organised by the player with the spells and abilities one needs quick access to in the game, usually a combination of combat-driven abilities such as attacking or healing. The primary action bar as shown is by default keybound to most of the top row of a standard keyboard (numbers 1 to 0 and - & =). This allows the player fast access to these spells by the left hand, leaving the right hand free to use the mouse to look around the environment and click on monsters and other objects. Active navigation through the environment is something of a balancing act between keyboard and mouse, while the eyes and ears constantly process sensory information from the screen and speakers.



Figure 12: *World of Warcraft* User Interface showing locations of key aspects (Source: <http://us.battle.net/wow/cn/game/guide/how-to-play> viewed 14th January 2014)

In order for a player to be proficient in manoeuvring the player character around the game environment in *World of Warcraft*, they must be aware of and able to track the various components of the User Interface. Particularly important aspects like player health and energy/mana resource, enemy health and spell/ability “cooldowns” are monitored here. Some player character abilities may only be available every few seconds, in which the corresponding icon on the action bar will be greyed out or something similar.¹⁴ There are also elements in the visual field that act as markers for the player, such as the way the “Faerie Dragon” in figure 12 is highlighted in green, signifying that it is a “friendly” non-player character with the halo on the ground confirming that it is the currently highlighted target and will be the focus of the player’s relevant skills and abilities. Another example of these symbolic markers is the bright yellow exclamation marks above non-player characters (not shown), signifying that they are quest-givers in the virtual world. Also not shown clearly in figure 12 is the chat pane (the grey area above the left-hand side of the action bar). In group or raid situations where audio headsets are not in use, this is means by which players must communicate to coordinate their actions and is something else that must be paid attention to. These user interface features act as a secondary aspect of interaction with the game, with things like the heads up display or symbolic markers in the game world standing in contrast to the virtual aesthetic of the fantasy

¹⁴The way the User Interface communicates such things to the player has been the subject of constant modification and updating by developers throughout the game’s evolution.

world such as the visual representation of the forest, road, rocks and creatures (Jørgensen 2012). They guide the player through the virtual world by indicating what the player should ideally be doing as per game design, such as embarking on quests. As suggested in the story at the beginning of the chapter, mastery of the embodied aspect of play as an element of the *intentionality* of the player in the game can be a cause of frustration and anguish for players when it goes wrong. We could try to ask if this is a failure of the player's skill, or a failure of the technology: in any particular case it may not always be possible as an external observer to answer this question. We can, however, explore the fundamental aspects of the relationship between player and game for *World of Warcraft* players.

Understanding the relationship between player and computer is important for a discussion of the experience of play in *World of Warcraft* as it takes into serious consideration the perceptual boundaries of any play experience that is the focus of interpretation. While Schutz's phenomenology proves useful for understanding the typical *meanings* of action, it can't provide a robust account of the *doing* of the action, particularly if the meaning-context of that action is occurring in a virtual world. Secondly, playing a computer game like *World of Warcraft* is different to using a physical tool as it incorporates multiple intentionalities. As I will argue there is the experience *at* the computer, *in* the computer and *through* the computer simultaneously. This is an important aspect to consider in interpreting virtual action in virtual worlds using Schutz's phenomenology as it lends itself to the broader meaning-contexts of typical forms of action. In observing and interpreting a virtual action by a player character in a game world, where can we assume that the actor's attention is? Is it directed at the game world? Is it directed somewhere in their physical environment? Is it directed at *me*? Whilst an experienced player may treat the answers to these questions as a taken-for-granted aspect of gameplay, it is important that we explore their phenomenological underpinnings here. I will introduce and consider the ideas of authors such as Ihde (1990) and Klejver (2007, 2012) to inform my own argument about the relationship between player and game in *World of Warcraft* before entering into a discussion of the different types of relationship one has with the game.

Tensions in Phenomenology

Before attending to the embodied aspect of the experience of playing *World of Warcraft* we first need to resolve precisely what sort of vocabulary will be adequate for doing this. While Schutz's work at times spoke of an actor's use of technology in his discussions of social action (Schutz & Luckmann 1989), it doesn't appear to have been a key aspect of his work. Instead, he focuses more on explaining how actors use tools and the like as part of an overall project of action, and that an understanding of the typical use of tools are part of a socialised stock of knowledge in the mind of the actor. However, little if anything is said by Schutz regarding the role of embodied experience in the use of tools and technology. In order to continue with a phenomenological account of the relationship between actor and technology and later be able to successfully relate this to typical modes of meaning and practice, we first need to reconcile a suitable phenomenology of embodiment with Schutz's sociological phenomenology.

While there are many debates about the relative merits of the transcendental and existential fields of phenomenology (and 'post-phenomenology') (e.g. Husserl 1997), particularly in regard to understanding embodiment in virtual and computer game worlds (Ajana 2005; Dreyfus, HL 1996; Kim 2001; Schultze 2010), I argue that the two can be treated as different sides of the same coin. As Dreyfus argues 'one is no doubt consciously motivated to acquire a skill like tennis, but one does not try consciously to discriminate more and more subtle tennis situations and pair them with more and more subtle responses' (Dreyfus, HL 1996, para. 43). Although expressed in the context of expertise, there seems to be here a key distinction between a person's understanding of themselves in the world, and the embodied comportment of one's self towards the world.

One of the key debates between the two traditions rests on this point. Following Husserl, Schutz argues that meaningful experience lies *after* the fact, whereby an actor has had opportunity to reflect on their experiences, stating that:

The prephenomenal experience of activity is, therefore, not meaningful. Only that experience which is reflectively perceived in the form of spontaneous Activity has meaning

(Schutz 1967, p. 57)

In contrast, in a discussion of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception, Carman argues that:

Intelligent body behaviour is not based on the contemplative and reflective attitudes on which philosophers have traditionally modelled their theories of experience and understanding. Indeed, dealing skilfully with things in a spatial environment requires no conscious or reflective grasp of objects standing in determinate spatial configurations at all

(Carman 2008, p. 113)

Here we are faced with two different accounts of “meaning”. One argues that what is meaningful is found to varying degrees by conscious reflection, exemplified by the statements “What was that noise outside?” or “Why did the game music suddenly change... is there an enemy nearby?” The other account argues that the sensory perception of the event itself is, in itself, meaningful in its very essence. There are here two different types of meaning: one relates to a symbolic system of meaning relating to the social world, and the other to the embodied experience of human as being-in-the-world (Heidegger 1962).

The Phenomenology of Perception

In the transcendental tradition, the mind interprets input from the senses (Carman 2008; Schutz 1967). This implies a separation of mind and body in regards to how a person understands a phenomenon. In contrast, the work of Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Dreyfus & Dreyfus suggests that the body is *not* abstracted from the way in which a person encounters the world. Instead, perception and embodiment ‘are not mere *properties* of minds or subjects, but constitutive elements of our *being in the world*’ (Carman 2008, p. 30). The ways in which we understand the world, our attitudes towards it, and the ways in which we orient ourselves towards it are all determined by the fact that our bodies are always in the world, an idea first outlined by Heidegger and later taken up by Merleau-Ponty:

For Merleau-Ponty... the body is not just somehow attached to the self, or merely “inserted,” as Husserl puts it, between subject and object. The body just *is* the self
(Carman 2008, p. 131)

Simply put, we cannot have perceive the world in a way that is not related to our own body, nor can we have an experience in the world that is not ultimately embodied. In effect our own experience of ourselves is not one of *having* but of *being* a body (Carman 1999). When we dream, we dream from an embodied perspective. Likewise, if we imagine ourselves in the third person, or look at ourselves

in a picture, we always do so using our own observer position or our own pair of eyes, and the ways in which we do look are always meaningful.

We can distinguish between our immediate perceptions of the world as experienced in the flow of everyday experience and the reflective thoughts, ideas, wishes, projections and memories one has of these perceptions. However there is not yet a clear appreciation of a potential relationship between the two in the context of virtual worlds, something that is crucial for an understanding of how people play computer games. A need to begin this discussion is set up by the problem of our common understanding (or lack thereof) of virtual worlds (Bishop 2001; Lehdonvirta 2010; Madary 2014; Søraker 2012).

From an existential perspective the *I* (as a synthesis of mind and body) is always directed towards the world and objects in it, and from the transcendental tradition like that of Schutz's interpretation of Husserl in particular, the body in the life-world is directed by projects of action born out of the fantasizing of the mind (Schutz 1967; Schutz & Luckmann 1989). However once we start to consider the case of computer game play involving virtual worlds and the fact that the player is now (at least in part) fixated on something not directly accessible in the physical world, we are faced with some further puzzles. Each of these must be considered by virtue of their relationship to the others. As an always embodied actor, what is the player's perceptual relationship with the computer system? What is the player's relationship with the virtual world, and finally what is the player's perceptual relationship to their player character? Upon answering these we can then embark on a more robust discussion of the player's relationship with *World of Warcraft* and the typical meanings of play in consideration of the relationship between player, computer and game.

Relationship with the Computer System

We can begin to understand the ways in which the player interacts with the computer system by drawing on existing ideas on embodied perception and experience, of which much has been written (Brey 2000; Carman 1999, 2008; Heidegger 1977; Ihde 1990; O'Brien 2004; Sommerseth 2007; Verbeek 2008). According to Heidegger, our perceptual experience of a technology lies in not what it does, but rather how it exists in its potentiality for what it can do. As he writes in *A Question Concerning Technology*:

Enframing means that way of revealing which holds sway in the essence of modern technology and which is itself nothing technological. On the other hand, all those things that are so familiar to us and are standard parts of an assembly, such as rods, pistons, and chassis, belong to the technological

(Heidegger 1977, p. 10)

This 'enframing' sets out to us the 'standing-reserve' (Heidegger 1977) of the world in which we live. According to Heidegger, technology enframes how we understand the world and ourselves in it in regard to what is possible. For example, the Earth now has different forms of action on standing-reserve for us to exploit, for example our ability to draw fuels from it. My television exists on standing-reserve to supply me with entertainment and information. The computer system doesn't merely exist to service my variety of needs. It also *reveals* to me ways of living in the world. I need not know *how* it works, simply that I may have some sort of intentional relationship with it.

Heidegger's work has been drawn upon to provide some more substantial discussions of how we use technology in our everyday lives. Some of these discussions have examined the body's relationship to the world to provide the basis for an explanation of our relationship with the world and the objects in it. For example, knowing where something is in relation to our body also allows us to know where our body or limbs are without needing to be explicitly conscious of them (Carman 2008, p. 107). Our embodied relation to the world and the ways in which we act in it appear to us in most cases as an automatic reflex. Once a skill is learned and mastered, we need hardly consider it consciously anymore (Carman 1999, 2008; Dreyfus, SE 2004; Dreyfus, SE & Dreyfus 1980). We are able to *avail* ourselves to things in the world without the need for conscious consideration, such that our conscious thoughts of *doing* are abstracted from this 'exercise in practical skills' (Carman 2008, p. 112)

Once our skilful use of tool is mastered in such that we no longer *think* about it, it becomes a kind of extension of our body-in-the-world. From Merleau-Ponty's perspective, when we use a tool, 'it cease to be an external object and instead becomes part of the experience of the body-subject' (Sommersth 2007, p. 766). A popular example of this relationship is Merleau-Ponty's discussion of the blind man's cane (Brey 2000; De Preester & Tsakiris 2009; Merleau-Ponty 1945; Sommersth 2007). The cane becomes a perceptual extension of the man's body. We can consider our experiences of other objects in a similar way for example when we use a chair, a spoon, wear

shoes, or when we drive a car. They are no longer objects in the world that are present-to-hand in standing-reserve (Heidegger 1977) but are part of an intentional, embodied experience.

The same can be said of the computer system as a technological object in the world. When I type, for example as I am now, I do not need to think or plan in advance each individual keypress in order to finish a sentence. I instead focus on the words that I wish to convey and have my vision fixed to the screen, watching the words “magically” appear out of the flashing cursor through my ability to touch-type. I am not thinking about the size of the screen, the hum of the CPU fan, the position of my feet on the floor, the posture of my back, the temperature of the room, nor any people sitting nearby, although I am to varying degrees perceptually aware of them. To turn my attention towards them would be to turn my attention away from the computer, changing the relationship with it from *ready-to-hand* to *present-at-hand* (Svanaes 2013).

Building on this understanding, there are aspects of the embodied relationship between actor and computer system that deserve further attention. What about the intentional experience of the human-computer relationship, particularly in the case of playing computer games like *World of Warcraft*? A useful perspective to employ in order to address this puzzle is found in the work of Ihde. Ihde’s (Ihde 1990) work has primarily focused on developing a robust phenomenology of technology drawing upon the ideas of people like Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger. He does this by focusing on the *intentionality* of the human-technological relationship and the different ways in which we interact with modern technology (Ihde 1990).

Ihde and our Relationships with Technology

Ihde proposes four different aspects of intentionality in regards to human-technology interaction – the *embodiment relation*, such as wearing a pair of spectacles; the *hermeneutic relation*, such as reading a thermometer; the *background relation*, such as the hum of a refrigerator and the *alterity relation*, such as withdrawing money from an ATM (Ihde 1990; Verbeek 2008). Ihde’s four relations have formed the foundation for a lot of the critical discussion in the area of human-computer interaction. However only limited use of these concepts have been made in regards to understanding virtual game worlds.

The embodiment relation is one of the key concepts in the case of human-computer relations. Broadly, it can be thought of in the same way as Merleau-Ponty’s example of the blind man’s cane

that was previously mentioned. In the embodiment relation, the technology in question becomes an extension of perception of the world. A pair of prescription eyeglasses allows us to see the world a bit more clearly, while an oven mitt allows us to handle hot dishes without burning our hands. The important aspect of this relation is that the technology in question is not the intentional focus of an action, but rather attends to how the world is experienced *through* the technology in question (De Preester 2011).

In contrast, the hermeneutic relation gives us information about the world that would otherwise not exist. The thermometer is a good example of this. It does not give us a perceptual experience of hot or cold, but generates information about these states in a way that needs to be interpreted by the user (Verbeek 2008). The background relation provides contextual information about the world, like knowing one is standing near a roadway by the sound and smell of vehicles rushing by, or the light given off by a fluorescent globe in a darkened room. Finally the alterity relation is one where intentionality is directed at the technology in question and does not provide a perceptual gateway to something else in the world. In the alterity relation 'we interact with the technology itself as an Other' (Søraker 2012, p. 501). There are many aspects of human-computer interaction that could fall in this category.

The Embodied Relationship with *World of Warcraft* as a Computer Game

Using Ihde's framework in the case of computer games, it is clear that a multiplicity of perceptual relationships could coexist. As he writes on the subject:

In the actual use of video games, of course, the embodiment and hermeneutic relational dimensions are present. The joystick that embodies hand and eye coordination extends the player into the displayed field. The field itself displays some hermeneutic context (usually either some "invader" mini-world or some sports analogue), but this context does not refer beyond itself into a worldly reference

(Ihde 1990, p. 100)

The joystick becomes the 'core prosthetic element' (Klevjer 2012, p. 25) that links the player with the game world. Mastery of the prosthetic element allows for the kind of perceptual immersion so often talked about in computer games, where the corporeal body also no longer becomes an object of conscious intentionality, or what Klevjer calls 'proxy embodiment':

...proxy embodiment is a trick at the level of the phenomenology of the body, not a trick of fiction. The sense of bodily immersion that is involved in avatar-based play is rooted in the way in which the body is able to intuitively re-direct into screen space a perception of itself as object, which is the perception of itself as part of external space

(Klevjer 2012, p. 29)

The avatar or player character on the screen also becomes part of the perceptual extension of the body by providing kinaesthetic feedback to the player. The player uses the control interface to move the character around and the character visually responds in kind by moving, jumping, shooting or whatever inside the game environment, just like one can “feel” a remote control car taking too sharp a turn and crashing into a gutter.

While it is obvious in both cases that the experience is mediated technologically in that we do not directly experience virtual movement or the motion of a remote control car, our intentionality is no longer on the interface itself but is *projected* out beyond the body. In the case of games with virtual environments like *World of Warcraft* ‘we reach across the material barrier, and “traverse the wired gap” between our body’s space *here* and screen space *there*’ (Klevjer 2012, p. 25, author emphasis). In this sense, a perceptual bridge exists between the player and game world. It allows the illusion of direct control over a virtual object or character via the computer interface via a synthesis of the keypresses of my left hand and the audio-visual feedback from the screen and speakers.

As I play *World of Warcraft* for hours on end, I don’t entirely lose direct perceptual consciousness of my body, but for the most part it ceases to become an intentional subject. My left hand rests on the left hand side of the keyboard, hovering over the W A S D movement keys. My right hand rests on the mouse, directing where my character looks. My eyes are firmly locked to the screen, and my ears to the speakers or headset if I am engaging in voice chat with other players. My head starts to droop; my left wrist starts to get hot due to the location of the video card underneath the flimsy plastic of the laptop. My right elbow starts to get sore from resting on the side of the desk, and my shoulders start to get sore from the position of the laptop being a far sight lower than shoulder height. I don’t even know if I blink. My legs are constantly moving to try and find a more comfortable position as I sit in my chair. Sometimes it has become dark outside and I’m not aware of the fading light coming through the closed curtains. I’m pretty sure my wife has gone out and I haven’t noticed. I am fixed towards the game, my senses of touch, sight and sound captivated by the computer on the desk.

Once again, the top row of numbers on a standard keyboard deserves particular attention in playing *World of Warcraft*. As can be seen previously in figure 12, these keys are the default mapping that provides access to the bottom action bar of the user interface where the player can organise their character's skills and abilities as they see fit. The player can choose which thirteen abilities will be placed on the bottom action bar and in what order. These keys are fundamentally important in the physical act of playing *World of Warcraft*. The position of the left hand over the *W A S D* keys to direct character movement means that some of these number keys (1 to 5) are more 'under-the-hand' than keys 6 and onwards. The skills and abilities that the player uses can be made easier to reach, but could limit the ability of the player to master the player character by leaving some other potentially important abilities out of quick reach. Some character classes have a massive number of spells and abilities. The druid class, for example, can have up to around 70 total class-specific spells and abilities depending on the character specialisation chosen by the player. The player does not just have to master the utility of 70-odd spells and abilities *in* the game, but also negotiate how these can be used and accessed by the physical hardware interface. As a way to overcome these limitations, some players will opt for aftermarket peripherals such as gaming keyboards and mice. Figures 13 and 14 show some examples of aftermarket gaming hardware.



Figure 13: Razer 'Nostromo' Gaming Keypad (Source: <http://www.razerzone.com/au-en/gaming-keyboards-keypads/razer-nostromo/> viewed 11th August 2014)



Figure 14: Razer 'Epic' Gaming Mouse (Source: <http://www.razerzone.com/au-en/gaming-mice/razer-naga-epic/> viewed 11th August 2014)

Figure 13 shows a gaming keypad that has been ergonomically designed to fit under the player's left hand as opposed to resting on the keyboard. The *W A S D* movement keys are replaced by a directional stick operated by the thumb, while the fingers are left free to use the fourteen keys which are now more under the hand, modifying the manner in which kinaesthetic action takes place. Instead of having to move the left hand across the extent of the keyboard (and therefore incorporating arm and wrist) the player can now focus primarily on finger position, while being granted greater access to the character's abilities via the left hand. Figure 14 shows a gaming mouse designed for the right hand, with twelve extra buttons positioned under the thumb of the player which can also be mapped to the action bars. Combined, a player using such peripherals would now have 26 buttons available for mapping to character abilities, before keyboard modifiers (such as holding down the Ctrl or Shift keys), a contrast to the 5 easily accessible on a standard keyboard.

While it would be impractical to try and determine if the use of such peripherals modify the extent to which a player can become 'immersed' in the game via proxy embodiment, it is clear that the use of these peripherals enables a different perceptual experience in the way the player is able to relate to the game.¹⁵ It also reinforces Carman's point about the significance of the perceptual, embodied experience but marries that to Schutz's typified socially constructed experience found upon

¹⁵ I only have a crummy gaming mouse with five extra buttons, however even this small improvement was able to modify the way I controlled my player characters substantially.

conscious reflection. It is only because I have had the experience of playing with a standard keyboard that I recognise the utility of technologies that may improve that experience, such as gaming peripherals. It also reinforces the social construction of technology approach in which technology evolves as ‘an alternation of variation and selection’ (Pinch & Bijker 1987, p. 28). On this account, a particular technology or artefact only has a ‘problem’ when a particular social group views it as problematic. This ‘interpretive flexibility’ (MacKenzie & Wajcman 1999, p. 21) means that different social groups will have different perspectives and experiences of a particular technology or artefact, including different ideas of how it is used, how it should be used and how it should be understood by others. A ‘gamer’ for example will find gaming peripherals much more significant than a non-gamer.

The Interruption

I would posit that most if not all *World of Warcraft* players, or even gamers in general, have at some point had “that moment” where everything starts to go wrong and where the buttons just don’t seem to work. It is at this point during what has been called an *aporia* (Rush 2011) that the player’s immersive, kinaesthetic relationship with the game world via proxy embodiment breaks down. In my own experience this often occurs during an intense battle either with other players or in the heat of a boss fight during a raid. For whatever reason, the player is unable to maintain that link with the player character in the virtual world, and the player must consciously take stock of their physical actions, such as looking down at the keyboard to determine where the left hand is sitting, for example. On many occasions I have been wondering why a skill or ability wouldn’t “fire” only to realise I was pressing the number “6” key instead of the number “5”. In other cases in the heightened state of stress during a battle I find myself conscious of repeatedly mashing the same button as fast as possible, even though the ability itself is on a timer and will only fire every few seconds. I have found myself yelling and swearing at the computer as if I was yelling directly at another player. It also brings to the fore the possibility that other players may be or may have had fundamentally the same experience, and that this may be able to be interpreted via the observation of other player characters in the game.

I’ll admit: I’m not the best PvPer. I don’t have the best gear, or the best rotations, but I give it a red hot go. At times I can surprise myself by how proficient I seem, while other times I recognise the fact that other players are simply better than me. Playing as a rogue, I find that one of the hardest classes

to defeat in one-on-one battle is the heavily armoured paladin, with their multitude of healing spells and stun abilities. Yet now and again, I will engage in combat with an enemy pally only to find them seeming to flounder in trying to defend themselves; having played the Paladin class in the past, I try to preempt their actions only to observe their character trying frantically to escape combat whilst I repeatedly stab them in their posterior. Was this a case where the player had already popped all their cooldowns? Or was it a case where, in the heat of battle, the flustered player lost control over their player character and was frantically belting keys on the keyboard?

The fact that I am not *there* in the game becomes a matter of little concern as the ‘suspension of disbelief’ kicks in and I find myself perceptually, cognitively and emotionally immersed in the virtual world of Azeroth. What is happening on the screen is often the most important thing going on. When I’m being attacked by another player, I hardly care that the phone is ringing, let alone hear it ring. My attention has been fully given to the virtual game world which this brings us to the second aspect of the relationship: how do we understand the “*there*”?

In a single-player computer game like *Space Invaders*, we could be satisfied with Ihde’s discussion in assuming that the computer system generates the ‘displayed field’ on the screen for the player to interpret. Yet in multiplayer virtual game worlds like that of *World of Warcraft*, while it is true that the player’s computer system generates what is displayed on the screen for the player, this is done in respect to a central server that the player has logged in to. Each instance of the game on a player’s computer is not entirely discrete from other players. This means that virtual objects in the game world appear to endure, not just to the player but importantly to *other* players also logged in to the same server. It also means that the central server is bound by the programming code to instruct players’ computer systems to generate a consistent visual representation of the game world for all players on that server at any one time. The player’s embodied / hermeneutic relationship with the computer system provides information about *something else* in the world, even if that information relates to a virtual world. I will now examine the key aspects of this relationship in more detail.

The Relationship with the Fantasy World of Azeroth

Virtual worlds are problematic for an existential philosophical tradition that is focused on embodied intentionality. This is because the player’s intentionality in *World of Warcraft* is directed at something that cannot be physically interacted with. Although discussing embodiment

in the context of prostheses and not explicitly talking about virtual worlds, de Preester proposes an extension of Ihde's ideas via a 'subcategory of hermeneutic relations' that can be 'considered as a hermeneutic relation with a non-existent object in the position of the intentional object' (De Preester 2011, p. 129). This idea may provide a useful conceptual foundation for a discussion of the player's relationship with the virtual world.

Firstly, we need to take note of idea that the computer screen is not a "lens" through which we look into the virtual world in *World of Warcraft*. Rather it is an on-the-fly generation of a represented three-dimensional space contingent upon the input of the player and the commands given by the remote server. It is an *illusion* of space, albeit a convincing one. While the player is physically interacting with the computer, their hands on the keyboard and mouse with their eyes directed at the screen, the intentionality of the player's action is in contrast directed at the virtual game world. For example, when attempting to battle three monsters in *World of Warcraft* at the same time, my intentionality directed at what sequence of skills and abilities I should use, which monster I should attack and when, at the same time mindful what is going on in the virtual environment around my player character such as enemy players looking for an easy kill. I don't need to consider my embodied hand gestures provided I have mastered those actions. My intentionality exists *in* the virtual world. However a problem still lies in the distinction between physical and virtual worldly actions. To use an example of driving a car, while my body controls operates the vehicle my intentionality extends outward into the world, aimed at avoiding other vehicles and obstacles and stopping at traffic lights. In a computer game, my embodied gestures translate into virtual actions that have no worldly reference (Ihde 1990), and instead are significant only because of what I can visually interpret on the screen.

As I fly my dragon mount across the skies over Pandaria, I take note of familiar landmarks as I fly over the top of them. I can also check my map to see where I am above the continent. I am travelling north, towards Kun-Lai Summit on my hunt for rarespawn monsters to defeat. As I get closer to the zone, the sweeping mountain peaks emerge in the distance. I check my map again, noticing that I am slightly off-course. I adjust my heading slightly to the left. As the terrain rises, I am closer to the ground now – I can see monsters roaming around in packs, and other players protecting the "Grumple" trade caravans that wind their way up the mountain. I angle my mount upwards towards the snow covered peaks in search of where the rare-spawn Pandaren "Ahone the Wanderer" should be, and hover about the area

for a moment; she is not there, meaning another player has likely defeated her recently. I turn my mount to the east and head off to try and find other rare champions located around the mountain...

This perceptual experience of electronic screens belongs to a realm of discussion that extends far beyond computer screens, to include televisions and smartphones, for example. Vanderbeeken argues that this relationship between screen and user ‘mediates our perception of reality (also causing us to lose touch with reality) and it generates a new reality in a new, mediated environment’ (Vanderbeeken 2011, p. 247). The fact that the virtual world of Azeroth is not a “real” world should not mean it is any less significant in regards to the intentionality of action, particularly when actions in the virtual world can be observed and verified by other players. It is not enough to say that multiplayer computer game worlds are entirely *fictional* as this would signify an object that has no ontological significance. On the contrary, virtual worlds have *some* level of ontological significance as they are not only able to be *perceived* by a subject in some way, but they contain virtual objects and the like which can be *intentionally interacted* with (Madary 2014). I can acquire a virtual item in *World of Warcraft*, for example a sword, which I can recognise as being in *my* inventory, I can wield it during combat where it can be observed in the virtual world as a useful object by other players, and I can even in some circumstances sell or gift it to another player. We should be able to accept the premise here that ‘virtual entities are not mere products of the mind or illusions; they are generated and made intersubjectively available by a computer according to a comprehensive set of regulative principles’ (Søraker 2012, p. 505). But at no point can I remove an object from the virtual world: my perceptual experience of it is limited to its *symbolic* representation of an object through pixels on the computer screen, or its audible clash against other virtual weapons during battle. The way in which it *represents* itself to me in these ways is influenced by the intentional actions I make via my embodied hand gestures as I interact with the keyboard and mouse.

Virtual worlds aren’t corporeal, in the sense that I cannot reach out and physically sample virtual objects by touch, taste, smell or otherwise – all I have access to is a visual or audio representation. Yet they don’t fit a clear definition of fantasy worlds either, at least not how Schutz defines a fantasy world. Including things such as ‘daydreams, games, fairy tales and jokes’ he writes that, ‘when my attention becomes absorbed in one of the several fantasy worlds, I no longer need to master the

external world' (Schutz & Luckmann 1973, p. 28). Echoing Huizinga's (1955) concept of games and play Schutz also claims that '... as long as I live in fantasy worlds, I cannot "produce," in the sense of an act which gears into the external world and alters it' (Schutz & Luckmann 1973, p. 29). Yet, data storage allows us to produce something digital on a computer system, store it, and recall it later, even duplicate and share it with other people, such as a text document or audio file. The document is not ready-to-hand in the form that we think about it, such as in sheets of paper, but is digitised in binary code that can be electronically transmitted or stored on a CD-ROM or USB key. In this sense, we can create something tangible, but we cannot access it meaningfully or literally in its physical form. Similarly, in *World of Warcraft*, one interacts with virtual objects through their player character. Objects can be kept, used, even traded within the finite limitations of the programming. The player can undertake productive actions, earning virtual gold through quest rewards and trading which then acts as a kind of fiat currency in the game, and at times has been traded in real-world markets for actual cash (InformationWeek 2009; Steinkuehler 2006). There is also a perception of ownership in that I can own a set of armour, weapons, or even player characters, just as I could own a text document or an MP3.¹⁶

Hence we return to a key problem. In *World of Warcraft*, I can perform actions in the virtual world that are intersubjectively meaningful, and I can also compete with others for the same finite virtual resources in the game world. Ontologically, I do not gain anything tangible – all of these virtual resources are only meaningful in the game itself. It is in this sense that I argue that this aspect of the actor's relationship with the game is *symbolic*, in that the objects represented on the screen are meaningful only in that they represent something else. As Schutz offers in his discussion of symbols in *Collected Papers I*:

A symbol can be defined in first approximation as an appresentational reference of a higher order in which the appresenting member of the pair is an object, fact, or event in the reality of our everyday life, whereas the other appresented member of the pair refers to an idea which transcends our experience of everyday life
(Schutz 1962, p. 331)

Which he later revises to:

¹⁶ Although I cannot download my character or my character's 'stuff' in *World of Warcraft*, the key idea here is that I have access to these objects to the exclusion of all others, and others recognise my exclusive right to access these objects and characters (even if I have no legal right to 'own' such things as set out in the game's Terms of Service).

... an appresentational relationship between entities belonging to at least two finite provinces of meaning so that the appresenting symbol is an element of the paramount reality of everyday life

(Schutz 1962, p. 343)

It is this transcendence of everyday life which is important, in that it allows for objects and events in everyday life to be ascribed greater meaning. A red sky at sunset, a handshake, soup on a cold day, and so forth, can all be objectively understood by their respective definitions but are also appresentational of things such as weather patterns, intimacy and comfort. We can approach thinking about objects and actions in *World of Warcraft* in the same way, for example, by looking at gold, or an epic armour set, the shadowy mists of Duskwood or the “Lich King” as respective appresentations of wealth, power, or evil. When I play *World of Warcraft*, such as when I watch a fantasy film, I arguably engage in the “willing suspension of disbelief,” to again borrow a term from Samuel Coleridge. I know that which is in my focus is not “real” in the literal sense of the word, but it becomes my reality: ‘While the play lasts, Hamlet is to us *really* Hamlet and not Laurence Olivier “acting the part of” or “representing” Hamlet’ (Schutz 1962, p. 340). My focus is on the meaning of what *Hamlet* says, not the portraying actor. It is only when we “break” from the reality of the fantasy that we are able to then discuss the merits of the actor’s performance, or the realism of the film sets, and so on. As Schutz argues, ‘... it is the meaning of experiences, and not the ontological structure of the objects, which constitutes reality’ (Schutz 1962, p. 341). This symbolic relationship between meaning and object always exists contextually in what Schutz calls a ‘finite province of meaning,’ similar to what psychologist William James called ‘subuniverses’ (Schutz & Luckmann 1973, pp. 21-3). These finite provinces of meaning, or “worlds” like the world of science, world of dreams and so on, ‘rests upon the character of the unity of its own peculiar lived experience – viz., its cognitive style’ (Schutz & Luckmann 1973, p. 24).

We should, then, be able to understand *World of Warcraft* as its own finite province of meaning. The symbols that are contextually relevant in *World of Warcraft* are only wholly meaningful in the context of the game. We can then consider the meaningful symbols in *World of Warcraft* as appresentational of the fictional world of Azeroth. We know *World of Warcraft* is set in a fictional world in which we cannot literally enter. Yet when we play, for all intents and purposes, the actions, forms and objects we see, that which we use to make sense of the experience, are ‘real entities in the finite province of [virtual] meaning’ (Schutz 1962, p. 347). In order to examine the

experiential meanings of playing *World of Warcraft*, we should pay attention to the symbolic relationship between virtual object and virtual world, and consequently, how this frames the *intentionality* of player action in the virtual space.

The Virtual World AS a World

Finally, we need to speak a little about the ‘worldness’ of *World of Warcraft* in terms of this symbolic relationship. How is Azeroth appresented? *World of Warcraft* has a ‘worldness’ (Krzywinska 2006), constituent of things such as the perceived permanence of the game world spatially, but also historically. Azeroth has a rich mythic history that the game’s actions are centered around. Much of what *World of Warcraft* mythology draws on is decidedly Tolkien-esque, such as the incorporation of humans, orcs, trolls, elves, dwarves and so forth, each with their own particular histories and “racial” relations. This drawing on existing ideas and themes contributes to the making sense of the game environment. The framing of *World of Warcraft* as a fantasy world is made explicit by its incorporation of recognisable elements of Tolkien-esque fantasy and medieval aesthetics and not spacecraft or other futuristic science-fiction elements (Klastrup 2010). Klastrup has a similar concept of ‘worldness’, which ‘emerges from the interplay between world design choices, world aesthetics, a specific gameworld culture and the player’s world experience’ (Klastrup 2010, p. 312). Both of these conceptions of the worldness of the game also appear compatible with Schutz’s “worlds” as finite provinces of meaning, where meanings of player experience are fundamentally influenced by such things as aesthetics, lore, gameplay and culture, as my reflections on this suggest:

As many other current and former *World of Warcraft* players do, I often reminisce about particular experiences in the game. These fond memories don’t necessarily take the form of a personal achievement, but often take an aesthetic nature. For example, I recall my early days of playing *World of Warcraft* as an Alliance character after leaving the starting zone of Elwynn Forest and heading out into the drought-stricken rural area of Westfall. The zone was lit in a yellowish glow, and the grass was dry and the trees were leafless. The background music gave the impression that this was an area where the local population had fell on hard times, and that life was tough out here. The harvest reavers in the fields had gone mad and had become feral; large birds of prey waited to attack wandering players, while that band of pirates the Defias Brotherhood would attack any players who wandered into Moonbrook. Murlocs roamed the shores while gnolls roamed the countryside.

I recall the feeling of sharing that world with other players who roamed the area, performing quests for the various NPCs at Sentinel Hill.

An example of the symbolic relationship between player character and game world is how the game's questing and levelling system is constructed archetypically in terms of the "hero," akin to Homer's *The Odyssey* (Krzywinska 2006, p. 391). The game allows the player to engage contextually in heroic adventures with or against other players, each of whom are experiencing the same typical intersubjective reality in regards to this. This experience is a step beyond mere simulation for two reasons. Firstly it incorporates permanence in that virtual quest rewards in the game are kept by the player character. Secondly it allows such experiences to occur in the presence of other player characters, and by proxy, other players. This *intersubjective fantasy*, in returning to the ideas of William James (and to a degree W.I. Thomas and D.S. Thomas) is as real as it is experienced by the players themselves. Although this aspect of the relationship is highly symbolic in regards to the high fantasy world constructed by the game's designers, actions in the game, whilst in their own sense symbolic in that they don't "produce" anything tangible, have real meaning that is intersubjectively experienced.

This aspect of intersubjectivity, however, assumes the presence of an Other or Others in the game world. The final part of this discussion will examine how the computer system and game world mediate the experience of the Other player.

The Relationship with the Player Character

The final key point that needs to be considered in regards to the player's perceptual relationship with the game goes well beyond the way in which the player interacts with the virtual world via the computer system and has a lot to do with the player's technologically mediated perceptual relationship with the player character. The player character is not simply a puppet for the player as is no direct perceptual relationship between the player and player character. There are no strings or levers in which the player can directly "feel" the virtual world. This is why Ihde's account of the embodiment relation to explain this relationship needs some revision.

As an extension of Ihde's post-phenomenological discussion of our relationship with technology, Peter-Paul Verbeek also proposes two more relations: the *cyborg relation*, where bionic technologies

are incorporated in the human body to modify the experience of the world, for example through a hearing aid, and the *composite relation*, where human and technological intentionality come together (Verbeek 2008). In other words, the composite relation helps to construct rather than represent reality, like the example of a radio telescope (Søraker 2012). Yet we are still left with the puzzle of understanding the relationship to our virtual representatives in virtual worlds, and Søraker argues that neither Ihde or Verbeek can adequately define or account for relationships with virtual worlds, something I must agree with. The conceptual framework of “human” “technology” and “world” used by Ihde and Verbeek makes it difficult to understand virtual worlds with this schema with any confidence, as it is not clear where a virtual world exists – is it in the technology or in the world?

Rune Klevjer’s account of avatars treats them as a ‘prosthetic proxy’ which directs the player’s intentionality into the screen space (Klevjer 2012). It is a useful starting point for this discussion. Much has been written about the relationship between player and avatar, or as I contend in regards to role-playing game worlds *player characters*. Bayliss (2007) makes a helpful distinction between playing *through* an avatar and playing *as* an avatar, where playing as a character signifies that the character in question has something of narrative a relationship to the game world. A useful distinction may be a Tetris block as the player’s avatar versus a player’s character in *World of Warcraft*. But player characters in *World of Warcraft* need to be considered in a different light to player characters in single player role playing games like *Tomb Raider* or *Skyrim*. They exist in a virtual world shared by other player characters and take on an important social function. They don’t just provide an instrumental vehicle for the player’s intentionality towards the game world, they convey to other players information *about* the controlling player. As Søraker writes:

Although it may be technically correct to describe virtual worlds as constructing that which cannot be experienced as such (i.e., the underlying computer states), this misses the experience of being immersed in a virtual world and of communicating with another human being by way of avatars—and losing the subjective experience seems particularly unfortunate from a (post)phenomenological point of view
(Søraker 2012, p. 504)

Although it is clear that on the one hand the player’s actions are directed into the virtual world, they can often be directed at other player characters and consequently at other players. Søraker proposes two kinds of effects that can spawn from player characters in virtual worlds – *intravirtual* and

extravirtual effects. In order to further explain this, he relies on Searle's ideas regarding intentionality and 'conditions of satisfaction' (Søraker 2012, p. 506). He uses the example of virtual rape, discussing the problematisation of intention:

Our judgment of the severity of an event depends on whether we (implicitly) judge someone's intention as aiming for intravirtual or extravirtual conditions of satisfaction—for instance, whether we judge the virtual rapist as trying to hurt the avatar or the person controlling the avatar

(Søraker 2012, p. 508)

Søraker's proposal highlights the difficulty in establishing a clear understanding of intentionality in virtual worlds, particularly in regards to social action. Of course, my intentional killing of another player character in a computer game doesn't necessarily mean I have any desire to murder the controlling player, nor does it assume that I automatically hold any ill-will towards them. If I did, this would be apparent in my behaviour towards them, as outlined in an experience I had.

I snuck up behind the NPC respawn Pandaren monk "Nasra Spothide" who sat peacefully meditating under a pagoda in the Valley of the Four Winds. I had much practice on my rogue fighting respawn monks and was aware of their deadly abilities and how to avoid them. Half way through the fight I was suddenly attacked by an enemy player – a human mage saw me as an easy opportunity for a kill since I was already getting low on health during my current fight after poorly anticipating the respawn monk's moves. The mage defeated me and I died, releasing my spirit and running back to my corpse as a ghost in order to resurrect. As I got closer, I noticed the mage was now battling Spothide for the kill achievement. I resurrected and went into stealth. I cast my [Marked for Death] ability on the mage, generating five 'combo' points on the target which were needed to use most rogue skills. I waited patiently for Spothide to cast 'spinning crane kick', a devastating ability that the player had to avoid at all costs, usually by running backwards. Just as Spothide started to spin wildly, I attacked the mage with my [Cheap Shot] ability and ran backwards, stunning them on the spot as Spothide kicked them to death. As I ran off into the distance I smiled to myself, thinking about the rage that the other player would be directing at me through the screen right now.

Using Søraker's concepts, in interacting with the other player character in such a way I simultaneously invoke both intravirtual (directed at the player character in the virtual world) and extravirtual (directed at the controlling player) effects (Søraker 2012, p. 509). Players speaking to and interacting with each other *through* player characters reinforces the telecopresent (Zhao 2003,

2005) mode of social relationship that is mediated by the technology and game, but to varying degrees of relevance to the fictional game world. Players can orient their own actions in response to the actions of another player without any other indications of their intentions other than the movement of their player character. Players must learn how to interpret the observable actions on the part of other player characters in order to successfully negotiate the game world, particularly in group situations that require coordination or in player-versus-player situations where players engage in combat. The mediated relationship of player characters ultimately allows for ‘social action’ (Schutz & Luckmann 1989, p. 68) in that the actor’s intentionality in regards to a project of action has at its ‘thematic core’ a specific Other or others.

Me, Myself and I

There is final aspect of the player’s relationship with their player character that deserves attention. There is still a question concerning how the player *identifies* with the player character. For example, in the *Assassin’s Creed* series, I play *through* the player character as a named character with a biography of which I cannot change. This may include *Ezio Auditore da Firenze*, a renaissance nobleman turned assassin, or *Edward Kenway*, a Welsh privateer-come-pirate in the Caribbean. This is in contrast to a game like *Fallout: New Vegas* or *Skyrim*, where the player must “build” a player character by choosing a name, appearance and other qualities before entering into the game world. In both instances I play as a character in the game world. In games that require the player to build a character, a more dynamic aspect of role-play is made possible by player choice. In *World of Warcraft* elements like the player character’s name, gender, race, class and appearance become the manner in which the player is represented in the game world to other players. As Crick writes in regards to playing as an avatar:

There is no intellectual analysis; I think as the avatar, from the point of view of the avatar. By becoming accustomed to the movements of the control device – enabling a fluent engagement with the virtual world – the avatar’s (and virtual camera’s) movement is incorporated in my corporeal schema and, as such, becomes an extension of my bodily basis of consciousness

(Crick 2011, p. 267)

While I understand Crick’s point of view on a perceptual understanding of a player character’s actions in the game world, there is an interesting phenomenon in *World of Warcraft* in regards to how players treat their player characters discursively. Whilst *not* engaged in a direct perceptual

relationship with the game world via the player character *I can speak of the player character transitively between the first and third person perspectives*. Let me explain this in more detail.

From the first person perspective, I speak about my player character's experiences in the game world as if they were *my* experiences. This can be in past, present or future tense, such as "I just got ganked" or "I'm heading over to help you out now" or "I have to run some more dungeons for rep". But I can also talk about my player characters in the third person as a *subject* or *object*, for example in "I need to grind more herbs on Ulthoras" or "my tank doesn't have a high enough item level yet" respectively. Other players can also ask questions like, "have you done the Shado-Pan dailies yet?" or "do you want to group up for a bit?" while directing their text at my player character. While I have agonised over these forms of discourse from a phenomenological perspective, it appears that first and third person discourse is in many cases more or less interchangeable. Irrespective of the perspective taken, there is a key point to take note of: in all instances a *relationship between the player and player character* is recognised. The player character is not recognised as a subject with intentionality in its own right, but always as an avatar, reliant on input by the player. Other players may talk about "my" actions in the game world while referring to my player character's name, but the context of the conversation will be aimed at *my* intentional actions as player.

To further complicate the issue, I can also speak about *my* own subjective thoughts or perceptions *external* to the game world as the player character. I am able, for example, to engage in small talk with guild members and other players in the game world on topics or events that don't relate to the game world but to the physical world, invisible to the external player. Take this example taken from the chat channel during a raid:

[Player]: next time do a ready check..I was unwrapping some chocolate

As I know that player characters can't eat chocolate, I am able to interpret that the player is talking about the fact that they were unwrapping some chocolate whilst sitting in front of their computer while the raid fight started. The context of the message was extravirtual rather than intravirtual (Søraker 2012). In other instances players will communicate directly with each other in an effort to upset another player or players, in contrast to influencing their player character, as seen in this example from Orgrimmar trade chat:

[Player A]: anyone wanna get reported for swearing today I swear ill report you if you swear one more time you'lll get banned from the *World of Warcraft*
[Player B]: dickhead
[Player C]: lol.
[Player D]: cunt

In this example, players are communicating directly with each other in a context detached from the player character's observable actions in the virtual game world. It is not the *player character* that swears but rather the *player*. In this example players are speaking to each other *through* the player character rather than as the player character.

Overall the relationship the player has with the player character is multifaceted and complicated, especially in the context of player characters interacting with each other. To again draw on Idhe, the relationship the player has with other players in the game world can be considered something like:

Human <> Computer <> (Game <> Player Character) <> Other

The intentionality of *social* action is here mediated *through* the computer system and virtual world rather than directed *at* it. The idea of the transcendental Ego (e.g. Schutz 1942) is perhaps useful to consolidate our understanding of this. When we engage in an action directed at another person, we do not think of them as some sort of disembodied being, but as a being in-the-world. We do not usually seek to consciously manipulate other people's minds, but instead recognise the Other as mind and body simultaneously. We can treat player characters in the same manner, in that the existence of the player character as a virtual being in the virtual world assumes the existence of a controlling player of whom I can intentionally, albeit indirectly, interact with via the computer system.

Conclusion

The three aspects of the player's embodied relationship with *World of Warcraft* discussed here address the ways in which the player engages in a technological relationship with the game in a perceptually multifaceted way, incorporating aspects of sensory, symbolic and social experience. The necessary interface, the computer system, must be used in a meaningful way in order to interact with the virtual world and play the game successfully. Secondly, in order to play the game

meaningfully, one must be able to make sense of the game environment as it is presented to the player, not just as an immersive fantasy world with a rich history and lore, but as a virtual world containing objects that can be interacted with. The fantasy world itself is also symbolic in that it is only an audio-visual representation of software programming. The virtual objects in the game do not represent anything tangible however they can be produced, used, and traded in the game. Finally, the computer system mediates the social relationship between players, facilitating interaction in the virtual world made possible by the game's programming and the computer's hardware capabilities, as well as the in-game contexts in which players interact with each other. To this end, the mediated relationship that players have with each other is framed by both the sensory and symbolic aspects of the technological relationship.

In taking these points into consideration, we can now further explore observable actions of player characters in the virtual world of *World of Warcraft* in a new light and be able to further appreciate the broader context of typical motivations for action. This vocabulary should assist us in being able to develop an understanding of the significance of play, and what play "is" in *World of Warcraft*. The next chapter will explore the types of actions available in the game and how players engage in matters of typical practice.

PART TWO: THE EXPERIENCE OF WORLD OF WARCRAFT

Chapter Five: Play as Productive Practice in *World of Warcraft*

My alarm sounded at 6:45am. Sunday morning. I wearily pulled myself out from under the blanket, throwing on a pair of pants and a jumper hanging off the end of the bed. I wandered into the kitchen, made myself a cup of coffee, went outside and had a smoke before sitting myself down in front of the computer by 7:00am. This was the time the guild had set aside for guild runs, as it was the day that we usually all had free. We would do raids, dungeons and scenarios all morning before guild members had to leave for family and other commitments.

I logged on to the game to find some of the other guild members already logged on and waiting. I plugged in and put on my headset and fired up Skype for the guild leader to start a group call so we could all converse. A couple of guild members needed some better gear to be able to take part in higher end raids, so we decided to run the Heart of Fear raid on the hope of 'gearing up' these characters. A couple of hours later we were successful, and decided to embark on the Terrace of Endless Spring raid, which, while we managed to tackle it took longer than expected due to a number of raid wipes. I realised I was hungry – I excused myself, made a coffee and went for another smoke, stopping past the fridge on the way back to acquire something to eat. Muesli and fruit. I returned to the computer, food in hand, sat down and put my headset back on, making sure to mute the microphone whilst I was chewing. A couple of the guild members had to leave, so the rest of us decided to run some random heroic-level Pandaria dungeons for the guild achievements. Following this, we decided to run some scenarios in smaller groups as some members were already 'valor-capped' and would not gain any benefit from further dungeon runs. Hungry again; another quick smoke, returning with a sandwich. For fun, we decided to run some lower-level raids from earlier game expansions for guild achievements and challenges in order to try and get some rare epic dragon mounts. The guild leader had to leave after this to go and play cricket; the remaining guild members online, myself included, grouped up to do the Shado-Pan dailies for faction reputation.

I glanced at the clock. It was now 5:30 in the afternoon.

Although not a regular occurrence, from time to time I would have lost whole days to playing *World of Warcraft*. Typically however a normal session of play would last between two to three hours. Yet to me *World of Warcraft* is not necessarily unique in this regard. I regularly find myself

immersed for hours on end playing a range of different games, from the turn-based strategy of *Civilization 5* to the single-player role-playing post-apocalyptic adventure of *Fallout 3*, or the first-person multiplayer shooter of *Battlefield 4*. The styles of play in these games are all different from each other, suggesting that the type of “immersion”, if we can use that term, is experientially distinct. In each game I journey towards an end goal: the defeat of my enemy through the building of the greatest empire, the most powerful character or simply by being quicker to hit the “fire” button. Yet the end goal is *trivial* in the sense that once the journey is over and done with, I have produced nothing tangible, even though I have dedicated considerable time and effort to that goal. In discussing play as a ‘good’ in regards to classic authors like Marx, Nietzsche, and Aristotle, Hurka and Tasioulas (2006) argue that the intrinsic value of play is about the journey rather than the end product, a claim with which I can at this stage only partially agree. Focusing on the journey a player takes in a game like *World of Warcraft* means paying attention to the *practice* of play in the virtual game world, and considering the typical ways in which players interact with the virtual environment. But there is also some sort of *ends*, something that players are “working” towards. Using our augmented phenomenological understanding of virtual game worlds as outlined in the previous chapters, we can now ask the question: How can we describe the different aspects of play in *World of Warcraft*, and what are the typical understandings of this?

Using my auto-ethnographic experience and drawing on my observations of my own play experience and the observable actions of Others in the game world, I will examine the practice of play in *World of Warcraft* in light of the phenomenological frameworks of Schutz and others as discussed in the previous chapters. This will be undertaken with consideration for the existing literature and concepts currently used to understand play in games like *World of Warcraft*. I will then employ my own ethnographic evidence to interrogate the relationship between work and play in *World of Warcraft*, arguing that the practice of play in the game challenges the dominant definitions of “game” and “play” as often used to describe contemporary electronic games. The practice of play in *World of Warcraft* is one that is complex and multi-faceted and can be defined as a kind of “productive play” offering a form of fulfilment that can be interpreted as something not readily found in the more mundane aspects of capitalist Western societies. Players’ motivational contexts are varied, but can be typically understood as inclusive of both personal and social motivations.

Interpreting *World of Warcraft* as NOT a Game

In assuming that *World of Warcraft* players voluntarily engage in this virtual world, to what extent can we consider it a game? In returning to more traditional definitions of play, a helpful starting point for engaging with this question is Caillois' classification of games as drawn from a contemporary textbook on computer game design:

Table 1. Classification of Games

	AGÓN (Competition)	ALEA (Chance)	MIMICRY (Simulation)	ILINX (Vertigo)
PAIDIA ↑ Tumult Agitation Immoderate laughter	Racing } Wrestling } not Etc. } regulated Athletics	Counting-out rhymes Heads or tails	Children's initiations Games of illusion Tag, Arms Masks, Disguises	Children "whirling" Horseback riding Swinging Waltzing
Kite-flying Solitaire Patience Crossword puzzles ↓ LUDUS	Boxing, Billiards Fencing, Checkers Football, Chess Contests, Sports in general	Betting Roulette Simple, complex, and continuing lotteries*	Theater Spectacles in general	Volador Traveling carnivals Skiing Mountain climbing Tightrope walking

N.B. In each vertical column games are classified in such an order that the *paidia* element is constantly decreasing while the *ludus* element is ever increasing.

* A simple lottery consists of the one basic drawing. In a complex lottery there are many possible combinations. A continuing lottery (e.g. Irish Sweepstakes) is one consisting of two or more stages, the winner of the first stage being granted the opportunity to participate in a second lottery. [From correspondence with Caillois. M.B.]

Figure 15: Caillois' Classification of Games (Source: Caillois, R 2006, 'The Definition of Play, The Classification of Games', in K Salen & E Zimmerman (eds), *The Game Design Reader: A Rules of Play Anthology*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, pp. 122 - 55)

Figure 15 is an overview of Caillois' classification of games, with two concepts *paidia* and *ludus* describing the types of play one would engage in. 'Paidia represents wild, free-form, improvisational play, whereas ludus represents rule-bound, regulated, formalized play' (Salen & Zimmerman 2004, p. 308). Considering Caillois' first developed this typology in the 1950s we can be somewhat certain that he had not envisioned the kind of immersive electronic games and virtual worlds that we have access to today, and as such use of these concepts need to be carefully considered.

On the surface there are a number of Caillois' concepts present in *World of Warcraft*, including *agon* (competition), *alea* (chance) and *mimicry* (simulation). The concept of *alea* underpins the game mechanics mathematically via computer-regulated chance rolls, as an adaptation of the dice rolls use in *Dungeons & Dragons*. In *World of Warcraft*, a player's skill and gear level don't *dictate* the outcome of a battle. The player's item stats influence things like the chance to hit, the chance to critically hit, the amount of damage done to the enemy, how much of the enemy's damage is mitigated through armour and so on via complex calculations of chance. Secondly, the underlying fictional premise of *World of Warcraft* is conflict, with many of the activities in the virtual world focused on combat and with no certainty about the outcome we can propose then that *agon* is present, particularly in player-versus-player combat situations.

Yet we need to be both careful and critical when using Caillois' classifications to understand types of practice in *World of Warcraft*. Rather than the 'essentialist' perspective offered by Caillois (and to a degree Huizinga as well), Dixon (2009), drawing upon Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*, argues that the categories *paida* and *ludus* should be changed to *playing* and *gaming* to capture the intentionality present in the activity: 'the phenomenological reformulation of *ludus*, the experience of playing rule-bound games, leads to the aesthetic experience of *gaming*' (Dixon 2009, p. 8). From this perspective, gaming could be interpreted as a more subjective, 'individuating' experience incorporating puzzles or challenges whereas playing would be interpreted as a more intersubjective, social experience (Dixon 2009). In considering playing and gaming in this manner as intentional activities, we can begin to examine practice in *World of Warcraft* by thinking about the game world as a 'third-order simulacra' (Baudrillard 1994; Frostling-Henningsson 2009) that *contains* games in it. The concept of this order of simulacra is one that encompasses 'fantasies, possibilities, and situations that have no reference in reality, thus "making the impossible possible"' (Frostling-Henningsson 2009, p. 557).

A key argument for this perspective begins when we contrast a typical "game" with *World of Warcraft* and find that the so-called "magic circle" falls apart, particularly in considering the intentionality of players. In a game of chess, or checkers, solitaire, golf, football, hide-and-seek, and so on, the player (actor) is always directed towards the game, else a change in attention suspends or finishes the game: I can either be playing chess, or not playing chess. By contrast, in *World of*

Warcraft a player can be online and telecopresent in the virtual world, but *not visibly doing anything* as suggested by my own experience:

I would often log in to the game, entering the world in one of the major cities or player hubs in Azeroth (usually Orgrimmar or the Shrine of Two Moons in the Vale of Eternal Blossoms, Pandaria). Although these spaces are designed as hubs for player activity, including banks, profession trainers, reforgers, inns and so on, this doesn't mean that they would mirror a similarly constructed metropolitan area in the physical world. While one would see players running around, going to the different areas of the town or city, players would generally be seen congregating around a few key areas: the auction house, the mailboxes, or the flight master.

Often these player characters were idle, sometimes sitting on the ground. Players near auction houses and mailboxes were often sorting through their inventory, while players near the flight master or surrounds were often waiting for a group instance or raid to start, or in some cases simply standing around, announcing in the general chat channel that they were 'bored'. Sometimes I would find myself sitting in front of the computer, staring at my character on the screen, standing there, wondering what the hell to do. Should I go and farm herbs? Run some dungeons? Do some daily quests? Why did I feel compelled to log in to the game in the first place?

In considering this example from the perspective of player intentionality, we can compare this to a football game. Would we consider team members waiting in the changing room to be *actively* playing? In this way the virtual world of *World of Warcraft* presents itself as a space of *potential* action where players can choose to engage or not to engage in various activities. Consequently the question becomes: when are players *actually* playing? When does the practice of play start? By thinking about *World of Warcraft* as a virtual world that *contains games within it*, we can redefine the boundary of the 'lusory attitude' (Salen & Zimmerman 2004; Suits 2005), interpreting different forms of play as the various types of intentional activities of players in the virtual game world. By also incorporating Dixon's distinction between *playing* and *gaming*, we can also draw on Schutz's phenomenology in distinguishing between projects of action that are predominantly subjective, and projects of action that incorporate other players, i.e. social action, and consider the typical aspects of each kind of experience.

From here we can start to examine: what do people DO in *World of Warcraft*?

Solo Play: Questing

Questing is one of the key practices for players who are below maximum level, and is one of the instrumental aspects of the design of the game pertaining to character development (Karlsen 2008). Questing provides the opportunity for players to acquire experience points to level their characters much faster than merely running around killing random monsters. Quests not only provide item rewards for player characters in the form of gold, weapons and armour, but also introduce the player to the rich fantasy narrative of the game world making the player part of the story (Krzywinska 2006). Figure 16 below shows the player character interacting with a non-player character, who is offering the player a quest. The pane on the left outlines to the player what is required in regards to the necessary actions of the player (rules) in order to overcome the arbitrary obstacles (slaying 6 tunnel worms). The player has no need to go out of their way to slay these tunnel worms. They pose no threat to the player and offer only minimal experience points upon their defeat. They are, however, part of the fantasy story of the destruction of the island of Kezan by the dragon Deathwing, finishing with the establishment of the goblins as members of the Horde faction, and therefore the player is able to contextualise the actions required of the them as part of the offered quest.



Figure 16: Screenshot of a player character interacting with a quest-giver who is offering a quest to the player (Source: screenshot)



Figure 17: The player has fulfilled the quest obligations and has returned to the quest-giver for reward (Source: screenshot)

Once the player fulfils the quest obligations (or “wins”)¹⁷ they usually need to return to a non-player character in order to receive their reward. The reward offered assists in helping the player level up their player character by rewarding them with experience points. Figure 17 above shows the player character interacting with the initial quest-giver from figure 16 (who is now in a different location in the world). The pane on the left shows what the player character will gain by clicking the [Complete Quest] button – in this instance the player will receive an armour reward (either a vest or slippers), fifteen copper coins and a bonus ninety-two experience points.

Quests in *World of Warcraft* range in complexity, difficulty and availability based on the player character’s level. Some quests will direct the player to go to another zone or speak to another NPC in the game world, with others requiring the player to search out (and usually kill) a type of mob or mobs, or to loot a particular item from their corpses. There are aspects of chance in these kinds of quests, in the unpredictability of combat via the game mechanics, or in the “drop rate” of a piece of loot. For example, a quest may direct the player to collect 10 rabbit’s feet from rabbits in the area (which you must kill first, obviously), but not all rabbits killed will ‘drop’ rabbit’s feet. The player may need to kill many more rabbits in order to collect enough of the quest item. Another

¹⁷ In some circumstances the player can also “lose” or “fail” the quest by failing the objective and the quest must be restarted, however many are simply present in the player’s quest log until completed or the player decides to ‘drop’ the quest.

competitive aspect of this activity is introduced if other players are in the area on the same quest. There is then sometimes a competition over resources, and players can either choose to cooperate (sometimes by forming a group) or not to complete the quest. At times this generic formula of questing becomes bothersome, as my experience suggests:

The experience of questing can present itself in a couple of ways. For example, I find myself nostalgic for the early days of my first character's journey through the world, as it was the first time I explored Azeroth, taking in its sights and sounds whilst killing its monsters for gold. The ambient music of Westfall, for example, gave an impression of a foreboding danger lurking in the distance; the call of crows augmented the yellowish-brown hue from the drought-stricken fields. I was but an adventurer caught up in a conflict between the local militia and the Defias Brotherhood, a group of thieves and pirates who called the Deadmines their home. The quests gradually narrated the story of the conflict with myself as the hero.

Similarly, with the release of new expansions comes the novelty of new quests, and consequently new areas to discover and new stories about the game world.

But at times the drudgery of 'kill, rinse, repeat' wears thin, and questing can feel like a chore; a merely instrumental means to an end, the ends of which were to level my character in order to be able to raid; this was especially the case on 'alt' characters, where you've already done these quests a couple of times on other characters. Time after time the quest text would be overlooked as I find myself just clicking 'accept quest' to try and speed up the process. I didn't really care what was going on, or who had lost what, or who needed what killed – I just wanted to get on with the process of levelling. At times it felt like an impediment rather than a journey.

The idea that this form of play in a virtual world like *World of Warcraft* begins to transcend "frivolous enjoyment" is a curious point to consider. At times questing can feel like a form of work, a repetitive "grind" for hours on end. As most quests also centre on some sort of service for an NPC, either through violence or the acquisition of resources, some authors have argued the reproduction of a capitalist mode of production in the questing structure of *World of Warcraft* (Lukacs, Embrick & Wright 2010; Moberly 2010; Silverman & Simon 2009). But this formula is not necessarily unique nor out of the ordinary. It is a paradigm employed in many role-playing games. Players have commented on the nature of character levelling in *World of Warcraft*:

Usually leveling alone is horrible. Best way to level alts is tagging along a large group of friends, it's slow but doesn't make you /wrist after another collect 10 more bear flanks. [Post #15]

(World of Warcraft Forums 2012b)

Others put the responsibility for enjoyment back on the player:

If you treat it as a job its going to feel like a job, and more often then not it is not fun. [Post #34]

(World of Warcraft Forums 2012b)

Players may also undertake “daily” quests that offer gold and factional reputation amongst the various NPC groups in *World of Warcraft*. Raising a character’s reputation with a group may grant access to high level rewards like epic gear, and so players at the maximum character level may engage in daily quests to continue character progression.

While players can group up and quest together, questing is typically a form of solo play in the game world. Questing is also instrumental to the *journey* of the player character, not just in regard to the fantasy narrative the player is subjected to progressively raising the character’s level through the reward of experience points that encourage the player to keep questing.

Solo Play: Crafting and Wealth Creation

Another considerable part of the time a player can spend in the virtual world in *World of Warcraft* is in the collection and production of virtual items that can be used by the player or traded with other players. It has been argued that ‘much of what we declare to be play seems to be defined as the inverse of what we declare to be valuable work’ (Lastowka 2009, p. 384). Traditional understandings of play that draw on Huizinga (1955) and Caillois (2006) argue that play should be unproductive, however in *World of Warcraft*, aspects of play sometimes appear to resemble forms of *work*. In regards to the crafting system in *World of Warcraft* my own experiences somewhat reinforce this:

While the Darkmoon Faire is in town, players can turn in rare ‘decks’ of cards for powerful trinkets. Now, these decks aren’t easy to come by; during the *Wrath of the Lich King* expansion, for example, these decks were constructed by inscribers through the ‘Darkmoon Card of the North’, a craft skill that generated a random card from one of the four Darkmoon Card decks: the Nobles deck, the Prisms deck, the Undeath deck and the Chaos deck. Each deck comprised of eight cards which had to either be inscribed by the player

once they had the necessary reagents, or purchased from the auction house for a heavily inflated price.

The reagents themselves were not easy to come by, and for each card required the player to obtain six 'Snowfall Ink' and one 'Eternal Life'. The Snowfall Ink was obtained from the herbalism skill, which allowed players to collect the various plants and flowers in Azeroth and mill them to provide inks. Snowfall Ink required the Icy Pigment, an uncommon 'drop' milled from herbs around the continent of Northrend. Eternal Life was created from 10 'Crystallized Life', an uncommon drop from various plant-based monsters around Northrend, or sometimes found when picking herbs.

Knowing that the Darkmoon Faire was coming up, I must have spent at least a good four to six hours per day for a week flying across Zul'Drak, an area on the eastmost of Northrend, looking for the herb 'Talandra's Rose' as it grew in the area with a good respawn rate. There was also the fact that not many other players would farm in this area, instead preferring to farm in areas like Wintergrasp or Storm Peaks. I would fly around in a 'path' over the area, a kind of route around the area followed where I know the herb grew in large clusters and as such helped speed up the process. I would follow this path, waiting for my mini-map in the user interface to light up with a small gold dot indicating a herb on the ground. I'd fly down, dismount, pick the herb, mount up again and continue flying over the area. Once my inventory bags were full, I would stop and mill the herbs I had collected before continuing on. On occasion it would seem that the herbs simply wouldn't be there; it was soon after I would usually notice another player flying ahead of me, following the same path, collecting the herbs before I had the chance to. If this was the case, I would turn around and follow this path from the opposite direction.

I tried to mitigate the boredom of the 'grind' by listening to music or chatting to guild members as I went. At times I was on autopilot, not really thinking about what I was doing in the game – just going through the motions, patiently counting herbs, milling herbs, inscribing cards. Eventually I managed to construct a few decks of cards of which I sold on the auction house for many hundreds of gold, while keeping one for myself – the Undeath Deck, which rewarded me the Darkmoon Card: Death, giving me the chance to regularly cause extra 'shadow' damage to my enemy, improving my skills as a damage-dealer.

Spending hour on hour undertaking repetitive tasks in order craft things to trade with other players does not seem to be a particularly entertaining form of play. It also runs counter to the traditional concepts of play described by Huizinga and Caillois as the player's actions appear to be intentionally *productive*. In crafting, the player's project of action is one that aims to "make" something in the virtual world. This perspective has been examined by a number of authors who are also critical of

the way in which *World of Warcraft* frames practice in the virtual world. They claim that players are ‘...pretending to be or playing at being new forms of alienated labor’ (Silverman & Simon 2009, p. 374), a complaint that draws on ideas about the capitalist mode of production. We find ourselves facing a problem regarding how to interpret play behaviour in games that allow or encourage the player to acquire virtual “wealth”, particularly if that wealth is the outcome of virtual goods produced by the player that can be traded amongst other players. I will return to this problem later in the chapter.

Social Play: Dungeons and Raids

Once the player has reached maximum level, and questing no longer remains a key component of character progression, players will typically engage in increasing amounts of group-based play like dungeon and raid instances. Dungeon instances, as previously mentioned, require at least four other players fulfilling certain roles in order to successfully negotiate the encounter and typically last between 30 minutes and 1 hour (although older instances used to take much, much longer). Instances are also generally important aspects of the wider fantasy narrative of *World of Warcraft* and include “bosses”, more powerful monsters that require a group of players working in coordination to successfully defeat. Players can enter and participate in instance runs without quests and will often do so while *grinding* factional reputation, farming specialised currency like valor or justice points and while participating in guild activities.

In instance runs, a number of players are *telecopresent* (Zhao 2004, 2005) in a fixed space in the virtual world that is inaccessible to those not in the player’s group. Group members must ensure their actions are coordinated in order to successfully overcome the dungeon challenges which would typically defeat a single player. Players must also ensure they fulfil their class roles in the group such as tank, healer or damage. Traditional instances in the form of “five-man” dungeons where the player group comprises of 5 players and larger raid group instances between 25 and 40 players are similar in structure, but different in regards to the types of practice in the context of the “game” being undertaken. Dungeons and raid groups offer the player a form of play experience distinct from solo play as my observations suggest:

Many dungeon runs for the first time are quite exciting. The quest chain has led you to this point and is now offering you a greater reward, often in the form of a ‘rare’ piece of armour or weapon. Questing with others, particularly

in instances, is a whole different beast to solo questing. The rules change – it's no longer you against the world, but you against the world alongside others who have potentially different motivations. The achievement of completing a dungeon run is always pleasant, knowing that you were able to coordinate your actions with a group of others to overcome a common obstacle. There is an aspect of teamwork involved, even if no-one communicates directly; there is the sense of being part of a well-oiled machine. You're the archetypal group of heroes facing overwhelming odds.

When runs go this well, it's clear that everyone knows the 'rules' of the dungeon; stand here, don't stand there, attack now, clear adds, protect the healer, and so on. While we could consider these 'tactics' or 'strategies', we can also consider them part of the constitutive social rules of the dungeon run itself, as to not follow the rules will often mean certain defeat. This is particularly the case in large raid groups where a costly wipe can occur if someone doesn't know the rules.

We can treat dungeons and raid groups as more complex forms of *games* in *World of Warcraft* that incorporate the use of rules. While at the same time there are explicit rules that govern what is possible for the player to do (for example, you can't walk through walls or be immortal) that are somewhat explicit, others are more *social*, such as the general or specific tactics demanded in particular instances, or even expected etiquette among players:

'It's my opinion proper dungeon etiquette should begin at early dungeon levels. Sure, the gear will be outgrown quickly, but acting in a mature and sociable manner for all those involved would go a long way towards pointing newer players in the right direction on how to behave with other players.' [Post #13]

(World of Warcraft Forums 2013a)

Players in dungeon instances are typically motivated by the outcome of the instance run itself. The chance of reward leads the player to take on the risks involved with engaging in the activity. While there is, of course, no real physical risk to the player, the player character's armour can get damaged and need costly repairs. There is also the risk of the player character dying which constitutes an inconvenience to the player in the form of lost time. There is the risk of frustration in other players who are not of an acceptable skill level, and finally there is the risk that the loot that is dropped by the bosses in the instance is of little to no value to the player character. In this sense there is always doubt as to the overall outcome (Caillois 2006), a key feature in defining play using traditional ideas.

However, players can also be motivated by the *social* aspects of the instance run. For example, players may involve themselves in instance runs as part of their guild, meaning that the player may not have a truly vested interest in the material outcome of the event run but may instead be focused on maintaining social bonds by helping out other players. This was the case in regards to my guild experiences. We would often engage in dungeon runs as a group to help other members level up or acquire better gear for their character.

Social Play: Player versus Player Combat

Player-versus-player combat exists in a distinct mode of orientation in the virtual world in *World of Warcraft*. Rather than the player's intentionality being directed at non-player characters or objects in the virtual world, the player must now direct their attention towards other player characters, and by proxy, the mediated experience of the other player as a form of social action (Schutz 1967). For the time, the two or more players engage in a telecopresent We-relationship (Schutz 1967; Zhao 2005). Recalling the claim that opposing player character's actions are manifestations of the intentions of a controlling player, the combat becomes an intersubjective, social exchange between two players framed by *agon* (Caillois 2006), or in other words by a competition between them. Player-versus-player combat in *World of Warcraft* can be considered a kind of game, as there is a winner and a loser. The winner's character doesn't die, and receives "honor" points as a reward. There are two distinct forms of player-versus-player combat in *World of Warcraft*.

The first form of player-versus-player combat takes the form of *battlegrounds*. Battlegrounds are instances in the virtual world that reflect more of a traditional 'ludic' element in that they appear to be structured on an archetypal game, as players are formed into teams based on their player character's faction and must achieve a set of objectives in order to win. Some traditional forms of "game" have been incorporated into *World of Warcraft's* design in the competitive nature of battlegrounds play. For example, this could be a game of "capture the flag" like in the Warsong Gulch instance, or a "castle defence" scenario like in Wintergrasp, or one where teams must reduce the other team's resources to zero by capturing and holding "bases" and killing each other, for example in Alterac Valley or the Battle for Gilneas. The winning team receives a reward in the form of honor points and / or conquest points and the match ends. The final scoreboard in the User Interface at the end of the match allows players to compare their performance with other players

from both teams. In arenas, small groups of players engage each other in instanced combat with the sole purpose of wiping out the enemy team. The team whose players die first is the losers, making the other team the winners who receive honor points.



Figure 18: A battlegrounds group of 40 Horde players mounting up at the start of an Alterac Valley battleground instance (Source: screenshot)

The “ludic” element is quite clear in instanced battlegrounds, and one could easily conceptualise the use of Huizinga’s ‘magic circle’ (1955) to explain this form of play as there is a bounded space, there are clear rules, and there is a clear winner. Socially, players who engage in combat are usually anonymous to each other in that they are only represented to each other by their player characters. There is often no reason for direct animosity towards the enemy player (unless they have been attacked by them before). The reason for engaging in combat is often purely because the enemy player is simply that: an enemy player from the opposing faction and it is part of the narrative of the virtual world that there is a natural animosity between the factions,¹⁸ and a reward is offered for a successful kill. Thus the game *demands* players attack each other in player-versus-player battlegrounds else there is no “game” to be played. Even so there are remaining aspects of etiquette and conflict amongst others on the player’s team as my observations exemplify:

¹⁸ I will further explore this aspect of the way in which the game encourages social conflict in chapter seven.

I was in a match of the Battle for Gilneas, a ten-versus-ten battle for control over different areas of the map. The three areas of the Waterworks, the Mines and the Lighthouse each have a flag that must be interacted with and then defended for a period of time in order to hold claim the area for the player's faction. Points are awarded over time for each flag held by a faction. Players must coordinate where they should be at any particular point in the match to either attack enemy-controlled flags or defend ally-controlled flags.

While the match rules are quite simple - control the flags until 2000 resource points are earned - there are a range of typical strategies that must be adhered to. Always have some players defending flags, call out 'incs' (enemy players incoming towards a held flag) and, importantly, FIGHT ON FLAGS. Much profanity has been hurled among players for not following these protocols. Not fighting on flags and being a 'road warrior' instead means that an enemy can stealth up to your flag and capture it.

Yet there is a strange disconnect between team play and the pursuit of combat. Players will scream at each other to fight on flags, but then scream at each other when 'you guys are just standing around' defending the flags. I recall one incident where I swore at another player in chat because he had a go at me for not helping him out whilst he was being attacked by two enemy players. Not my fault he wandered away from the flag.

Hence while instanced battlegrounds reflect the more traditional format of a "game" in regards to a match between two teams of players, the rules of play are otherwise generally quite loose. There always still scope for players to interpret and develop *typical* forms of practice in order to defeat the other team in the most effective way possible. This is unlike, for example, a game of Australian Rules Football, where although the simple objective is to kick the ball between the big posts at either end of the field, there are a multitude of different rules regarding how this is able to take place while governing player conduct on the field (over 100 if I count correctly) (Australian Football League 2014). While still a rule-based game, an instanced battleground in *World of Warcraft* allows degrees of freedom and creativity in regard to player action, allowing the collective development of typical strategies for success, while simultaneously establishing and reinforcing what constitutes "good" performance from bad.

There is a second aspect of player-versus-player engagement in *World of Warcraft* which is less regulated. In game servers (realms) flagged 'PvP', players may engage in combat with players of the opposing faction in most areas of the game world, without warning and without consequence, called

world PvP. By “without consequence”, I am referring to the game designers’ policies on player combat, which state that actions such as ‘corpse camping’ (where one waits for an opposing player to resurrect, just to kill them again) and killing players well below one’s own level (really just for the sake of causing grief) ‘may be considered dishonorable but are considered legitimate PvP tactics and will not be addressed by our Game Master staff’ (Blizzard Entertainment 2014a). The game’s harassment policy does not apply to PvP, as players of opposing factions cannot communicate with each other directly through the game. The loose and unpredictable nature of open world PvP further challenges the clearly defined “ludic” elements of player-versus-player combat in contrast to instanced battlegrounds. Just because this form of competitive combat takes place in a virtual fantasy world, does this automatically render it “play”?

I was levelling my rogue in the underground world of Deepholm, minding my own business, attending to the great number of quests in the area. I noticed an Alliance hunter beating up on a Horde mage. The mage died, and the hunter continued on his way – he had not noticed me. Soon after he came across a Horde warrior also levelling in the area and sent his pet in to attack.

Being a rogue, I stealthed up behind him and targeted him – he was below half health at this stage. I opened with a [Cheap Shot] to stun him, [Hemorrhage] to apply a damage-over-time bleed effect and then [Rupture] to apply another damage over time. The [Cheap Shot] stun had worn off and he was trying to run away from me but could only walk; I finished him off with a few [Backstabs] and an [Eviscerate]. The warrior thanked me and we continued to quest near each other. The hunter returned soon after, but decided to move on to avoid further confrontation.

While open-world PvP combat is sanctioned in PvP servers in *World of Warcraft*, it doesn’t fit a clear definition of a game and is a constant source of frustration to players when they are “ganked” by an enemy. It is unclear whether or not such actions occur in the spirit of play. It may simply be that some players enact a form of “griefing” to intentionally harass, intimidate and frustrate other players, such as entering low-level zones and killing every player and NPC of the opposing faction, or players in high-level PvP gear (armor and weapons specifically designed for maximum damage against other players) “farming” other players for “lulz”.

A Common Aspect of Play

In drawing together the four core types of practice in *World of Warcraft*, the common aspect of engagement with *World of Warcraft* is *character development*. In each of the four kinds of play previously suggested, the player is engaged in a project of action (Schutz 1967) to *acquire* something they did not previously have, whether this is experience points, gear, tradeable items, factional standing, achievements or honourable kills (notwithstanding griefing). The player is trying to make manifest in the game world their intentional action, which in many aspects are demonstrable through the various observable elements of their player character in the game world via their character's visual appearance, acquired items, titles and achievements, and ultimately the manner in which their character can effectively overcome challenges in the game.



Figure 19: Screenshot taken from *World of Warcraft Armory* featuring my main character at the time (Source: <http://us.battle.net/wow/en/character/dreadmaul/Phatninja/advanced> viewed 12th February 2014)

Figure 19 shows a screenshot taken from the *World of Warcraft Armory* featuring my main character Phatninja, showing a three-dimensional model of the player character and a list of the various armour and weapons the character currently equips, and their item levels. The menu of the

left of the screenshot allows me and others to examine the achievements, pets, reputations and other aspects of the character's status. Not shown in the screenshot, but present below the picture of the character upon scrolling down, is the character's other statistics such as primary stats, damage, hit, crit, expertise, and so on. When not in the game, I can view this webpage as a snapshot of my character and share it with others; likewise I can compare my character to others. In essence, figure 19 is a summary of my character's development that holds some sort of social value.

Work or Play?

If I am producing something that has “value”, does this mean that *World of Warcraft* is a realm of work or play? Moberly (2010) argues that game itself is designed to reinforce a capitalist ideology, and ‘what *World of Warcraft* sells players is not liberation and fulfilment, but a spectacular version of the present tense in which the race- and the class-based antagonisms that define the status quo of late capitalism are represented (fetishized) as magical and fantastic’ (Moberly 2010, p. 217). The argument presented by Moberly is that the ultimate ends of such games like *World of Warcraft* is the acquisition of wealth, veiled in fantasy genre. It also encompasses the “commoditised self” in that the measure of the “worth” of a player character (one that can be monetised if one was inclined to trade) is not by the measure of one's actions, but the rewards from those actions, in:

a version of self that has become all too familiar in late capitalism—an objectified version of self that demands that individuals not only construct themselves in the image of the products they consume, but measure their worth almost entirely in abstract units of currency: experience points, achievement points, strength, mana, health, intellect, energy, stamina, spirit, honor, and gear score, to name a few
(Moberly 2010, p. 224)

Moberly offers a somewhat sobering perspective on the way in which play has been apparently commoditised. The typical ends of questing is to generate a character that is of the maximum level, who can then engage in end-game raids and secure epic loot. In this sense, Moberly is correct in arguing that one aspect of the measure of a player is in their character's “item level”, yet this misses some of the important aspects of the experience of play. Conway (2012) also points to a transition away from traditional ideas concerning games and play as unproductive towards a more individualistic, reward and achievement-driven style of practice in which the ultimate ends of play appears as a ‘consumerist illusion’. Players consume time through play and money through monthly subscriptions in order to construct player characters whose worth is measured by the virtual goods

they craft or obtain. It even appears to push some players into seemingly ultra-repetitive behaviour in order to acquire that rare pet or achievement, such as the [One That Didn't Get Away] achievement earned by catching a rare fish in the game world:

'OK, how'd you do it? I've spent 1 week, and 17 hours (according to my fishing addon) working on this in Howling Fjord.' [Post #1]

And:

'Took me 17,000 Fish caught before I got mine on my main...' [Post #15]
(World of Warcraft Forums 2012c)

While players may complain about the grind associated with some aspects of *World of Warcraft*, others take a more accepting approach towards it. As one player commented in the forums:

'MMOs have traditionally been time sinks. Designed to inhale hours upon hours of your day. That's why I play them.' [Post #66]
(World of Warcraft Forums 2014b)

Indeed, *World of Warcraft* can consume a considerable amount of play time, especially for those who have been playing the game for the last ten years. Players can check the total time they have been logged on to a specific player character in the game using the /played command, counted in days and hours. I have played my rogue character, for example, for about 24 days (576 hours) in total, which I thought was excessive, however in a forum thread asking players how long they'd played for, I discovered I am truly a casual player:

'455 days 11 hours.

let that sink in for a bit. no really. think about it....it's quite easy

365 days in a year. WHOLE...COMPLETE...DAYS.

yah. there ya go. now you understand the enormity of it all. :D' [Post #12]

With one player, perhaps sarcastically, deciding to remain ignorant:

'This is a number I no longer wish to know.' [Post #4]
(World of Warcraft Forums 2013d)

In multiplying the amount of hours played by some players in to the average hourly wage, the hypothetical value of time spent playing is astronomical. Spending time in the game working towards having stuff that other player's don't have, including achievements, appears as one of the motivating factors in solo play or *gaming* (Dixon 2009) in *World of Warcraft*. Catching tens of thousands of fish, or flying around the game world for days upon days of game time to dig up artefacts as part of the [Archaeology] skill, or other similar activities appear on the surface as some form of "work", but to what extent can we interpret this in the same way as capitalist work in thinking about the distinct province of reality (Schutz & Luckmann 1973, pp. 22-3) in which the game operates?

Productive Play

Interpreting the observed behaviour of player characters engaging in actions that appear as essentially "neoliberal" and / or reinforcing capitalist or consumerist social attitudes and practices may not be the only or the best way to make sense of a game like *World of Warcraft*. Just because aspects of *World of Warcraft's* gameplay encourage players to produce, and in many regards compete economically, does not automatically infer a relationship to some sort of free-market economic model. In a recent article examining the relationship between work and play, Schulzke talks about how virtual worlds like *World of Warcraft* mirror real-world economic relations (Schulzke 2014). The structure of play in games like *World of Warcraft* 'reframe leisure activity as an extension of working life that is governed by the same rules, and they do this in a way that seems to empower players' (Schulzke 2014, p. 27), and this this reinforces the market system by 'introducing new realms of work and exploitation' (p. 28).

However a contrary position exists arguing that games like *World of Warcraft* could be seen as an *antithesis* to contemporary capitalism, instead reinforcing more historical forms of production. Incorporating the ideas of Marx, Aupers (2007) examined the meaning of play in games like *World of Warcraft*, questioning the way in which the player is employed to undertake tasks in the game. As part of a content analysis of a range of games, Aupers argues that whilst on the surface games like *World of Warcraft* may seem to be reinforcing the idea of "work" as the opposite of "play", this does not necessarily mean that it characterises the concept of alienated labour as a Marxist critique would

hold for contemporary Western capitalist societies. He argued that in games like *World of Warcraft*, 'players have complete control over the means of production' (Aupers 2007, p. 264) and that 'these humanized working environments in games potentially provide meaning in a modern, capitalistic society' (p. 266). It is a perspective that frames play not as the inverse of work but as the inverse of *labour*. This idea of play revises the ideas of authors such as Huizinga, Caillois and Suits by incorporating the idea that play can be *productive*. A key point lies in the context in which the player engages in play in the first place. As Hurka and Tasioulas write:

...Marx held that when scarcity is overcome and humans enter the 'realm of freedom' they will still have work as their 'prime want', so they will engage in the process of production for its own sake without any interest in its goal as such
(Hurka & Tasioulas 2006, p. 230)

My interpretation of this is that in a Marxist utopia, or perhaps a virtual game like *World of Warcraft*, human production is no longer tied to capitalist modes of production and the alienation of labour. In a utopia, society would be free to produce for the sake of production, and individuals act for the satisfaction of producing, of creating. Let us examine these arguments more closely in light of the types of practice I have previously identified.

One of the clear ways in which to consider this puzzle is to pay attention to the ways in which we use the terms "work" and "labour". While in common parlance it may be permissible to conflate the two, in thinking about the practice of play in *World of Warcraft* we need to be more specific. While there are compelling arguments that players engage in forms of work in the game (Lastowka 2009; Lukacs, Embrick & Wright 2010; Schulzke 2014) it isn't clear how practice in *World of Warcraft* reflects a kind of *labour*. A key aspect of Marx's argument that workers are alienated from what they produce is by virtue of their relationship to the capitalist (Marx 2009). What workers produce by selling their labour is something *alien* to them, as 'the product of labor is labor which has been embodied in an object' (Marx 2009, p. 29), removing the subjective significance of one's work. In *World of Warcraft*, however, entering into the space of play in the virtual game world of Azeroth is entirely *voluntary*. The player does not sell their labour to someone else, but instead engages in activity upon one's own desire. To engage in questing to level one's character is to practice the production of a player character of which the player can have a number of different relationships with. While the player character can be a space for identity play (Turkle 1999, 2005) through

which the player interacts with others in the virtual world, the player character can also be seen as the fruits of one's work through the dedication of play. This is exemplified in the way the *World of Warcraft Armory* website offers publicly accessible player dossiers for each player character, allowing players to track their own progress and compare their progress and motivations with other players (Medler 2011).

What we can infer from this is that while the practice of play in *World of Warcraft* is perhaps *productive*, this doesn't necessarily mean that it reinforces a capitalist mode of production or has anything to do with a capitalist mode of production. Players can *choose* what to do with their product, the key product being their player character. They can level it, enhance it, acquire achievements as an exercise in social capital, but also *stop* playing with it, gift it to someone else, or even *delete* (destroy) it. Questing and raiding are forms of productive play that offer the promise of reward as part of a motivational context of player character development. The practices of crafting and wealth creation in the game further reinforce this as players are 'involved in all steps of the production process' (Aupers 2007, p. 265), as players need to acquire the necessary primary resources (ores, herbs, cloth) and to have learned the necessary player character skills in order to craft these virtual materials into useful items. Once crafted, the player has the agency to do whatever they like with the object – keep it, sell it, gift it or maybe disenchant it for magic dust, destroying the object in the process. In this regard the practice of productive play is meaningful in a manner contrary to merely having the object itself. It is not the ends, but the *means*, or the experience of producing something meaningful which is valuable to the productive player, even if at times that experience is a laborious exercise.

We can consider social *playing* (Dixon 2009) from this viewpoint also. The act of engaging in group situations like levelling or instance runs is often a means to an end in regards to what the player will or may acquire as part of that event, be it an achievement, experience points, rare armour or other outcome. This nature of individual gain introduces a tension in the game world, with players appearing to compete over resources in the game environment, including both crafting resources (ore, herbs, animal skins, etc.) and mobs tagged as quest objectives. It also introduces tension in situations where players need to cooperate to overcome obstacles. One of the most striking examples of the individualistic, self-centredness that can sometimes manifest is the *rage* that

can be seen during many random-group battlegrounds,¹⁹ where players will insult and hurl abuse at other players on their team for not meeting their expectations regarding expertise. It is an example of a kind of narcissism encouraged by the structure of the game, whereby the discourse of “we’re not winning” is often framed as an “I’m not winning because of you” mentality. In a forum thread on the *World of Warcraft* forums naming and shaming a player character for poor conduct in battlegrounds such as abusing other characters and ‘ragequitting’ (leaving a battleground instance before the match is over), another player commented that it ‘sounds like 90% of the WoW population’.²⁰ This is not to say that altruism and kindness are not present among players in *World of Warcraft*, yet it appears that the typical premise of play as a form of practice is somewhat focused on individual achievement rather than the experience of social exchange. As one player summarised current maximum level play in the *World of Warcraft* forums:

“Rush to max level skip all the content -> sit in main city -> queue up for raid -> afk till queued -> join raid -> no one talks besides trolling -> raid takes 15 minutes get free loots without trying -> afk in orgrimmar -> bored so revert to trolling tradechat -> wait for new content ” [Post #1]

(World of Warcraft Forums 2014f)

In contrast, other players are critical of those who appear to be bored with the game yet also appear to be primarily engaged in solo forms of play:

‘the problem isn’t the game, the problem is having no one to play with. That’s a totally legitimate issue. If my wife and my friends didn’t play WoW, I wouldn’t have much motivation to play it either, but that’d be true of almost any game.’ [Post #20]

And:

‘WoW with friends will always be more compelling than WoW without friends. Not just pure enjoyment wise; they are also a major motivating force (peer pressure) in keeping up your gear, wanting to support the team, etc etc.’ [Post #12]

(World of Warcraft Forums 2014b)

These perspectives, along with my own experience, suggest that Dixon’s distinction between *playing* and *gaming* (Dixon 2009) is a useful perspective in helping broadly describe the typical motivations

¹⁹ A search using the phrase ‘battlegrounds rage’ in the World of Warcraft forums yielded nearly 1000 threads.

²⁰ <http://us.battle.net/wow/en/forum/topic/8481408563#1>, viewed 12th Feb 2014

of play in *World of Warcraft*. There is a clear demonstration of the productive nature of play through the ongoing process of character development through both solo and social play, which contributes to the development of social capital inside and outside of the game through the qualities of the player character. Yet there is also an aspect of social and cultural capital as a motivating factor, in that playing with “friends” is an important aspect of the experience of play.

Conclusion

In understanding the practice of play in *World of Warcraft*, I have made a number of claims. Although we use the terms “play” and “game” to describe *World of Warcraft*, our definitions of these are quite “fuzzy” and often don’t apply clearly to the types of practice available in the virtual world. What takes place in *World of Warcraft* is not a trivial exercise in which the player has no material investment in the outcome. Instead, the player can have a *significant* investment in their player character, or not. Players have the freedom to decide the value of the fruits of their work. In this respect, play in *World of Warcraft* can be considered meaningful exercise in the fact that it is inherently productive, but that the player has full agency over what they produce. We are able to make a distinction between work and labour in this sense, in that players will work hard to invest time and money into something that they *want* to do, and it is the practice of building and playing with player characters that is the focus of this investment. The forms of play in *World of Warcraft*, as types of practice, simultaneously incorporate aspects of “playing a game” and “making something” that come together to create a unique, “immersive” experience.

Associated with these forms of play is the role of social interaction in the experience of playing *World of Warcraft*. It has been suggested that social relationships are a factor in the motivation for play. Social forms of play may help in overcoming the boredom associated with the grind of some in-game actions typically associated with solo play, such as questing, farming materials for crafting or chasing particular achievements. But before we can explore the different aspects of social action and interaction in the game world in more detail, we need to first recognise that player practice in *World of Warcraft*, as an element of character development, includes player *expertise* as an important factor. In other words, how do players *learn* to do all of this? What are the expectations of player proficiency in the game world? The next chapter will examine the relationship between character development and social expectations.

Chapter Six: Knowledge and Expertise in *World of Warcraft*

I've spent hundreds of hours of time developing my rogue character. I have two monitors on my computer – one would have the game open, the other would be an Internet browser with multiple tabs open, with information on the best skill rotations, gems, enchants, locations for particular item drops, and so on. I'd be simultaneously spending time in the game in the auction house buying gems and reagents, or farming materials to make inscriptions and enchantments, or reforging my gear to more efficiently balance out my stats. Other times I would be standing in front of a training dummy, trying out different skill and ability rotations.

The purpose of all this was to fine tune my character to try and squeeze every last drop of damage-per-second out of it, almost like tuning a car to try and run that extra 0.2 of a second down the quarter mile. A few hundred extra DPS during a boss fight might not seem like much when the monster has a couple of million health points, but that wasn't the point. I had to be sure I could hold my own alongside twenty other damage-dealers in a raid group instance; if I wasn't up to scratch I'd be vote-kicked (involuntarily removed from the raid group)... again. I made sure now, however, that I was consistently in the top ten – it presented a validation for the hard work I put into the character, and the satisfaction of being good at what I was doing.

But during the raid fights, I wasn't thinking about any of this. I was immersed in the act of controlling and navigating the fight; making sure I was to the side or rear of the monster or monsters, or pre-empting the different phases of the boss fights, hitting the appropriate number key on the top row of the keyboard at the right time in the right sequence, responding on the fly to challenges in the environment with the macro keys I had set up on my mouse button. I wasn't really thinking about what I was doing, I was just DOING it.

Players do not read a rulebook or starter's manual before playing *World of Warcraft*. Learning to play the game is not like learning to rebuild a car engine. Learning and knowledge acquisition in *World of Warcraft* is *experiential*. Sometimes, more experienced players will offer other players in the open world tips and advice in forms of apprentice learning (Steinkuehler & Oh 2012), and in *World of Warcraft* matters of practice and strategy are often a topic of conversation in the guild chat channel. However, these practices must still be actively integrated by the embodied player, who must be able to translate their intentions towards the game world through a mastery of the tactile controls of the keyboard and mouse. This mastery allows the player to establish the 'prosthetic' (Klevjer 2012) kind of relationship with their player character in the game world.

The experience of developing a player character through the game's levelling process gives the player time to practice and refine the control of their player character in the game environment, something that like any other mastered motor-skill seems to withdraw into the background of the flow of everyday life. While battling a powerful raid boss with dozens of other players in *World of Warcraft*, for example, players have no time to consider what move to make next, what attack to make, who to heal, where to stand, and so on. As the game demands player cooperation to overcome endgame content, there is an expected level of expertise amongst players at the highest player character levels.

In the context of the physical world, the idea of embodied expertise has been considered at length by Dreyfus and Dreyfus (Dreyfus, HL 2007; Dreyfus, HL & Dreyfus 2005; Dreyfus, SE 2004; Dreyfus, SE & Dreyfus 1980) whose work is among the most prominent on this topic. Yet in computer games like *World of Warcraft* we are faced with a because of the way in which the computer system acts as a physical proxy for access to the virtual world. As discussed in previous chapters, the experience of the virtual world, including our experience of other players in the virtual world, is mediated. The fantastic actions by player characters in the virtual game world are in essence controlled by a sequence of finely-timed keypresses on a keyboard and the simultaneous mouse movements by the player, in which the computer system becomes an 'extension' of the body (Merleau-Ponty 1945; Sommerseth 2007) which extends the player's perception into the virtual world (Brey 2000; Ihde 1990; Klevjer 2007, 2012). Each character class in *World of Warcraft* has its own set of skills and abilities of which the player must know which is the most appropriate to use during an encounter. The player can also decide which skills and abilities are visually present on the User Interface and / or bound to "hotkeys" for quick access.

A far cry from the simple joystick paddle of *Pong*, *World of Warcraft* not only requires the player to learn what their player character can (and should) do in an encounter, but to learn how to master these skills and abilities using the computer interface. Even at maximum character level, much of a player's time in the game is spent mastering different aspects of their character and refining their play technique in regards to combat-based actions in the virtual world. The nature of *World of Warcraft* as a virtual social world means that as well as mastery over one's player character in a combat situation, the player must also be aware of the way in which player performance is typically

appreciated. There is a lot to learn, and we need to consider the significance of this learning that takes place both inside and outside the virtual game world, and how this can be understood as an aspect of social practice by players.

While the last chapter developed the idea of productive play where players have an investment in what they do in the game, we now need to further explore the process of play based on the aspects of character development and player cooperation / competition in endgame content. Upon reflection, the way in which the game's structure guides the player through the process of levelling from level 1 is particularly linear, and does reflect elements of Dreyfus and Dreyfus typology of the acquisition of expertise (Dreyfus, SE 2004; Dreyfus, SE & Dreyfus 1980). As such this may be a useful starting point for further thinking about this in regards to the experience of play in *World of Warcraft*. Using Schutz's phenomenology as a guide, and drawing on Dreyfus and Dreyfus' phenomenology of expertise, what can we deduce about both the process and importance of expertise in *World of Warcraft*? This chapter will first discuss how Schutz and Dreyfus and Dreyfus' respective phenomenological positions could be used complementarily in regards to understanding the embodied expertise of the player and the corresponding motivational contexts of typical forms of action in the virtual game world. I will then explore the experience of character levelling in *World of Warcraft* using Dreyfus and Dreyfus' model as a guide, incorporating Schutz's sociological phenomenology to explore the relevant contexts of player action at each stage, before examining how expertise informs the experience of cooperative play in endgame player-versus-environment content. I present autoethnographic examples to interrogate, arguing that expertise plays an important social role in the experience of play in *World of Warcraft*.

Schutz and Dreyfus

While playing *World of Warcraft*, there are two distinct contexts of action that need to be considered. First there is the player's embodied interaction with the computer system, and second the player's mediated interaction with the virtual game world. We need to be able to appropriately consider both of these contexts alongside each other when thinking about expertise. Schutz's work on the acquisition of knowledge in the life-world is focused predominantly on the structure of social knowledge in the world, or knowledge about the world as people go about their daily life. In *Structures of the Life-World Vol. 1*, he goes into considerable detail discussing the nature of the

acquisition of the stock of typical knowledge, detail we need not go into here. To summarise his work on knowledge of the life-world, Schutz, drawing on Merleau-Ponty, argues that the body is present in each and every experience, but does not necessarily form a 'latent' aspect of everyday experience (Schutz & Luckmann 1973, p. 102). He writes that 'daily life is, above all, although not exclusively, concerned with the mastery of typical, recurrent situations' (p. 139) and distinguishes between that which we learn via the pre-existing structures of the everyday life-world and that which we learn through subjective experience, of which he often mentions constitutes but a small part of one's acquisition of knowledge (Schutz & Luckmann 1973). For example, we typically need not to touch a hot stove to know that it is hot and that we should avoid it – we can learn this merely by being told.

In everyday life, according to Schutz, the acquisition of knowledge occurs in a conflict between a 'routine situation' and a 'problematic situation' (Schutz & Luckmann 1973, p. 115). In a routine situation, an actor can go about their business without having to stop and reflect on what it is they are doing in any great detail. In a problematic situation, an actor's existing stock of knowledge is insufficient for the mundane flow of experience to continue in regard to the experience in question, and these novel elements of the experience are now drawn into relief for the actor to consider. Theoretically, any problematic situation can be 'explicated without limit,' but practically, every problematic situation is only in need of a certain measure of explication to acquire an adequate level of mastery (Schutz & Luckmann 1973, pp. 114-5). Part of the reason for this is that the actor's *interest* in the situation bears heavily on the actor's motivation to engage in this-or-that depth of explication, in determining the appropriate 'relevance' (Schutz & Luckmann 1973, p. 182) of what the actor would consider the problem 'solved'. The choice of explication is determined by the 'plan-interest' of the actor, which is itself part of the ordering of everyday life: 'the plan-determined interest determines not only the choice of elements to be determined but also the point at which the exposition can be broken off and can leave the situation sufficiently determined' (Schutz & Luckmann 1973, p. 118). The explication of a problematic situation begins with an actor drawing upon their existing stock of knowledge, and concludes with this stock of knowledge being augmented by the 'sedimentation of current experiences in meaning-structures, according to relevance and typicality' (Schutz & Luckmann 1973, p. 119). Each person's stock of knowledge,

while on one hand born from subjective experience, is on the other hand also a product of the objective social knowledge of ideal-typical constructs (Schutz 1967).

The spatial, temporal and social structures (stratifications) of the life-world are part of every experience, and therefore the way in which a mediated virtual world like *World of Warcraft* exists as a life-world stratification of 'consociated contemporaries' (Zhao 2004, 2006) suggests that the form of knowledge generated from experiences in virtual game worlds is distinct from the physical world. This kind of knowledge could be considered to belong to its own 'province of reality' (Schutz & Luckmann 1973, p. 157) where knowledge of things in the game world cannot be translated directly into knowledge of things in the physical world. A clear example of this is the differences between our interpretations of killing something in a game world versus the physical world, a difference that should not need to be further explained. This also reinforces my claim from chapter three that our knowledge of other players in the virtual game world is heavily contingent upon anonymous ideal types. Belonging to a distinct province of reality, knowledge of another player in the game world does not straightforwardly translate into a clear knowledge of them in the physical world, as the ways in which we acquire knowledge of them, and the various actions and contexts of action of which a player's character "acts" is contextually bound to the game world and the game world alone.

What is missing in Schutz's work is a robust discussion of how one's stock of knowledge relates to embodied action, our ability to act in the world without constant consideration of things such as our spatial awareness (e.g. Carman 1999; Merleau-Ponty 1945). While Schutz makes reference to 'habitual knowledge' (Schutz & Luckmann 1973, p. 107), a knowledge of bodily movement, of acts that we do 'automatically' (for example shaving) or a 'knowledge of recipes' such as a hunter tracking prey, he doesn't make a particularly clear link between the acquisition of knowledge and the acquisition of bodily skills. He does regard them a particular phenomenological status, however, in a similar manner to that of Merleau-Ponty: 'habitual knowledge presents "definitive" solutions to problems, which are organised in the flow of lived experience without one having to give them attention' (Schutz & Luckmann 1973, p. 108).

It is here that some further consideration of this habitual knowledge as an aspect of expertise in virtual game worlds would prove useful, particularly if we remind ourselves that there is always an embodied player controlling an avatar or player character. The phenomenology of expertise

introduced by Dreyfus and Dreyfus (Dreyfus, SE & Dreyfus 1980) may be a useful tool for analysis alongside Schutz's sociological phenomenology. First developed as part of a research project with the United States Air Force on how pilots develop expertise, Dreyfus and Dreyfus' (1980) typology is one of the most cited papers. Although the typology has changed slightly in the last three decades, the current version of Dreyfus and Dreyfus' model is as follows:

- 1) Novice, where the basic rules are learned, but without any real situational context;
- 2) Advanced Beginner, where knowledge is sufficient enough as to be able to *maxims* for the application of rules;
- 3) Competence, where 'long-term' goals are able to guide the actor's actions;
- 4) Proficiency, where the application of rules is considerably more situational, and the actor relies much more on intuition, but must still decide the best course of action
- 5) Expertise comes when the actor is able to react to the situation without need for pause – or in other words, 'what must be done, simply is done'
(Dreyfus, HL & Dreyfus 2005; Dreyfus, SE 2004; Dreyfus, SE & Dreyfus 1980)

According to Dreyfus and Dreyfus, by the time that an actor reaches an expert level, their embodied actions are more or less intuitive (Dreyfus, SE 2004) and don't require conscious reflection, allowing the actor to engage in action without interrupting the flow of experience – being “in the zone” to use a sports analogy. McDowell critiques this perspective, arguing that ‘perceptual experience is permeated with rationality’ and ‘I do not have to ignore embodied coping; I have to hold that, in mature human beings, embodied coping is permeated with mindedness’ (McDowell 2007, p. 339). Dreyfus responds by arguing that McDowell fails to properly distinguish between ‘absorbed, situated experience’ and a world of ‘facts, features, and data’ (Dreyfus, HL 2007, p. 364). In saying this, however, Dreyfus and Dreyfus remove much of what we could consider ‘contextual relevance’ from their consideration of expertise. Their typology works well when considering a motor-intentional relationship between the subject and the world, for instance in their original example of learning to pilot aircraft (Dreyfus, SE & Dreyfus 1980) and in later examples like playing chess or operating a motor vehicle (Dreyfus, SE 2004). But what about situations where expertise in regards to motor-intentionality incorporates another person, such as a team sport? What about dangerous situations such as motor racing where one must constantly account for the potential actions of others? It appears here that Dreyfus and Dreyfus may fail to adequately account for the transcendental Ego of the Other (Schutz 1942; 1967, p. 97) as a factor in expertise.

As will be elaborated on later in the chapter, I speculate that we can resolve this by insisting that expertise in the social life-world must include knowledge of ideal types in instances where the action in question is *social* action, defined by Schutz as a course of action with a specific Other or Others in its horizon (Schutz 1967, p. 144). For example, in order for a race car driver to successfully complete a race, the driver must not only have mastery over the motor-related aspects of operating such a powerful vehicle, but also have an intimate knowledge of the *typical* behaviour of other drivers, and to also be able to assume that these drivers hold the same typical stock of knowledge. While Dreyfus may argue that this is part of the objective ‘facts, features and data’ (ref Dreyfus 2007, 364) and thus not part of absorbed motor-intentional expertise, we need to ask whether the ability to react appropriately to an unexpected event requires a pre-existing knowledge of the possibility that the situation *could* potentially happen and in what scenarios it could happen, such as a driver not following a typical racing formation around a corner. In any situation where actors must take into consideration the potential actions of others, there is then an inherent unpredictability in the environment. This is especially applicable to multiplayer computer games including *World of Warcraft*. Predicting and reacting to what another player might do is not only contingent upon what the rules of the encounter are, or the typical modes of practice in the context of that encounter, but the assumption that the other player is operating under the same set of rules or objective stock of knowledge of typical practice (Schutz 1967, p. 194). To this end, also, players are able to interpret the actions of the other player character on the screen as indications of the likely level of expertise of the player.

It is clear, then, that a multifaceted approach to expertise in *World of Warcraft* is warranted. Dreyfus’ model of skill acquisition can complement Schutz’s approach by helping breaking down the experiential knowledge acquisition of individual acts. However as I have noted we need to distinguish between while still acknowledging two distinct aspects of experience, the *motor-intentional content* and the *conceptual-intentional content*, to quote Dreyfus (Dreyfus, HL 2007, p. 360). To draw upon an example from *World of Warcraft*, the act of attacking another player or virtual monster using a stealthed rogue:

Press number 5 on keyboard -> bound to [Cheap Shot] ability -> opening move in ‘rotation’ -> requires player character to be stealthed and behind target -> appropriate / possible in some contexts but not others

The deceptively simple act of pressing a button on the keyboard sets loose a number of elements of knowledge and expertise that can be considered. Why is the [Cheap Shot] ability bound to number 5 on the keyboard? Why is it the first move in a rotation, and for that matter, what is a rotation? Why can this move only be used in some circumstances as set out by the game's programming, and why is it only appropriate or useful in certain contexts? How do players learn this stuff, and what sort of 'value' does it have?

I can identify two distinct aspects of knowledge here as it relates to a player's expertise, considering the perspectives of both Schutz and Dreyfus. First, the player must be expert in the tactile / embodied control over their player character in the game world, with the player character acting as an extension of the player's body (Klevjer 2007, 2012; Reeves, Brown & Laurier 2009; Rush 2011) allowing an uninterrupted flow of experience as the player "plays". Second, the player must be expert in the "when" and "where" of the player character's actions, and the broader rules and tactics of play, in other words the objective, 'social' knowledge that Schutz argues is the foundation of the subjective stock of knowledge (Schutz & Luckmann 1973). In situations where the player character is not engaged in some sort of combat or similar interaction with the game world, the player must also be aware of the broader social norms and practices present in the game world that assist in contextualising social action in the game world.

Dreyfus states that 'even when we are reflecting, the body is in the background maintaining its grip on the world' (Dreyfus, HL 2007, p. 356). As I write, my focus is on the structure of the sentences and paragraphs I write, while I give little attention to the keys on the keyboard as I touch-type, and even less to the fact that I am sitting in a room. In a computer game like *World of Warcraft*, then, in the province of player expertise, players are consciously directed towards a particular outcome, such as the defeat of a monster while the body controls the player character via the computer interface in a state of 'absorbed coping' (Dreyfus, HL 2007). We are able, then, to distinguish between aspects of Schutz's phenomenology of knowledge and Dreyfus' phenomenology of expertise. As Dreyfus writes, 'there is no place in the phenomenology of highly skillful action for conceptual mindedness' (Dreyfus, HL 2007, p. 361). In contrast, Schutz's focus appears to be more consistent with this idea of conceptual mindedness by interrogating experience for the motivations behind action in the life-world, and the ideal-typical structures of objective knowledge such as the

why a player would engage in *this* project of action and not another. The revised phenomenology of Schutz for virtual worlds as offered in chapter three is also useful in helping think about situations where players must interact with each other through their player characters, and to account for typical social knowledge of expert practice in the game. The next step is to consider how these ideas apply to the experience of play in *World of Warcraft*.

Examining Character Levelling in *World of Warcraft* Using Dreyfus and Dreyfus' Typology



Figure 20: Level 1 Orc starting area with first quest text shown (Source: screenshot)

The Novice

The structure of *World of Warcraft*'s initial quests for a new player character is structured in a generally linear fashion, introducing the player to the player character and the ways in which the character is able to interact with the game world. Upon entering the game world with a level 1 character, each character race has its own “starting zone”, a kind of safe learning area for the player to familiarise themselves with the player character in the virtual game world. In this zone, the player is guided through an initial questline that introduces the player to the game narrative and their player character's abilities. It allows the *novice* player an introduction to the basic controls in the

game, such as how to move around, pan the camera, cast spells and use abilities, and interact with non-player characters. In the context of Dreyfus and Dreyfus' typology in the 'novice' category (Dreyfus, HL & Dreyfus 2005; Dreyfus, SE 2004; Dreyfus, SE & Dreyfus 1980), introductory quests offered to the player character are relatively context free,²¹ usually requiring the player to kill a number of arbitrary monsters such as wolves. The game environment also reveals itself to the player in a way that doesn't require the player to interrogate the experience in great detail by drawing upon common fantasy elements from Western culture (Aupers 2007; Krzywinska 2006). In Schutz's terms this provides a relatively 'familiar' (Schutz & Luckmann 1973, pp. 137-46) experience, although in a distinct province of reality (Schutz & Luckmann 1973, pp. 22-5). Things such as trees, roads, animals, buildings are easily recognisable and interactable with in much the same ways as in the physical world (such as sitting on a chair), allowing the player to concentrate at this stage on the initial development of the embodied-mediated relationship between player and player character in the virtual world. As one player recalled in a topical forum thread on their first experiences with *World of Warcraft*:

'I still remember being completely overwhelmed by Mulgore [A starting zone in the game]. Heck, I even remember staring at the grass on the ground until I figured out to rotate my camera--lol.' [Post #38]

(World of Warcraft Forums 2012a)

Figure 20 shows a level 1 Orc character standing in a dry, dusty valley in Durotar with a few cacti about and some sort of ceremonial fire burning in the back ground. The player has just been offered a quest that offers a broad narrative contextualisation ('Finally, you are of age...') and instructs the player to speak to another non-player character, seen in the background with a floating yellow question mark above their head. Upon speaking with 'Gornek' the player is offered another quest to kill some 'mottled boars' in the nearby area with little real justification, as shown in figure 21. The location of these boars is indicated on the player's mini-map in the top right corner of the screen.

²¹ They are contextual in regards to the fantasy narrative of the game, but unimportant in regards to the overall development of the player character.



Figure 21: Second quest in Orc starting area with associated quest text (Source: screenshot)

As shown in the quest text in figure 21, completion of the quest offers the player a reward of their choice of common-level armour, some copper coins and some experience points. The player character, an Orc monk, at this stage only has two abilities (other than auto-attack) of which to use to undertake the quest: the monk class [Jab] ability which deals a little bit more damage than an auto-attack and generates some 'chi', and the orc's racial ability of [Blood Fury] which increases the player character's attack power for 15 seconds. I recall the creation of a new character with a class I hadn't played before:

Even though I was an experienced player by this stage, the creation of a new character each time brings to the fore novel elements of play. Each 'toon' brings with it a different experience, a different set of rules. The intimate relationship I had with other characters is missing; I must start anew. I have to learn what each skill does, how it works, how to use it, and when to use it, working through the grind of character levelling again.

At this level of play the player requires little to no expertise to play *World of Warcraft*. Simple hand-eye coordination like moving a mouse and pressing a few keys on the keyboard is all that is required in order to complete the quest offered by the game, which the player is encouraged to do so in order to receive the quest rewards. In considering motor-intentionality, the player is given simple but repetitive instructions in regards to interacting with the game world using the player character,

which can be considered the initial ‘rules’ (Dreyfus, HL 2007) for mediated interaction with the game world.

‘I couldn't believe you could walk anywhere you wanted (if you didn't die first anyway). I fell in love with that fact. The world was huge and open to anyone who wanted to explore it.’ [Post #44]

(World of Warcraft Forums 2012a)

In a social sense, the player is also being introduced to the typical structure of play that will likely govern the majority of their character development during play over the coming hours, days, weeks or perhaps longer. The *quest* in *World of Warcraft* is a ‘course-of-action’ type (Schutz 1967) that forms the usual way in which players direct their efforts towards character development. But as mentioned, for experienced players creating new characters, this repetitive mundane “grind” of levelling can be quite tedious.



Figure 22: Level 2 Orc monk offered a quest to learn a new ability (Source: screenshot)

The remaining quests in the starting zone are similarly structured, allowing the player to *familiarise* (Schutz & Luckmann 1973, p. 137) themselves with both the way in they interact with the game world through the player character, and the structural elements of the game such as quests which instruct the player in typical forms of action. Some quests, such as the one shown in figure 22, require the player to practice and learn a new skill, in this case the [Tiger Palm] ability which the

quest-giver wants practiced against some nearby training dummies. Each new skill is a cause for the player to pause and reflect on how they will use this new ability:

As I level a character up, each new skill or ability is another cause for reflection on my own play. How useful is this new ability? How do I use it alongside my existing abilities? How much will I use it? Should it be easily accessible from my left hand?

The Advanced Beginner

Once the player reaches level 10 and leaves the player character starting zone, other aspects of the game world become available to the player. It is also around this point that the player is introduced to the nearest major city to the player character starting area (such as Stormwind, Darnassus, or Orgrimmar). New players will come face-to-face (virtually) with maximum level players in these areas. Major cities are hubs for the majority of non-combat action in *World of Warcraft*. These cities include inns for the player to rest, banks for players to store items in their inventory, auction houses for players to trade virtual items in the game, profession trainers for players to learn crafting skills, and non-player character vendors of various items from simple “consumables” to epic-level weapons and armour.



Figure 23: Fishing in one of the small ponds in Orgrimmar with the canyon faces in the background (Source: screenshot)

On my first time entering Orgrimmar, the main Horde city on Kalimdor, I was somewhat overwhelmed. It appeared to me as a sprawling sort of camp

dug into the sides of a deep canyon. Where is everything? The inn? The auction house? There appear to be questgivers dotted all over the place... should I go and check out what they're offering or should I continue on with my current quest objectives? Where the hell is my class trainer?

For new players, or even players new to the faction (Horde or Alliance) the major cities hint at the scope of the game. Hundreds upon hundreds of player characters hurry about, each engaged in their own project of action. Over time, however, the player becomes used to the environment (except that I would always forget where the training dummies are) and it becomes a useful "space" for the player to engage in the non-combat aspects of character development, including crafting and trade.

It is also at this stage that other aspects of character development become available. At level 10 the player can choose a class specialisation which determines what future spells their character can learn, and what sort of useful items the player should seek to enhance their character. As shown in figure 5 below, using the monk class again as an example, the player can choose a character specialisation from between a *Brewmaster* (tank), *Mistweaver* (healer) or *Windwalker* (damage), influencing how that character develops, the choices the player must make and importantly that player character's role in group situations with other players. At level 15, talent trees become available to the player, offering another layer of customisation in regards to how their player character interacts with the virtual game world. As this stage the player must make further decisions about the future of their player character in the game world, relying on their limited experience. It leads the player into a more 'advanced beginner' stage (Dreyfus, HL & Dreyfus 2005; Dreyfus, SE 2004; Dreyfus, SE & Dreyfus 1980) wherein it is expected that the player has the hang of navigating the player character through the game world. The player is starting to become more familiar with typical combat situations, and which skills and abilities are most useful in defeating enemies.

'I struggled at first, since I had very little gaming experience, and a friend suggested I roll another class that wasn't as squishy, so I also started a Gnome Warrior. The priest won out, though. It just sort of clicked with me, and while I did many things wrong, such as spreading out my initial talent points across all three trees (It seemed like a good idea at the time!), accepting and completing only one quest at a time (You're allowed to multi task? Really?!), and even attempting to level as Holy (which lasted all of 2 levels, I'm sure), my initial class choice was confirmed to be the right one for me.' [Post #56]

(World of Warcraft Forums 2012a)

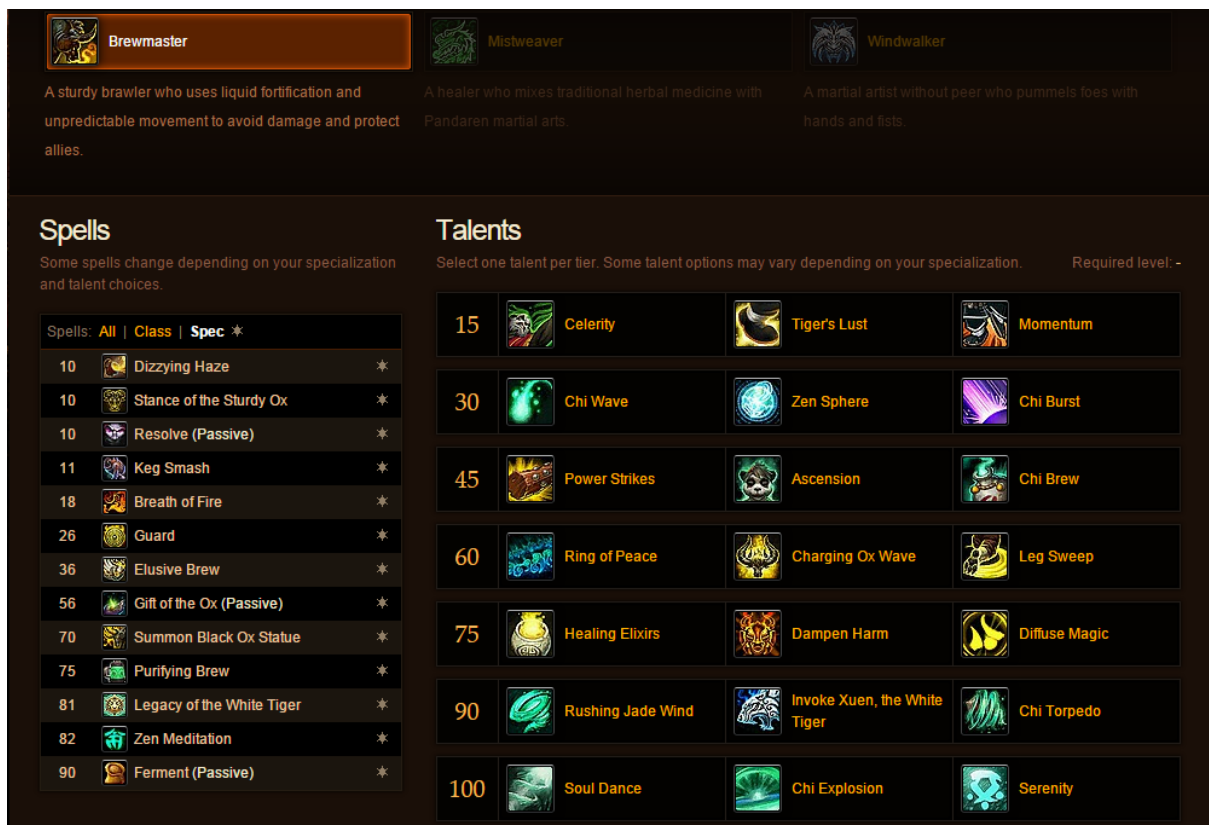


Figure 24: Overview of monk class specialisation, spell list and talent tree (Source: Blizzard Entertainment 2014, <http://us.battle.net/wow/cn/tool/talent-calculator#faa!.....>, viewed 4th December 2014)

I recall the many times across various characters that I have had to decide which class specialisation to choose:

Choosing a character specialisation adds an extra dimension of interest in regards to play. Having played many characters, the choice of character specialisation seems to get harder each time, not easier. I recall on my first character, a human warlock, choosing the Destruction specialisation because, well, it sounded cool. It wasn't until much, much later that I learned that 'destro' 'locks are mostly for player-versus-player combat and didn't have the damage output that other specialisations had.

The introduction of the character specialisation courtesy of the talent tree offers the player an initial taste of the deeper motivational context of player character development and the existing social stock of knowledge of which this is contingent upon, as the utility of particular spells and abilities are held in a decidedly social context. The player must start to consider what spells and talents are 'relevant' (Schutz & Luckmann 1973) for further consideration and/or explication in regards to the player's project of character development. A *Mistweaver* monk, for example, will have to seek out items from quest rewards and the auction house that have the appropriate gear bonuses (such as

intellect, which improves the player's mana pool), while a *Brewmaster* monk will have to seek out items that offers bonuses to armour and damage mitigation. In other words, these initial choices have a significant bearing on how the player's experience of play unfolds in the future. They determine the *relevance* (Schutz & Luckmann 1973) of knowledge in regards to the player's character for as long as the player keeps that character specialisation.

At this stage, then, there is an initial tension between the subjective experience of the first few hours of play and years of socially conditioned knowledge regarding player practice in the game world. By requiring the player to begin to make decisions regarding their player character in the game world, the game's design challenges the mundane flow of experience, introducing 'problematic situations' (Schutz & Luckmann 1973) that require the player to consider. Learning to master one's player character at this stage is in part situational, but still conceptual (Dreyfus, SE 2004) and the player may draw on external sources such as the *World of Warcraft* forums and third-party websites to augment their knowledge of how to undertake quest and dungeon objectives, acquire certain items like weapons, armour and uncommon / rare recipe items and finally as a source to further research player specialisations. I recall how my own experience with the levelling process and how I undertook "research" into my player character as I developed it:

One of the best things while playing WoW was having a multi-monitor setup on my computer. I would often have one screen playing the game, while the other screen had an Internet browser open with multiple tabs with pages of information on the current quest objectives I was undertaking, or the best way to level my chosen professions (such as where the best drop rate for a 'farmable' item was), or the tips for the dungeon I was planning to run with a group, and so on. It was rare that I was playing the game and not having an Internet browser open at the same time.

As my knowledge of the game evolved, so did the manner in which I chose character specialisations. What would be easiest to level? What class does the guild need more of? What have others said about this class specialisation in contrast to other classes? What sort of professions would go well with this specialisation?

In earlier iterations of *World of Warcraft*, when players were given a quest, they were told the name of the area in which the quest objectives were located and not much else. Websites that use live server data like *Thottbot.com* are useful in that a player can search for the name of a quest and be

able to research on a map where the quest objectives were on a zone map, the attributes of the non-player character, monster or item required as part of the objective, and a “comments” section that includes player feedback and tips on that quest, item or monster. Other sites such as *Wowhead*, *Wowpedia*, *Wowwiki*, *Allakhazam* offer similar information and are generally useful sources of information, and players are often referred there by other players in the game and also external forums as a source of reliable information. In later iterations of *World of Warcraft*, the game began to include elements of this in its User Interface, by showing the player on their minimap where the quest objectives were located.

The Competent Player

By the ‘middle’ levels (i.e. levels 40-50 in more recent expansions) a certain level of ‘competence’ (Dreyfus, HL & Dreyfus 2005; Dreyfus, SE 2004; Dreyfus, SE & Dreyfus 1980) is needed for a player to be able to make adequate decisions regarding how their character will develop towards maximum level (endgame) content. Players need to make (or have already made) somewhat committed decisions as to what professions to master, what virtual items to keep in the bank and what to sell and buy. To engage fully with the game at this stage the player must also begin to learn the more ‘conceptual’ aspects of the game as exemplified by social knowledge. It requires the player to make decisions based not on game structure (quests – go here, do this) but upon one’s own experience, and more importantly the experience of others:

I recall running dungeons around level 40 like Scarlet Monastery, Sunken Temple and Blackrock Depths for the first time, not realising that these instances could take hours to complete. Blackrock Depths was always quite involved, particularly with the patrolling groups of mobs in the first open area. I soon learned it was important to be aware of where one is standing, otherwise an unwanted ‘pull’ might occur.

I made sure in these instances as a new player to watch carefully what others were doing, where they were standing, who they were attacking and when, and making an effort to take a page from their book. I didn’t want to be ‘that noob’ that ends up wiping the group.

Observation in group situations is a critical source of knowledge as instance runs and group-based activities become a more common practice at higher levels. In a group of strangers, often the only communication is text-based via the party chat channel. During combat, this means the player has

to stop fighting to type a message which is in most cases not a great idea. Being able to observe and interpret what other players in the group are doing is often pivotal in the experience of that encounter. This form of knowledge construction, in contrast to earlier character levels, is shifting from a combination of game instruction and trial-and-error to a kind of group learning through observation and interpretation of typical practice.

In the game, players can be observed using the in-game chat channels seeking knowledge from other players regarding things like where stuff is in the game world, how to overcome certain obstacles, acquire certain things, the trade value of items, and so forth. In considering this stage of 'competence' in regards to Dreyfus' typology, players are able to start to structure 'long term goals' (Dreyfus, SE 2004) in regard to their player character, shifting the motivational context (Schutz 1967) to one that is less "reactive" and more "proactive". The player has enough knowledge about their player character in the game world, and the ways in which play is structured in the game world to be able to think about goals relating to their player character and start to form projects in the *future perfect tense* (Schutz 1967). Associated with this is the development of a stronger "bond" with the player character:

I've created many 'alts' – characters that are 'secondary' to my main character that I play the most. Sometimes, an alt will only make it a dozen or two levels before I lose interest, but sometimes I will develop the character to maximum level. I seldom think about the characters I never levelled, but feel a certain attachment to the characters I have maxed out. It's not until about level 40 or 50 that one really starts to feel an intimate association with that character; you know that there's no turning back now, that you have to go all the way to levelling this character, you have to see it through.

By this time I've already done some dungeon runs with this toon; the guild knows its name and that it's my character. There's a social association now – this toon exists in the world. It's played with others. People can recognise this toon, and by proxy, me. It's important.

This sort of association with the player character reinforces the commitment to play and consequently the importance of deciding which projects of action to undertake. I am able, for example, to decide to undertake a certain suitable-level dungeon for my player character, locate and / or form a group and tackle the dungeon content in order to acquire experience points and rare-drop loot from dungeon bosses. The game's structure does not likely require me to undertake this.

I am able to exercise agency based on my existing knowledge of the game world and decide that running this dungeon would be of benefit to me, even if I am nervous about my performance:

**I would often get nervous waiting in the queue before a random dungeon run.
Am I on top of my game today? What if I stuffed up and everyone wiped?
What would others in the group think?**

Being aware of the potential expectations of others in a group situation reinforces the importance of a social stock of knowledge that is connected to player character level as a proxy for relative expertise. A level 50 character should be competent enough to run a dungeon with others. At any point in a group situation while levelling, there is an ever lingering question: do I have sufficient knowledge and expertise to engage in this with other players?

Although the game may suggest or encourage players to take particular directions for character development (levelling through play etc.) the player may make decisions contrary to this based on their level of social knowledge, such as by asking other players what they recommend to do at that level or in that zone in the game world. Other players may decide to cease levelling their player character and develop a purely player-versus-player 'twink' character.²² Players may decide to dedicate time to levelling of their chosen professions, or to rush through the game's narrative and 'power-level' instead.²³ For a new player, these decisions cannot be made on the basis of subjective experience alone as this kind of knowledge is acquired based on the reported experiences of others.

Also by this stage the relationship between the player and player character could be seen to begin to solidify. As the player is able to make decisions as to what the player character does, where it goes, how it proceeds in the game world and what skills / abilities / armour / weapons it acquires, the element of productive play as argued in the previous chapter really starts to drive home as a key motivator of action, influencing other aspects of my daily life:

The more I was engaged in playing WoW at this point, the more I would find myself thinking about my character while not actively playing the game. What zone would I quest in when I got home later? How far away was I from the next level, and what new skills would I get? Ooh, I can use that new rare helmet I got in that dungeon; should I go to the Auction House and buy gems for it?

²² <http://www.wowwiki.com/Twink>

²³ http://www.wowwiki.com/Power_leveling

Schutz's 'because' and 'in-order-to' motives are useful here in interrogating the role of knowledge at this stage. The typical because-motive (Schutz 1967, p. 91) here is the desire for player character development and advancement. The in-order-to motives (Schutz 1967, p. 86) of action in the game world are contingent upon the available content for that character's level, be it the gaining of experience points, non-player character faction reputation, gold, honour points, weapons, armour and so forth. It also reinforces the idea that the concept of play in *World of Warcraft* is part of a broader project by the player that is incorporated into their everyday life-world.

In thinking about things from a motor-intentional perspective, the player is able to engage in actions in the game (such as combat) with relative aptitude but will still make mistakes that may frustrate the player (Dreyfus, HL & Dreyfus 2005), particularly in the relationship between the player and the computer system (Rush 2011). I recall many times frantically hitting a button on the keyboard, yelling at the computer in frustration as a group of enemies beat the hell out of me, only to die and realise I was pressing the completely wrong button. Players at this stage will also need to look down at the keyboard often to ensure they don't make errors like this, which in turn means taking one's attention off the action on the screen, breaking the 'flow' of experience (Schutz 1967, p. 45) by shifting attention from the virtual world back to the player's immediate environment.

The Proficient Player

By the time that the player approaches and reaches maximum level, they will be much more proficient (Dreyfus, HL & Dreyfus 2005; Dreyfus, SE 2004; Dreyfus, SE & Dreyfus 1980) in the mediated relationship between player, player character and game world. The player character will have acquired many more skills and abilities for the player to use, and the player should be much more experienced in combat situations, including dungeons, and have a better set of armour and weapons:

On my rogue, the last character I made, the feeling you get as you reach maximum level is much the same. You know the end of levelling is nearly there, but at the same time you can feel how useful your toon is now. I had much more confidence in dungeons and group situations now, as I was much more in tune with my character. I knew what he could do, when he should do it, and was aware that others were increasingly judging me on my performance as a player.

By this stage, a player should be intimately familiar with the skills and abilities of their character in relation to their objectives, and be able to easily plan out encounters in the game world. The hardware interface is seldom looked at, as the player now begins to intuitively “know” where each spell or skill on the keyboard is in relation to their physical body and when and where to use them – this is called a “rotation”. A rotation is the core set of skills and abilities of a player character that a player uses to achieve their goals in combat situations. Developed on the basis of both subjective experience and social knowledge, the rotation attempts to ensure that the player is as efficient as possible in achieving their goals. Knowing one’s role is of core importance in group situations in *World of Warcraft*. For a tank class, this means ensuring that the player character generates the most “threat” for the targeted enemy or enemies, ensuring that they attack the player character and not others in the group. For a healer (particularly druids) this means ensuring that the healing offered to group members is as efficient as possible, so that there is little to no over-healing and that mana is used efficiently so the healer doesn’t run out. For a damage dealer, an optimum rotation means that the maximum damage-per-second output is maintained. A player’s knowledge of their class role is an important social factor:

Upon reaching level 90 I knew I had to ensure that my dps output was substantial enough. I would be running raid content with the guild as well as others, and there would be reasonable expectations of a level 90 rogue in regards to damage output. I spent hours reading up on websites like Icy Veins, player class guides with player-generated content regarding optimum rotations, what gear to find, what gems and enchants to use and what talents to select. Even though I was in a friendly, supportive guild, I felt that there was a wider social pressure on me to ensure that I knew what I was doing!

Some guilds, such as my own, offer supportive environments for players to hone their skills by running dungeons and 3-player scenarios so that members could get experience tanking or healing, for example. However not all group-based play would take place with my “friends”. In pick-up-groups, or raid groups, or battlegrounds, players must usually work alongside other players unfamiliar to the player and thus maintain certain standards of expertise.

Alongside rotation, there is also a greater focus at higher levels on a character’s core stats, modified by a player’s gear. Players need to be aware of what sort of gear they are using and how this influences their performance in group situations. In my experience, understanding this required

considerable reading up on external websites. Called ‘theorycraft’ (Choontanom & Nardi 2012; Paul 2011), this kind of knowledge goes into detail on the mathematics that govern the player character’s actions in the game, a kind of “fine tuning” of the player character’s performance in a given situation. The game’s design, however, influences the relevance (Schutz & Luckmann 1973) of this knowledge by only introducing certain game mechanics and attributes at higher levels, such as armour that can be “gemmed” for extra stats, or the way in which the “hit” attribute is calculated when attacking a boss-level enemy. While this kind of information is easily found on many *World of Warcraft* related websites, there is nothing *in* the design of the game that necessarily requires the player to have this knowledge. The expectations that players have of each other to understand at least the basic elements of theorycraft are in fact social, driven by players as part of the necessity of cooperation to overcome endgame content. Other researchers have noticed this also, suggesting that although social supports appear to exist to help players develop their player characters while levelling, this attitude is not shared amongst higher level players (Schrader & McCreery 2008). They suggest that ‘for more proficient and expert players, collaboration may go unrecognised given its fundamental, structural nature’ (Schrader & McCreery 2008, p. 569).

Typically, then, it is the player’s responsibility to acquire the relevant knowledge of their player character and game content, such as strategies for battlegrounds, dungeons and raids, in order to ensure socially expected levels of performance of higher level player characters. This level of expertise begins to translate here into social expectations based on character level:

Much of my time upon reaching level 90 was spent grinding random dungeons, sometimes with guild mates, sometimes on my own. It was always a bit of a lucky dip using the LFR (looking-for-raid) tool. You would have to expect many more mistakes in a ‘PUG’ run (pick-up-group of random players) like crap heals, an overenthusiastic tank who ran ahead without waiting, a ‘squishy’ (caster wearing cloth armour) who would always be standing in the wrong place taking AOE (area of effect) damage, or simply just some dude standing at the start of the instance doing nothing because he obviously went to the toilet or something.

It was clear when there was a player who wasn’t particularly experienced – you could ‘inspect’ their gear and notice it was rubbish, and it frustrated you; you’d put all of this effort into ensuring that you had your toon in order and knew the fights, and this dude isn’t even wearing plate...

The Expert Player

Expert players must be versed in all aspects of play, both combat and non-combat. Expertise is critically important in group situations, as ‘embodied coping’ (Dreyfus, HL 2007) must be paramount during raid experience as there is little to no time to make calculated decisions due to the fast-paced nature of boss-level encounters. Players are also expected to know each “fight” (what the monster does, when it does it, and what to do / where to stand). The expert player (Dreyfus, HL & Dreyfus 2005; Dreyfus, SE 2004; Dreyfus, SE & Dreyfus 1980) is able to act intuitively through the player character via the keyboard. Their focus is on the action on the screen and the communication with other players (text or speech). They know what to do in a situation, even if that situation is relatively novel. No deliberation is needed as they player knows the capabilities of their player character intimately and can respond immediately:

I recall once on my ‘resto’ druid receiving a phone call from my health insurer trying to upgrade my cover. Being a healer, I was responsible for making sure that no-one in the group died, keeping an eye on everyone’s health bars while also knowing the fights to try and predict what would happen next.

I was able to heal the group successfully whilst on speakerphone to the consultant and have an in-depth conversation with them.

In this example, my level of expertise with that character at that time is clearly demonstrated in that I could perform an act of attention (Schutz 1967) towards a conversation with someone on an unrelated matter while my body ‘coped’ (Dreyfus, HL 2007) with playing the game. I didn’t *need* to think about what my hands were doing, or to make decisions about what spells to cast and when: I could just *do* it. As Dreyfus argues, ‘the enemy of expertise is thought’ (Dreyfus, HL 2007, p. 354). The ability for my motor-intentionality to direct my player character successfully without requiring my full attention meant I was able to multi-task. It was also likely that the others in my group were unaware that I was on the phone as I was not using a headset for in-game voice chat at the time. Using Dreyfus’ typology, this is an example of motor-intentional expertise in a *World of Warcraft* player.

Expertise-at-Play

Success in encounters at the highest player levels in the game require collaboration (Schrader & McCreery 2008) and is inherent in the game's programming. Players wishing to use the Dungeon Finder and Raid Finder tools in the User Interface must ensure that they have the required average item level (weapons and armour) in order to be able to "queue", and be matchmade with other players. This mechanic ensures that sub-par players are less likely to get into these instances and be a hindrance to other players, but at the same time it sets out clear standards in regards to the experience and expertise of players. It is interesting to note here that the Dungeon Finder system has been criticised by some players for making it 'too easy' to acquire the highest level gear in contrast to players in elite guilds who organise their own group runs, with the term 'welfare epics' sometimes used (Paul 2010). Having the required average item level means that the player should have adequate play experience through the process of acquiring these items, such as by running dungeons and raids for epic loot rewards.

In a way similar to enforcing standards of player expertise, game patch 3.0.2 introduced the 'achievement system' where players would receive points and a titled achievement for undertaking and completing specific tasks in the game. Although these points were not valuable for anything in the game, the achievement system itself was soon adopted by players wanting to screen candidates for raid groups. One notable example of this was the *Vault of Archavon* raid located in the Wintergrasp PvP zone, which required a player's faction (Alliance or Horde) to control the area in order for players to enter the raid instance. Every two and a half hours, the area would become a PvP zone where players of opposing factions would battle to either retain or take control of the area, including the main keep. This makes it difficult for guilds to organise an *Archavon* raid in advance, as there was no certainty that the guild's faction would control the area at any given point in time. Hence, raids for *Vault of Archavon* were often put together using the general chat system, drawn from earlier versions of *World of Warcraft*: advertising in general chat for raid members typically read something like '[Player Name] LFM VoA 25, PST achieve.' This means that it is a requirement for players wanting to join the raid to be able to *prove* they had successfully encountered the instance before, by "chat-linking" their player character's achievements in a direct message sent to the other player. This made it much more difficult for more casual players (such as myself) to encounter this content. It was the old catch-22 in getting a job: you need a job to get

experience, but need experience to get a job. In the case of *Vault of Archavon*, you needed to do the raid to learn the fight and get the achievement, but needed the achievement to get into the raid.

Raiding

My experience of endgame content during research was restricted by the small number of players in the guild. While raiding guilds that have an adequate pool of skilled players are able to (ideally) organise their raid teams and schedules, discuss tactics and so forth, our guild often relied on making up the required number of players (twenty-five) by queuing in the Raid Finder system. Although identified by many as a useful tool, Raid Finder has been criticised for encouraging more of an anti-social (perhaps casual) aspect to *World of Warcraft* by removing the *requirement* for more intimate social collaboration and cooperation as found in cohesive guilds (World of Warcraft Forums 2013b). It has also been criticised for being where less-experienced players or more “casual” players are able to access endgame content, with a much lower expectation of player expertise. As one player on the *World of Warcraft* forums remarked:

‘You ever get drunk before you play WoW? LFR is full of those people.’ [Post #11]
(World of Warcraft Forums 2013b)

The popular gaming journalism website *Ten Ton Hammer* published a short opinion blog by a *World of Warcraft* player outlined the ‘top five annoying raid finder personalities,’ categorising some of the negative types of social experiences one may find in a LFR raid (TenTonHammer.com 2013). These included the ‘LFR Mom,’ the ‘Antagonizer,’ the ‘Elitist,’ the ‘Noob’ and the ‘Slacker.’ My own experiences in the game using the LFR system certainly supports at least three of these – players who like to antagonise and criticise others, the perfectionists who think that everyone should know the fight do everything to the letter, and the noobs who aren’t sure what’s going on, can’t keep up and usually die. As much as I hate to admit it, I have on more than one occasion fallen into the noob category:

My heart is often pounding the first time I enter into a new raid boss fight. I’ve made sure to read up on the fight in the dungeon journal, but without having actually ‘done’ the fight before it’s hard to know what to expect. It’s disheartening, and maybe a little embarrassing, to be that guy who gets killed and has to then sit back and watch the other players kill the boss just because I stood in the wrong place and got annihilated.

Poor performance is noticed by other players in raid situations. User Interface “addons” like *Recount* list the overall damage-per-second by all players in a group, and players who are under-performing can be subject to a ‘vote-kick’ where they can be nominated to be booted from the raid group with enough support:

I was in a group with some of my guildmates for the Dragon Soul raid for the first time. I thought I was doing ok, but the group kept wiping due to a lack of overall damage. I happened to be near the bottom in terms of damage as it was the first time doing the raid and I was as yet somewhat unfamiliar of where to stand, when to hit stuff, and so on. My guildmates did their best to guide me through it as we went, talking over Skype. After about the third wipe, the raid leaders criticised the group for the lack of overall damage and proposed to kick the lowest-performing group members. If it wasn't for my guildmates defending me in the raid chat channel by blaming others for poor tactics (and the raid leaders for poor direction), I would have been involuntarily removed from the group.

This is another example of the way in which expertise is regarded in *World of Warcraft*. It is typical for players to become frustrated when raids don't go smoothly, and this frustration is often directed at other players and their perceived lack of expertise.



Figure 25: Players argue about tactics to kill the group of monsters across the room in the Oratorium of the Voice (Source: screenshot)

The conversation below is taken from the party chat in the *Heart of Fear* raid, in the *Oratorium of the Voice* wing of the raid. It was a discussion of strategy after nearly wiping on “trash” mobs, and after one of the two raid tanks had subsequently left the raid group (either they were fed up, or had no idea what they were doing):

- [Player A]: I’ve never stacked
- [Player A]: And I’m not going to again
- [Player B]: Never stack on any trash here
- [Player C]: I’ve run this on normal, you stack or you die
- [Player B]: Next batch avoid the cloud aoe
- [Player D]: Uhh no I just stacked first time ever and died
- [Player B]: I’ve run it H mode, you don’t stack
- [Player C]: Well then fuck
- [Player D]: Well I’ve done it Chuck Norris mode you still don’t stack
- [Player E]: ^^
- [Player B]: Just avoid the Aoe
- [Player F]: Look at that bombass gateway

[Player A]: CC isn't going to work with all the aoe everyone is doing...
[Player D]: Pull
[Player F]: Just look at it
[Player A]: Just tank stuff
[Player A]: Go
[Player F]: Oh man look at it sitting there
[Player C]: They can stun you, it doesn't work with that strat

...at which point one of the tanks ran in to start the fight.

This is a typical example of the type of strategic discussion that takes place in a Raid Finder group. After the raid nearly wiped (when all players die), the type of discussion that eventuates is often not the case of “ok, that didn't go well, how do we do it better” but rather “ok, who're the noobs that don't know what they're doing?” In the example above, the discussion focused on whether or not players should ‘stack’ (stand closely together rather than spread out) during a particular fight. Some players argued that you needed to stack to survive, while others argued that you never stacked. Some tried to support their point by saying they had run the instance on a higher difficulty (normal or heroic), with one player sarcastically saying they had run it ‘Chuck Norris’ mode to highlight the one-upmanship of the discussion. At this point, boredom and frustration began to manifest among the rest of the group, with one player deciding instead to comment on their Warlock portal gateway they had produced.

The example highlights both the social importance of player expertise in group situations in *World of Warcraft* at higher levels, but also the disconnect between the expectations of player proficiency and the social stock of knowledge of typical tactics in collaborative play. At times where consensus on strategy is absent, the social cohesion of the group begins to crumble as well and players can become quite nasty towards each other:

You could often cut the tension with a knife (virtually, of course). I'd be feeling kind of awkward when people started to argue, especially when the name calling began. I knew that I knew these fights, but I didn't feel like I knew these fights enough to contribute to the conversation or argument. I didn't want to add fuel to the fire.

Below is a similar example of players arguing over strategy on the first boss fight in the second half of the *Heart of Fear* raid. The group had wiped three times on *Wind Lord Mel'Jarak*, an insect-like humanoid with nine “adds” (additional mobs) protecting him. One of the typical strategies for this

fight is to have one tank generate threat on the boss, while the other tank generates threat on the remaining adds. Some of the adds can be “crowd-controlled” (CC’d), which means the mob is incapacitated for a set length of time via the spell or ability of a player character. During this time the mob cannot attack, however any damage to the mob will “break” the crowd-control and the mob will be active again. Needless to say, the coordination of crowd-control amongst a Raid Finder group in the absence of voice chat can be problematic if things are not made explicit and agreed upon from the outset of the raid. The following is taken from the party chat after three wipes:

[TANK 1]: lol..

[TANK 1]: I had all the adds just fine...

[TANK 2]: dps needs to be taking off amber prison, [DPS 1] needs to stop breaking CC

[TANK 2]: or kick him now, either or

[DPS 1]: im not breaking shit you dickhole

[DPS 2]: [TANK 2] needs to stop being a douche

[DPS 3]: I know what all of you need

[DPS 3]: weed my friends

[DPS 4]: ^^^^^^^^^^^

[DPS 1]: im high as fuck bro

This again highlights the tension between players who either like to antagonise others, don’t take the game as seriously as other players, or perhaps even a combination of both. After being accused of not knowing the fight properly, [DPS 1] also “admitted” he or she was high, although this could have simply been a ruse to antagonise the tanks. Again, we can see another player attempting to maybe defuse the situation by offering humour (or weed).

The tensions of the different types of players present in raid situations present challenges for players wanting to learn the fights through experience. In the midst of unclear direction and distractions from other players, the environment becomes somewhat toxic. Less experienced players also thus run the risk of becoming targets for more experienced, “elitist” players if they make a mistake during an encounter, especially if this causes grief for the group. One example of this was during the ‘Sha of Fear’ encounter in the *Terrace of Endless Spring* raid, where the tank must stand in the correct place in front of the boss in order to provide a kind of “light shield” to protect the rest of the raid group. With two tanks present, one will pick up the slack if the other one dies (if for any reason the healers can’t keep up):

I watched the first tank die for some reason... I think they stepped too far out of the cone. The other tank just stood to the side, though, meaning the rest of the group started copping all of the damage from the boss, which massacred us in a manner of moments. I just watched the tank, wondering why he was just standing there... I'm sure I was yelling at him through the screen!

Afterwards, players in the chat channel started to hurl abuse at each other, at which time the second tank left the group (likely through embarrassment).

Expertise as a Measure of Cultural Capital in *World of Warcraft*

Expertise can be seen as a measure of the cultural capital a player has amongst the *World of Warcraft* community. Bourdieu's (2004) conception of cultural capital is useful in considering the way in which player expertise is regarded in the game. Bourdieu emphasised the value of education in regards to cultural capital, but he also argued that this form of capital was inherently embodied drawing upon the example of inherited social class (Bourdieu 2004). Arguably in an anonymised virtual world like *World of Warcraft* such capital is softened or rendered unimportant, given that many relevant markers of cultural capital in the physical world have little relevance in the virtual game world. Nevertheless, in *World of Warcraft*, player expertise can be seen as a form of cultural capital, in contrast to social or economic capital (Bourdieu 2004) as it is not institutionally restricted by the game mechanics (i.e. players with poor expertise can still play the game) nor does it hold any inherent economic value as it cannot be traded (although it can be used to generate economic reward as will be discussed).

Even though the capital one may have in the physical world may not be relevant in the game world, the actions of players through their player characters in *World of Warcraft* have considerable social value as has been discussed throughout this chapter. Player expertise is required to gain the highest level rewards in the game, which also require collaboration with other players of equivalent expertise. This embodied expertise (Dreyfus, HL & Dreyfus 2005; Dreyfus, SE 2004; Dreyfus, SE & Dreyfus 1980) (ref Dreyfus) and associated knowledge (Schutz & Luckmann 1973) hold significant social value in the game, particularly when considered in the context of committed, productive play as described in the previous chapter. The outcome of player dedication demonstrated by expert play is cultural capital in a variety of forms. First, there is the 'embodied state' (Bourdieu 2004) in regards to the player character. Although the player is visually absent,

their unique player character is their proxy in the game world, and as such has its own biographical history intertwined with the controlling player. The player character's name and actions in the game world can be observed and recalled by others, particularly those in which the player often has interactions with, for example guild members. Even guilds whose players have never met each other will be able to recognise which players hold the greater capital in regards to experience and expertise.

Second, there is the 'objectified state' (Bourdieu 2004) of cultural capital, where the player character's items that are "owned" by the player form part of the cultural status of that player. Players with extremely rare items, such as mounts from dungeons with low drop rates (like *Baron Rivendare's Deathcharger*) or legendary gear acquired through expertise and dedication (like *Thunderfury, Blessed Blade of the Windseeker*) are held in high regard amongst other players. This also applies to players with "maxed out" gear, such as all heroic-level epic armour and weapons. These kinds of items often form the outward manifestation of cultural capital in the game world, the armour of a player's character being one of the only visual representations of their expertise. Players who have undertaken various in-game achievements may be rewarded specific titles (like [character name] *The Insane*) which are visible in the floating text above the player's head, giving another indication as to the level of expertise of the player.

Finally, there is the 'institutionalized state' (Bourdieu 2004), where player expertise transforms into further opportunities for the player. Examples of this are the player character's level, average gear score and achievements. Players will need to be of certain character levels to enter many dungeons, or have undertaken the required achievements. The most prominent case is where entrance to dungeon or raid instances is restricted by the player's average item level as previously discussed. The cultural capital consequent of player expertise in this regard confers privileges to the player.

Cultural capital in *World of Warcraft* is also boundary-transcendent, having social value both in and outside of the virtual world. Far from remaining in the world of 'consociated contemporaries' (Zhao 2004, 2006), cultural capital can spread out into the physical world and into the realms of consociates, contemporaries, to draw on Schutz's stratifications of the life-world (Schutz 1967). Building from small to large scale, for starters cultural capital can be observed in small dungeon groups, where players soon realise which players in the group are experienced and which are not, and in the event of a disagreement or discussion, which players are more likely to hold sway over

decisions. Growing in influence, guilds are structured in hierarchies (Chen, C-H, Sun & Hsieh 2008) which must have a guild leader, and traditionally had raid leaders who assisted in the organisation of raids. While personal relationships (friendships) can just as readily influence on a player's position in the guild hierarchy, larger more anonymised guilds (Chen, C-H, Sun & Hsieh 2008) are more likely to structure guilds based on observed player dedication and expertise.

On the next level, guilds and even individual players can hold notoriety on realms depending on their actions. Elite guilds will often vie for "realm first" achievements, such as defeating new dungeon content soon after it is released. The associated status of this is held in regard by other players on the server. Elite guilds and players can also be held in high regard beyond game realms and into the wider *World of Warcraft* community, with established guilds like *Nihilum*, *Ensidia*, *Method* and *Blood Legion* having a considerable presence amongst the established player community. This is evidenced through forum discussions and website articles on the game and the different guilds, as well as the official list of realm first achievements by the game's publishers. Finally, there are aspects of capital among elite players and guilds in the wider gaming community, with websites like *YouTube* being a repository of videos of recorded guild runs, and more recently established sites like *Twitch* being able to stream live gameplay to anybody with an Internet connection. There is also the "super" elite level of *World of Warcraft* play, where elite player-versus-player teams can compete at the annual *BlizzCon* convention held by the game's publisher, Blizzard Entertainment. At this level, expertise can translate into economic reward, with the 1st prize of USD\$120,000 going to the best three-player team at the 2014 convention (Blizzard Entertainment 2014b).

Conclusion

Parallel to the satisfaction of developing one's player character as discussed in the previous chapter is the required dedication to character development through the acquisition of knowledge and embodied mastery of players. The acquisition of player expertise in *World of Warcraft* is a particularly slow, sometimes laborious process that is linked with the development of a player character to unlock both the skills and abilities of that character and the game content that is restricted by character level. Once at the highest character levels, typical expectations of player proficiency become ever more important to ensure that a player's capacity to develop cultural capital

and engage in their project of character development is not hindered by the poor knowledge and expertise of others. While the game requires collaboration in order to achieve this, cultural capital can be achieved by both individuals and groups, which is in turn contingent upon a player's dedication to ensuring they have the relevant knowledge and embodied expertise in order to fulfil social expectations of performance.

The next chapter moves into a deeper discussion of the ways in which players interact with each other in socially meaningful forms. Aspects of play like the requirement for collaboration and social expectations of expertise influence what players do in the game, but this is alongside personal associations and friendships that form. We need here to consider the influence of *World of Warcraft* as a realm of consociated contemporaries, the role of anonymisation on the experience of social play and the development of friendships through social ties, particularly in the context of guild membership.

Chapter Seven: The Social Experience of Play in *World of Warcraft*

I recall, many years ago, making my first character, a human warlock, and the initial experience of beginning my adventure outside Northshire Abbey, the human starting zone in Elwynn Forest.

I'd played multiplayer games before, but nothing like this. I was used to first-person shooters like *Quake* and *Solider of Fortune*, where avatars were merely puppets that ran around the screen shooting at each other. This was different. These were people. They had names; they had levels and stuff. They had histories, they had plans. A priest ran past me. Where was he going? A bunch of players were chatting in general chat about stuff I had no idea about, in some sort of shorthand code that befuddled me. What could that stuff mean? What did people do here? This was a huge open world where players not only had choices about what to do, but came up with their own ways of doing it. I was intrigued from the outset – this was clearly a social world full of interesting people who all knew stuff that I didn't. I had to know more.

Although I have been playing *World of Warcraft* sporadically since 2006, including being a member of multiple guilds across different servers, the research period covered in this thesis took place between February 2012 and July 2013. During the research period, I was a member of a small but active guild on the *Dreadmaul PvP* server. It was initially started by a group of workmates who all played the game and decided to start a guild on the same server. Over time, a number of the guild members left for various reasons, and guild numbers dwindled. It was reinvigorated by the recruitment of some other friends of the then guild master, who also invited some of their friends to the guild. This also somewhat coincided with the release of the *Mists of Pandaria* expansion, which gave the guild some common goals to pursue, such as levelling characters up to level 90 and engaging in new content. I developed three level 90 player characters during my time with the guild. My first was a Blood Elf Death Knight named “Ulthuan”, whom served as my main character for a while. I then built an ‘alt’ (alternate) character, a Tauren druid named “Ulthoras”, whose primary spec was restoration: a healer. Both characters saw me through during the *Cataclysm* expansion. Finally, when the *Mists of Pandaria* expansion was released I started a new character called “Phatninja”, a Pandaren rogue.

Although the size of the guild limited the capacity for me to engage in some high-end game content (like heroic raids), during the research period I was able to canvas a broad range of experiences in the

game like questing, levelling, open-world combat, group dungeons, battlegrounds and some raids. From my time spent playing, it is clear that social interaction in *World of Warcraft* is an important aspect of play. However, this is not a straightforward affair. There is a multitude of contexts in which players can interact in this mediated space, which contribute to a dynamic social experience. Steinkuehler and Williams (2006) argue that MMOs like *World of Warcraft* are sites for players to develop forms of 'bridging social capital'. This is evident in how *World of Warcraft* players are consistently interacting with different players in the virtual game world in a variety of ways and degrees of intimacy. *World of Warcraft* can be thought of as a kind of informal 'third place' of social interaction (Steinkuehler & Williams 2006) where players can hang out alongside others and engage in various forms of play together.

On the other hand, players can establish friendships and partnerships that can extend beyond the virtual world and these kinds of social interactions contribute to the enjoyment of play in the game (Cole & Griffiths 2007). Indeed, it has been suggested that social interaction is a key factor in player engagement with *World of Warcraft* (Chen, VH-h & Duh 2007; Kang, Ko & Ko 2009). These relationships are also functional within the game, allowing players to organise and coordinate their efforts to overcome challenging game content. *Guilds*, collectives of players that form together under the same banner, are seen as sites for developing social capital through shared goals such as levelling guilds, raiding guilds or PvP guilds (Chen, C-H, Sun & Hsieh 2008; Williams et al. 2006).

But what is the experience of all of this? Drawing on my revision of Schutz's phenomenological sociology, I ask: What is the role of social action and interaction in the typical experience of play in *World of Warcraft*? In this chapter I explore the different forms of player interaction in the game to further interrogate why social interaction has been highlighted as an important factor in player engagement. After first discussing the key elements of how players interact with each other in a mediated space using Schutz's phenomenology, I use these elements to break down the different ways in which players can interact in the game and the different contexts in which this occurs. On the one hand, framed as a site of conflict, *World of Warcraft* encourages players to engage in combat with other players by politicising the fantasy narrative and utilising game design to determine how players can or cannot interact with each other. On the other hand, the game

encourages players to form enduring social partnerships in order to overcome game challenges, including defeating the “enemy”.

Social Action in *World of Warcraft*

In recalling Schutz’s definition of social action as a revision of Weber’s original definition, social action has at its ‘thematic core’ the Other (Schutz & Luckmann 1989, p. 68). It seeks to intentionally modify the consciousness of the Other, directly or indirectly. It may be action that causes that person to pay attention to you, such as a face-to-face conversation, or it may be indirect in the form of a letter, or it may be mediated, for example by the use of a telephone or other device (Schutz & Luckmann 1989, pp. 88-90). The concept of mediated social action means that the meaning of the action itself has at its thematic core the intention to modify the consciousness of another, and is contextually bound to the particular technology and / or virtual space mediating the relationship between the actors: a theme discussed in previous chapters. Schutz also highlighted the ways in which actors are able to interact with each other in the life-world and how the associated degrees of anonymity influence the meaning-context of the action or project in question (Schutz 1967). This is particularly the case if actors are interacting in a virtual world. The player character in *World of Warcraft* acts as a proxy for the controlling player, a visual representation of their intentionality towards the game world. Players are able to interpret each other’s actions meaningfully in the game world through the representative actions of their player characters, and as such, develop an understanding of the *typical* forms of practice in the game world.

Developed from Schutz’s phenomenology, Zhao’s concept of ‘consociated contemporaries’ (Zhao 2004, 2005, 2006) is useful here. A truncation of two of Schutz’s stratifications of the life-world, the concept of consociated contemporaries when applied to virtual worlds can help us with a starting point for interpreting social interaction in the game world. In the physical realm of consociates, of direct social interaction in everyday life, actors engaged in mutual interaction enjoy a shared meaning context that is intersubjective, whilst their social distance is at that time immediate. In the realm of contemporaries, or those who exist outside the primary ‘zone of operation’ (Schutz & Luckmann 1973, p. 44), the shared meaning context is in contrast objective, contingent upon anonymous ideal types for meaning interpretation (Zhao 2004, p. 102). A mediated, virtual world like *World of Warcraft* instead finds a shared meaning context that is a ‘truncated’ subjective, in

that it only reflects but a 'segment' of the other person, and correspondingly the social distance is both intimate and anonymous (Zhao 2004).²⁴ Players are able to share only a virtual space, and can only interact with each other through their player characters. As such, interacting with other player characters in the game influences embodied players, creating a mediated form of social action.

A Taxonomy of "Closeness" in *World of Warcraft*

Just as the world of contemporaries covers a wide span of possible types of social experience between 'where they can almost be seen' and 'where they are by definition forever inaccessible to experience' (Schutz 1967, p. 181), the nature of social interaction in *World of Warcraft* can be thought about the same way.

At the peak of *World of Warcraft*'s popularity there were over twelve million players spread out over hundreds of realms, meaning that aside from the more recent introduction of cross-realm zones and connected realms, most player characters in *World of Warcraft* would never have the opportunity to interact with each other in-game. Players will associate with each other in different modes, depending on their 'distance' or level of anonymity, just as in the corporeal world between consociates (intersubjective *We*-relationship) and contemporaries (ideal-typical *They*-relationship) (Schutz 1967). In the virtual world of *World of Warcraft*, technological design sets the limits to player interaction in augmentation to the laws of physics. Based on our understanding of the relationship between player and game world developed in the thesis so far, I offer a possible typology of the ways in which players can interact with each other in *World of Warcraft* in the realm of consociated contemporaries, from the furthest to the least social distance.

Player Characters in Other Realms

Players with characters on separate realms are unlikely to ever interact in the game, because of the technological limitation of the number of player characters that can populate a realm and be on a player's screen at any one point in time. Player characters from separate realms may in some circumstances interact through 'battlegroups' and 'connected realms',²⁵ where player 'parties' or 'groups' can be formed from a player base that covers more than one realm. A more recent development in the game is cross-realm zones, where players from other realms can interact in the

²⁴ I will argue that the terms 'intimate' and 'anonymous' can be considered opposing ends of a broad spectrum in regards to social interaction in *World of Warcraft*, with varying degrees of 'closeness' as will be discussed.

²⁵ <http://us.battle.net/wow/en/blog/10551009>

open world however this is generally limited to lower population realms. In this aspect of stratification, the majority of the millions of current *World of Warcraft* players exist to each other only as contemporaries, understood as the anonymous ideal type “*World of Warcraft* player”.

Player Characters on the Same Realm

Realms can potentially support tens of thousands of player characters, although not all players will be online at the same time. On high population servers, some player characters may never come into contact with each other whether in the open world, the world’s capital cities or even through instances and dungeon groups. Assuming a roughly even spread of player characters by faction (a 50/50 split, which is never usually the case), this will further make it unlikely that many characters will ever have the opportunity to interact. Players become consociated contemporaries here, but on the contemporary end of the scale. It is possible that they can become consociates in the game but until that stage they are unaware of each other’s direct existence, but may instead perhaps interact indirectly and anonymously, for example by using the game’s auction house mechanic.

Player Characters in the Open World

While exploring the open world, players will come across other player characters engaging in activities like questing and resource gathering. Although these players and player characters may not interact, they may observe each other and therefore become aware of each other’s existence. The relative closeness of player characters in these situations may increase the likelihood of engaging in social interaction, hence shifting the experience further towards the consociate end of the scale. Players have the opportunity here to engage in more direct social action via their player characters. If they are factional allies, they can group up together to engage in quest activities, for example. If they are factional enemies, they can engage in player-versus-player battle. In either case, players may also decide to continue on with what they were doing instead.

Players in Major Cities

In a similar way as in the open world, player characters in major cities that are densely populated are again more likely to need to interact with each other, generally via trade or chat, but sometimes in duelling if players are bored.²⁶ Even though players have the option to interact with each other or not, in any circumstance due to the higher concentration of player characters in a major city at any

²⁶ Or if they are hanging around the front gates of Orgrimmar.

one time, the player is forced to acknowledge the existence of other player characters to a greater degree. It contrasts to the open world in that the player's attention may be more frequently diverted towards other players. A real world example of this might be the difference between walking through a forest compared to a city street.

Open World Groups

Groups (parties) shift the needle further towards the 'contemporary' side in that players are now *required* to engage in social interaction. It signifies a clear shift from the *potential* for shared experience to *certain* shared experience. While players in the open world may acknowledge the existence of one another in passing they may never undertake a "project" of social action (Schutz 1967) that considers the other player. As discussed previously, the meaning context of play changes when one must incorporate the actions and projected intentions of Others, and is the case in group play in *World of Warcraft*. The existence of an in-game player group, and the fact that players must make a conscious decision as to whether or not to join a group, means that *individual* play must now become *social* play, even if the social element is still heavily mediated and the player must continue to rely heavily on ideal types as interpretive schemes. Players must now acknowledge and consider the other player or players as part of their own actions.

Dungeon Groups

Dungeon groups introduce a greater expectation of player interaction in contrast to open world groups. The design of the game require players in dungeon groups to fulfil specific roles (tank, healer, or damage) in order to overcome more complex and difficult challenges. This increases the level of complexity of social interaction in two ways. One, it means that players must communicate and coordinate with each other more frequently and in greater detail, and two, it draws on the ideal-typical ideas of player expertise much more in that players are expected in most occasions to know what to do in an instance group and how their player class must respond in kind. Even in an instance run where players barely communicate either by text or voice, there is the assumption that all players in the group are proficient to a level in which a player's expertise is not drawn into question, and all players can rely on typical experience to get through the encounter. As such, the project (Schutz 1967) in regards to a dungeon scenario must in some way acknowledge the role of others in the group.

Raid Groups

While similar to dungeon groups, raid groups are another step up, representing a much greater challenge for players in terms of difficulty and complexity. Raid groups include more players (between 10 and 40) plus a greater expectation of player class proficiency and knowledge of instance encounters. Player-versus-player battlegrounds can also be interpreted in the same way due to the requirement of a greater number of players attempting to coordinate with each other.

Guilds and Guild Activities

Finally, the most socially intimate setting in which players can interact in *World of Warcraft* takes place inside guilds and guild activities. Although dungeon and raid groups can be comprised solely of guild members who are known to each other, they can also incorporate or be entirely comprised of “random” players, as is the case in a “pick-up-group” (PUG).

Guilds allow the greatest opportunity for players to get to know each other more intimately on a personal level and become more like contemporaries than consociates. In this sense, players in guilds can interact with each other less as anonymous ideal types based on aspects of their player character (such as level, class, item level) and more in regards to the subjective characteristics of the controlling player, such as their real name, their location, what they like, their subjective motivations, and so forth. Such information is crucial in establishing friendships in the game which can lead to long-lasting friendships *outside* of the game (Williams et al. 2006).

The relevant context of meaning of a project incorporating social action (Schutz & Luckmann 1989) in *World of Warcraft* depends on the way in which players interact along the spectrum of consociated contemporaries, and therefore the game itself acts as the basis for this technological mediation influencing how, where and when and in what situations players can interact. This leads us to a second order question of how these interactions are *framed* by the game. We can start to answer this by asking a simple question when interrogating an event: *Is the other player or players familiar or unfamiliar to the player and to what extent?* In answering this question, we can then ask, *if the other player is unfamiliar, are they a ‘friend’ or an ‘enemy’ in the political sense? Conversely, if they are familiar, then to what extent is this familiarity?* Are they someone the player has grouped with before, are they a guild friend, or do they know the player in-real-life? Interrogating typical situations of social interaction in *World of Warcraft* will help in establishing the typical contexts of

meaning of how players play with each other in the game. Overall there are three key paradigms of social interaction in *World of Warcraft*: *Allied strangers*, *enemy strangers*, and *allied friends*, of which the remainder of the chapter will develop.

The Political World of *Warcraft*

One of the first things players figure out in *World of Warcraft* is that practically everything is trying to kill you, and your best course of action is usually to kill it first. The game's fantasy narrative pits two factions against each other: the *Alliance* and the *Horde*. Each faction is made up of a number of races exclusive to that faction, playing a role in the political organisation of the game (Monson 2012), and this mythology of racial tension helps provide a contextual 'thickness' of meaning and a tension in regards to play (Krzywinska 2006). There are clear enemies of the player in both non-player characters and, importantly, other player characters. As this is the case, any social interaction in *World of Warcraft* arguably has a political dimension to it and it may be useful to incorporate another perspective on the matter, especially considering Schutz's writings have little dealings with the concept of power.

Schmitt's *The Concept of the Political* is one prominent, often used text when thinking about political conflict in the physical world, and we may find it useful here. Schmitt starts with a very simple but clear idea:

The specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy

(Schmitt & Schwab 2008, p. 26)

In Schmitt's duality, the political enemy is framed as something that is fundamentally different, as something 'different and alien', and whose enmity exists independent of other antitheses (Schmitt & Schwab 2008, p. 27). In the case of *World of Warcraft*, membership of the Alliance or Horde faction is something that the player chooses during initial character creation, simply by choosing a character race,²⁷ reinforcing the political essentialism in the game (Monson 2012). By virtue of choosing a particular character race, the player automatically becomes enemies with players of the

²⁷ Notwithstanding the Pandaren race, of whom the player must choose a faction upon reaching level 10.

opposing faction. The very fact that the game divides players into factions makes *World of Warcraft* a ‘political world’ (Schmitt & Schwab 2008, p. 53)

Aside from pitting the player against the virtual environment, the game’s mechanics go further to set up the social play experience as one of conflict by limiting the ways in which players can interact. Players of opposing factions cannot directly speak to each other within the game, nor can they trade. They can, however, attack each other, or make gestures at each other using the /emote command in the chat window. While such gestures can be as innocent as a wave, sometimes players will /spit on characters of the opposing faction, or laugh at their misfortune after being killed. Enemy player “nameplates” will appear in red if the player is attackable. In contrast, allied players’ nameplates appear in blue or green. Furthermore the game developer’s *Ongoing Harassment Policy* doesn’t apply to player-versus-player servers (Blizzard Entertainment 2014a), meaning that in the absence of direct communication, players can harass other players of the opposing faction basically as they see fit.

It is important to distinguish between other players that a player has a particular gripe with, and an enemy player who exists, fundamentally, as an anonymous entity. Schmitt’s concept of the political helps clarify this by stating:

He is also not the private adversary whom one hates. An enemy exists only when, at least potentially, one fighting collectivity of people confronts a similar collectivity’
(Schmitt & Schwab 2008, p. 28)

In *World of Warcraft*, players of the same faction can have disagreements and even heated arguments over things in certain circumstances, as suggested by some of the evidence in the previous chapter. Yet this does not make them a political enemy: only players of the opposing faction can be an enemy. Schmitt writes that ‘the friend, enemy, and combat concepts receive their real meaning precisely because they refer to the real possibility of physical killing’ (Schmitt & Schwab 2008, p. 33). This is reinforced in the game by the fact that only players from opposing factions can kill each other. Players of the same faction can engage in “duels” but only down to low health.

We should pause here and consider the way in which the term ‘killing’ is being used. As it is clear that players don’t actually *kill* each other in *World of Warcraft*, we need to think about whether or not this aspect of Schmitt’s concept is applicable verbatim. To reiterate, action in *World of*

Warcraft, including knowledge of typical practices, and the typical meanings of signs and symbols (like language) belong in a distinct province of reality (Schutz & Luckmann 1973, p. 157) and therefore a distinct context of meaning. Player's don't *actually* hate or kill each other. There is no evidence of real-world *World of Warcraft* hooliganism akin to something like soccer hooliganism. In web forum thread on popular gaming site *GameFAQs* titled *Would you guys have a fistfight IRL for the glory of your faction?* the answer was resoundingly in the negative, with one user remarking:

'No.

Any stupid, insolent, uncontrollable jackass that gets thrown in jail on account of a fight over a VIDEO GAME deserves to sit there and rot.

The only question of any worth relative to this is, "why did this question even come up?" [post #7]

(GameFAQs 2012)

Indeed, players often have a number of characters that belong to both factions. I spent my first few years of play as an Alliance character, but developed a number of Horde characters purely because my new guild was on the Horde side. We can still say that *World of Warcraft* is a political site and much of the game narrative and design is framed in terms of 'friend' and 'enemy'. This distinction belongs to the context of meaning in the virtual game world, and perhaps to some banter between *World of Warcraft* players, but that's about it. The game doesn't incite players to go out and commit murder to any degree.

At this point we have a starting vocabulary and set of concepts for interrogating typical forms of interaction in *World of Warcraft*. Players interact in a mediated virtual world that is framed around a fantasy narrative of political conflict, in Schmitt's sense. Players are divided into factions that can "kill" each other in the game world and are a persistent enemy. Yet players can develop more intimate relationships to varying degrees, depending on the manner of interaction. While Schmitt uses the words 'friends' and 'enemies', I will use the term *ally* to instead distinguish between factionally allied players that have cursory, more anonymous interactions and use the term *friend* for players that have developed more intimate friendships through substantiated interactions. I leave the term *enemy* to define a player of the opposing faction. Each term carries with it typical forms of social interaction which will be further explored.

Strangers in *World of Warcraft*

Allies in the Open World

Being a factional ally in *World of Warcraft* doesn't necessarily mean that they are a friend in the affectionate sense. There are many aspects of play that encourage players to compete with each other for resources. One of the aspects of game design held responsible for this is the "tagging" system, where if a player attacks a monster, that monster has been "tagged" by that player and only that player can receive the loot or quest objectives for that kill. In situations where players are grouped together, however, loot is shared between players (all players get a share of gold, and loot drops are sequential, i.e. player A, then player B, then player C...). Some players have argued that the tagging mechanic is a contribution to the individualistic style of play in *World of Warcraft*:

'Mob tagging *encourages* antisocial behavior. This is basically a proven fact at this point. It causes people to see other players as "competition" rather than other players.'

I've played games without mob tagging (namely Elder Scrolls Online), and people are a LOT more helpful there than they ever were in WOW. If you're having difficulty killing something and a random stranger wanders by, there is a fair chance they will stop and help you, because if they do then they get loot too.' [Post #41]
(World of Warcraft Forums 2014d)

Although monsters and crafting items will eventually "respawn",²⁸ the presence of other players trying to kill the same monsters is often a hindrance to a player trying to solo quest (World of Warcraft Forums 2014c). Yet there are many circumstances where players must engage in a decision regarding another player in the open world, with one notable example being the case in hunting *rare mobs*. Rare mobs are elite monsters that have a considerably long respawn timer, sometimes 12-24 hours, and are therefore not always where they are meant to be found. For some players engaged in a project to hunt down rare mobs (often for the achievement) competition can be fierce. Players can wait hours in the same place in the game world waiting for the mob to appear, only to have it tagged by another player if that player attacks it first. The question of etiquette has

²⁸ Monsters and trade items such as herbs and mining nodes are on what is called a respawn timer. After a monster is killed, their corpse will lie on the ground for a length of time before it disappears. Minutes later, the same monster will appear again in the same place or nearby. Similarly, if a herb is collected, another herb will appear somewhere nearby soon after. Respawn times vary; long respawn times are source of frustration if there are multiple allies in the area on the same quest.

emerged, generating different opinions about what to do in this scenario. This is evidenced by a 24-page forum thread (World of Warcraft Forums 2013c), with the general consensus, consistent with my typical experience being:

‘If someone tags it I leave it alone. If they're in trouble, I'll help them out. Now if they've caused me ire, I'll leave them alone to it. I'm not making a reputation of myself to be a jerk.’ [Post #9]

Others disagree with this approach, arguing that:

‘I don't see rare spawn competition as unethical.’ [Post #51]

And:

‘I don't really care. Unless the rare has someone's name on a piece of paper stapled to their butt, it's free for all.

‘I'm an opportunist, not a charity worker.’ [Post #60]
(World of Warcraft Forums 2013c)

In any case, the player's course of action requires that they must acknowledge the other player character and make a decision that will influence the other player in a positive or negative way, making part of the initial project a social action (Schutz & Luckmann 1989). There appears to be two typical kinds of open world interaction with other allied players in this scenario. One is to go it alone and compete with other players for resources, while the other is to group with others meaning players in the group can share quests and quest objectives. My experience in the game suggests that the former case is more typical, rather than players actively seeking each other's cooperation. Questing reinforces the race to the top for players wanting to reach the level cap as fast as possible. As one player argued in a forum thread discussing the problems of questing alongside other players:

‘Because things die so easily, there's no incentive to group up. And since we're pretty much solo questing, we are fighting each other for the first tag to get quest credit.

I think the only time I have an incentive to group up is when it is wall to wall people and it ends up being faster by being grouped up.’ [Post #5]
(World of Warcraft Forums 2014d)

Others say they avoid playing during the release of expansions due to the high number of players on at any one time:

'I recall trying to play Cataclysm at midnight release. It was pointless: I couldn't get a single quest objective because of all the people. It was release day of Burning Crusade all over again.

I would love to log on to Warlords of Draenor at midnight, but the reality is, I'm not going to. I'm going to let everyone zerging for world firsts and general release excitement die down during the day while I'm at work, and I'll play once I'm home.'
[Post #19]

(World of Warcraft Forums 2014d)

Sometimes, players just want to level on their own, and will make a clear decision when faced with the presence of another player to try and compete with them to get the quest done sooner than they will.

'I'm all for shared tagging. Speaking as an asocial player, I'm telling you right now, I'm not going to group with anyone outside of an instance. Leveling time is MY time.' [Post #78]

(World of Warcraft Forums 2014d)

My own play experiences reinforce the different modes of typical social interaction in the open world:

You can sometimes observe when players arrive at a zone and pause whilst considering what to do after noticing other players questing in the area. The body language of their player character can be interpreted as taking stock of the situation before deciding what to do. There are three possibilities here: turn around and come back later, try to compete with others for the limited resources in the area, or group together and possibly achieve common goals sooner.

Usually players will eye each other off from a distance and somewhat keep clear of each other, unless it is clear as day that maybe grouping up would be more beneficial.

PUGs (Pick-up-groups)

Even though allied open world play in *World of Warcraft* appears competitive and sometimes antisocial, it doesn't mean that all experiences are like this. As previously mentioned, in higher density zones players will group up and work together for mutual benefit as I have experienced:

Sometimes other players will /wave to you in a gesture of goodwill; if you are waiting for a mob or group of mobs to appear, sometimes they will send you a group invite.

I've had some good times running around with strangers levelling together.

In a situation where a group has formed to quest together, the context of play for group members changes for the immediate future (i.e. the life of that group),²⁹ as all members of the group now need to recognise the mediated, transcendent alter Ego of the other player or players and incorporate this new aspect into their current 'project' in an *intersubjective motivational context* (Schutz 1967, p. 159, original emphasis). A player's actions no longer only affect their own player character, but the other player character or characters in the group. Depending on character level, player expertise becomes a factor as suggested previously. For group cohesion, players also need to be directed towards the same goals typically by undertaking the same quests. Agreements need to be made as to the goals of the group in regards to the purpose of grouping and what quests will be undertaken. The player can no longer be entirely selfish in their desires as would be the case with solo levelling, or to set their own agenda as to which quests to do first, when to go hand them in, when to go have a bathroom break or a smoke, and so on. The existence of the group forms a kind of social contract in which there are expectations of each of the other members, however there are recognised limits to this. In a typical case, in regards to a group formed using the Dungeon Finder mechanic, each player is more focused on the ends rather than the means:

'Pugs are like a box of exploding chocolates.'

²⁹ The existence of a group in *World of Warcraft* is a recognised aspect of the game's design. Although a 'group' of players may be performing coordinated action, players must be *invited* to a party by having their player character specifically selected and an invite sent by another player. The player receives a notification in the middle of the screen with the text "[player game] invites you to a group" with the selection boxes [Accept] or [Decline]. Upon joining a party, character icons of the other party members appear as part of the game interface on the left of the screen, underneath the player's main character icon. Party members automatically share experience points and shared quest objectives. The group dissolves when all members leave the party or the group leader disbands the group.

I would never expect a randomly made team of basketballers to win anything. Their individual skills may be amazing but the interaction, like communication and plays, is just not there.

It's nobody's fault at all, just how the system works.' [Post #8]
(World of Warcraft Forums 2011a)

With PUGs often found in open world group questing or dungeon instances using the Dungeon Finder mechanic, there are clear boundaries to the depth of social bonding that typically takes place. The group exists only as long as it needs to, only as long as there is a common goal to undertake. Occasionally, group levelling PUGs will extend beyond an assortment of quests in a zone and can exist for hours, or sometimes players can have a good chat and make friends with an anonymous player. Yet whilst often an extremely pleasant experience, this is something of a rarity. Often the experience is more methodical, with the expectation that group members will adhere to the goals of the group and the negotiated terms of reference, to use that term.³⁰ While players in the *World of Warcraft* forums talk about meeting and making friends in PUG groups, I have never personally experienced this.³¹

Instance Groups

Instances remain an important part of the game at higher levels and are often run in PUGs or in guild groups. PUG dungeons are kind of gamble on their own as the player usually has no idea who he or she will be grouped with. Alongside this, the typical expectations of player expertise are higher than groups in the open world, as the monsters are usually elite level and much harder to kill.

Dungeon PUGs generated by the Dungeon Finder mechanic have five players with a mix of three distinct roles of which the player must select to fill when using the mechanic: one tank, one healer and three damage-dealers. Rather than being a group “adventure”, the instance “run” as it’s called becomes a task to be undertaken as quickly as possible in many circumstances:

³⁰ It may be interesting to note here that as the game progressed into later versions, many (if not all) group quests were removed (although they have reappeared in the *Warlords of Draenor* expansion). In earlier versions of the game, group quests had a suggested number of players required to undertake the quest, generally to kill an elite mob. This has been hypothesised in various discussions on the Internet as part of a process of streamlining the levelling process for players by removing the necessity of forming groups. If this is true, it also recognises and reinforces some of the potential difficulties and time constraints in forming groups, particularly in low-population game servers.

³¹ That said, in earlier iterations of *World of Warcraft*, groups for dungeons were formed in chat channels, while later expansions introduced the Dungeon Finder mechanic which automatically matchmade players into groups, meaning that less interaction was required in order to assemble a group.

Generally, when a group is formed, the players will organise at the beginning of the instance and prepare buffs, potions, healthstones, bandages and so on before engaging any mobs. Sometimes, an overzealous tank will charge ahead and start fighting mobs rather than wait around, even ignoring the fact that sometimes not all players have yet entered the instance.³² Some instance groups communicate well via chat, and general etiquette demands a ‘thankyou’ among players at the end of the instance run.

But, sometimes instance runs with PUGs are silent, fast-paced, and players leave when the run is complete without any recognition of the efforts of others. These runs are dry, without enjoyment, and seem merely to be a task to be undertaken rather than a fantasy-bound exciting audio-visual fantasy experience. It’s either like that, or everyone’s arguing about why we keep wiping. There is a different ‘feel’ in these types of runs. It feels again like solo play alongside others, whereas a group that communicates and works together is much more engaging. It feels different to a guild run, where we have a laugh if someone stuffs up. If you stuff up in a PUG, you’ll be told about it.

There are countless threads in the *World of Warcraft* forums dedicated to players venting about their PUG experiences. Interestingly, most of the ones I canvassed appeared to want to berate the performance of other players rather than the fight mechanics of the instance. There is even a 12-thread discussion in the forums titled *Things You Don’t Want to Hear Healing PUGs* (World of Warcraft Forums 2011c).

But maybe about half of the time, PUGs are generally pleasant, fun experiences where a group of players come together to play. There appears to be a somewhat unspoken recognition amongst PUG players that they are in a group with similar players for similar circumstances. Maybe their guild-mates are busy with other things, maybe their guild-mates aren’t online, or maybe they’re not IN a guild. Still, it sometimes feels like an extension of solo play and character development:

There is certainly a more ‘casual’ rather than ‘social’ feel to random dungeon runs in *World of Warcraft* now. A long time ago you had to actually SPEAK to people to get a group started – now you just have to click a few buttons. It does make things easier though and I can get more stuff done.

There is an ongoing disagreement among players that *World of Warcraft* has become too focused on the “casual” player as the game has evolved over the last ten years (World of Warcraft Forums

³² Players running ahead in instances has been identified as a key source of frustration among players (Barnett, Coulson & Foreman 2010).

2013e). In *World of Warcraft* (and indeed also in wider gaming circles) there is a dichotomy between ‘casual’ and ‘hardcore’ types of players. Understood quite generally, there are those who come and go as they please, and those who dedicate extraordinary time and effort to their in-game achievements.

While the particular details of these two ideas is debatable, there is a typical perception among players that the game developer has changed game over the years to suit a wider gamer base. As one player puts it succinctly in the *World of Warcraft* forums:

‘A large portion of the player base can no longer sit for hours on end raiding in order to advance their character. Blizzard is adapting to this new type of gamer. Now even the one or two hours per session people can see the content, advance their character and get a sense of accomplishment without devoting huge chunks of their time to the game.’ [Post #42]

(World of Warcraft Forums 2013e)

The consequent argument here is that by appealing to the casual gamers, the game doesn’t require players to engage in the level of committed play as other, hardcore gamers but still allows immersive character development. There is also an associated perception of expertise, as casual players engaging in Dungeon Finder PUGs are perceived as less likely to have the highest level gear, only attainable via “traditional” raid groups in heroic instances that are formed either via the in-game chat channels or via guilds. PUG groups are thus typically perceived as a more casual social experience with fewer demands of commitment and expertise on the player. There is no residual obligation between the relatively anonymous players in a pick-up-group.

World Bosses

So far we have discussed PUG questing groups and instance (dungeon and raid) groups, however there are also PUG ‘world boss’ groups. The *Mists of Pandaria* expansion saw the return of world bosses to *World of Warcraft* in the form of incredibly powerful boss-level mobs that would normally be encountered in a raid instance. These bosses are on a factional tagging system, meaning that if a Horde player attacks the mob, other Horde players can also attack it and be eligible for loot while for Alliance players could not earn loot: the same applies in the opposite. Part of the reason for this was that it initially required more than one raid group to defeat such a boss, although this

reportedly did lead to server issues when hundreds of players of both factions were in the same place at the same time.

During my research I was fortunate enough to be a part of one such world boss encounter comprising two raid groups (eighty players). It was to battle the world boss *Oondasta*, a giant ‘devilsaur’ found on the Isle of Giants zone. Although later “nerfed”,³³ *Oondasta*’s health pool was in the vicinity of 800 million hp (in comparison to average the 300 thousand hp of a level 90 player) and had abilities that could “one-shot” a player character (kill them with one hit). Successfully defeating *Oondasta* required players to properly coordinate their actions, as haphazard attacks would mean a sure death for player characters.

Raid groups for world bosses are formed in the “traditional” way via the in-game chat channels. Usually in the general chat channel in the major cities, one player will put the call out for other players to join, often in the manner of ‘Oondasta raid group forming, need more healers, post [player name] for invite’. Players then need to make their own way to the world boss area or ask for a summon using the raid chat channel which is automatically joined upon joining a raid group.

It was a long wait as the raid group filled up... I was already up at the Isle of Giants where Oondasta was found with about 20 other players. I hung around as players were either summoned by warlocks or took the long flight to the island, north of Kun-Lai Summit in Pandaria.

The raid chat channel consisted of people asking for a summon to the area in the form of [summon pls] while others asked if people knew the fight and explained the basics of it. Between the two raid groups that had formed, strategies had to be agreed upon: there was a disagreement over where the boss should be tanked, either in the pools where he stood or to kite him over to the nearby cliffs.

³³ A term to denote having something’s stats reduced, be it armor, a spell or ability, or a mob.



Figure 26: Players reconvene after wiping on world raid boss Oondasta (the giant dinosaur whose feet can be seen in the distance) (Source: screenshot)

Being such a considerable undertaking (and something of a logistical challenge) strategies were discussed and agreed upon before engaging in combat. It appeared as a much more coordinated effort by a group of strangers who identified that the stakes were much higher, as were the potential rewards on offer – level 522 epic loot.

It took about 45 minutes for the groups to form. While people prepared bandages, healthstones, and summoned raid members, I used the Internet to brush up on the fight mechanics. However, time was of the essence: an Alliance raid group was spotted forming nearby. Soon after this, the tank charged in, followed by a rush of about 80-off players in tow. It was something of a cacophony – players everywhere. I just made sure I was standing to the side, hitting the giant beast, avoiding its tail attack.

Ultimately, after two wipes and about an hour in total organising the group and fighting the giant beastie, we were successful. Sadly, no loot for me ☹

It is interesting that the issue of player expertise did not appear to be a problem considering the collective size of the two groups. Maybe players with limited expertise (maybe myself, who knows?) are somewhat “invisible” in such a large group. Again, though, the existence of the group was purely instrumental towards a shared goal of defeating *Oondasta* – once this was accomplished, and loot was collected, the group disbanded.

Battlegrounds

In recalling my claim in a previous chapter, as an aspect of player-versus-player combat, instanced battlegrounds represent a structured *game* where there is a winning team and a losing team, with the key objective being to engage in combat with the enemy team. A group of Horde and a group of Alliance players will face off against each other in different instances with a range of objectives, such as capture the flag or to generate “resources” by capturing and holding key areas of the zone.

The dialogue between allied players in battleground groups is typically particularly unpleasant. The inconsiderate behaviour of many players in random PvP battlegrounds reinforces Williams’ et al. (2006) research on guild members’ perceptions of PUGs. It is not uncommon in Raid Finder groups or “random” battlegrounds for players to hurl abuse at each other in regard to their lack of expertise, leading to a particularly tense environment in some circumstances. The previous chapter on player expertise offered examples of some of typical discourse in a PUG player-versus-environment (PvE) raid. For comparison, the following chat examples are taken from a PvP match in the *Isle of Conquest* battleground as the group was facing defeat.

[Player A]: so maybe more than just stealthies on d [defense] try something new horde
[Player B]: we lost in the first 2 mins
[Player C]: TANK HERE MEN
[Player D]: not the first time
[Player C]: STUPID

This example is typical of the kind of talk in the chat channel in PUG battlegrounds, incorporating a generally negative tone criticising the group for poor strategy and coordination. At the end of the match, some other players commented:

[Player E]: you wiped again
[Player E]: before I could help
[Player F (Raid Leader)]: offense fucked up cause assholes wouldn’t help
[Player G]: OFFENSE FAILS.
[Player E]: WOW

And just for some extra flavour, in the middle of a different match:

[Player]: FUCK THIS SHIT OUR TEAM SI FULL OFF BOOTS ANS
AFKS³⁴

Seldom found in PUG PvP battlegrounds are constructive discussions of strategies. There is a general expectation of proficiency on the part of all players. Yet it is mostly only a select few individuals in a battlegrounds instance who publicly voice their opinions. In a small battlegrounds match like *Warsong Gulch* or *Twin Peaks*, there are only ten players per side, making a much smaller group of which players can be more easily observed and policed by other group members. Coordination becomes much more of an important aspect of successful strategy. In comparison to much larger battlegrounds like *Alterac Valley*, *Wintergrasp* or *Isle of Conquest* which have 40 players per team, it is much easier for players to “slack off” or simply ignore any discussed strategies.

It also introduces a greater likelihood of a difference in opinion when it comes to what strategies to employ, and it is observable when players either clearly ignore any discussion of strategies prior to the start of the match, or break off into separate groups at the start of the match. For example, the *Alterac Valley* battlegrounds is notorious for players disagreeing about a winning strategy as there are numerous ways in which the match can be won. Each team starts with 600 “tickets” and the losing side is the team whose tickets are reduced to zero. This can be achieved by either killing enough players of the opposing team (each player kill removes one ticket from the enemy team), capturing and destroying enemy towers and bunkers (basically by standing there and defending them long enough), capturing the mines which slowly reward the team with replacement tickets, and by defeating the enemy NPC Captain and General (“zerg” rush) which results in an instant win for the team.

While it could be reasonably assumed that a random battlegrounds team has a shared expectation of winning, the existence of a group of strangers with little existing social capital or clear strategies for success in a match can be cause for disaster. Expectations of player expertise play a somewhat secondary part in the ability for a team to win. In many cases, agreement or disagreement of strategy is cause for success or failure. Groups with little to no communication effectively rely on chance, in

³⁴ It is likely the player meant to type ‘bots’, or software-controlled characters that usually follow another player-controlled character (a breach of the Terms of Service for World of Warcraft). AFKS refers to ‘away-from-keyboard’ or players who have gone to do something else whilst their character sits or stands idle somewhere in the game environment and does not contribute to the group’s objectives, while leeching honor from the kills of other players in the team.

that group members must hope that all the other players in the team are employing the same or similar strategy for success. It highlights the social convention regarding acceptable player expertise, and a lack of expertise and / or communication is a cause of severe frustration causing group cohesion to fail and for some players to have outbursts in the game,³⁵ with the experience of PUG battlegrounds at times a tinderbox of frustration. A research study by Barnett, Coulson and Foreman (2010) found that many of the key factors that produced anger and frustration amongst players were related specifically to the actions of others. Many of these factors could be interpreted as issues related to expertise and communication, such as players not paying attention to instructions, repeating the same mistakes and not performing their class role in raids or instances (Barnett, Coulson & Foreman 2010, p. 150). However, this research did not distinguish between guild groups and PUGs.

To summarise this section, allied players that are not known to each other on the generally more personal level found in guilds typically interact with each other on an anonymous level. Players that engage in this way are typically more self-interested, and in group situations some are quick to point out the shortcomings of others. Players don't know much about each other but don't really need to. The game allows for this form of casual, social engagement. Players can go about their own business, or if they need to, they can group together but on a more instrumental level where the group is a means to an end, rather than for its shared experience.

Enemies

There are two kinds of enemies in *World of Warcraft*: the non-player monsters and the non-player characters in the game world, whose behaviour is governed by the game's programming and player characters that belong to the opposing faction. As we are concerned with social action here, we will only talk about the second aspect: players who are enemies due to their player character's membership of either the Alliance or Horde faction in the game.

Open World PvP

While there are a number of game servers where enemy players are restricted in their capacity for interaction (PvE servers), as mentioned the research took place on a PvP server where enemy players in the open world can engage in combat as they see fit. For players on PvP servers, most zones

³⁵ And perhaps physical outbursts as well.

outside of the sanctuary of the capital cities are open for players of opposing factions to attack each other. Players can be ‘ganked’, to use the common vernacular, meaning that a player going about their business (usually questing or mounted travel) can be attacked unexpectedly by an enemy player without any notice. Player characters that employ stealth abilities such as rogues or feral druids are considered notorious for this sort of thing, as in most cases the player cannot see the enemy player character approaching. It is a risk one takes by deciding to play on a PvP server. The constant threat of attack by an enemy player or players becomes a normalised aspect of play.

Engaging in PvP combat with an enemy player in the open world carries with it some interesting considerations in regards to interpreting social action. Open-world PvP provides the player with arguably little benefit to the development of one’s player character, other than some *honor* points if the opposing player is of a sufficient level.³⁶ While organised raids on an enemy faction’s city can be undertaken, they were much more popular in earlier iterations of the game and won’t be discussed here. Rather, I wish to discuss cases of unorganised (or less organised) player-versus-player combat in the open world, as it incorporates a clear decision on the part of at least one player to instigate combat, in contrast to an instanced battleground where combat is the purpose. The potential for players to engage in combat in the open world increases as their level increases, mostly due to the nature of progressing a character past level 60, as the majority of zones available to players in the later stages of character progression are often non-factional quest zones, with players of opposing factions either questing in close proximity to each other, or even undertaking the same quests given by non-factional NPCs in neutral sanctuary towns and cities. This increases the likelihood of opportunistic players to get an easy kill, as one of my numerous encounters with this suggests:

I entered the area and headed for the questgiver. A level 90 Night Elf druid in flight-form hovered nearby. As I approached she changed back to elf-form and I thought “ok, here we go.” Next I was hit by a [Sunfire] – she had decided to engage me. I hit [Vanish], then [Cloak of Shadows] to remove the sunfire’s damage over time before attempting to hit the elf. I missed. She was too high a level. She cast an AoE spell, pulling me out of stealth. With the druid’s healing ability there was no way I could defeat her. I lost.

³⁶ In vanilla (version 1) *World of Warcraft*, players could have honor points removed via ‘dishonorable’ kills, such as killing a player of a much lower character or a low-level ‘civilian’ NPC of the opposing faction. This system was removed in the 2.0 patch.

I approached the area in ghost form to resurrect my corpse. She was still there, appearing to waiting for me. I resurrected and instantly hit stealth. She changed to cat form and went stealth as well. It was clear at this point she decided to camp me for some easy kills. I ran in stealth as far as I could and waited to see if she reappeared. After a few minutes I carefully made my way back to the questgiver. I quickly handed the quest in, which automatically pulled me out of stealth. My heart was beating hard – I didn't know if I was being stalked or not. I quickly hit stealth again. I was successful – the Night Elf had given up and left.

Although opportunities for easy player kills present themselves often, questing in the open world does not usually devolve into a cacophony of PvP combat in situations where large numbers of players of opposing factions are questing alongside each other. My observations during levelling my Pandaren rogue during the time soon after the release of the *Mists of Pandaria* expansion saw large numbers of players of both factions levelling their characters through *Pandaria* without engaging in combat, and even at times, appearing to *work together* to achieve a common goal, such as defeating an elite NPC:

As our small group of guildies ran through the Timeless Isle on the hunt for rare mobs, we fought alongside groups of enemy Alliance players. There were hundreds of players around. Engaging in factional warfare wouldn't be useful to anyone. It was a tentative, unspoken truce for the time being. The elite mobs on the island weren't factionally tagged: anyone could attack them and potentially get loot. This meant that at times both Alliance and Horde players were attacking the same mob!

Now and again a stoush started because someone either clicked the wrong target, got caught in an AoE spell or just got the shits with an enemy player. A couple of groups would fight it out for a few minutes before another elite mob would spawn and start kicking the hell out of everyone. It was then that enemy players were somewhat “forced” into cooperating to kill the mobs before they killed everyone.

My observations highlight some interesting aspects of open world PvP combat in *World of Warcraft*. Open world PvP is not a game “rule” as such, and players can choose whether or not to engage in PvP combat with each other in the open world. Rather, there is a context of meaning that frames such exchange as a distinct form of social action. Primarily, the purpose of PvP combat, whether in the open world or in an instanced battleground mainly consists of two things: reward for

the player in terms of honor points, and to negatively affect the other player's intentions by attacking their player.

Yet honor points don't always have to be a key motivator in combat, as my own experience and observations suggest. Sometimes, players will appear to attack other player characters purely for the pleasure of exasperating the opposing player (griefing), which is particularly the case when a player or players attack player characters of a level much lower to them. In this case, there is no functional reward for the player other than the cruel satisfaction of causing grief to the other player. A particular source of frustration is when a group of enemy players (usually with at least one higher-level player) will enter into a zone and pick off (gank) other players that are solo levelling. It is not uncommon in such situations for these players to "camp" the corpses of other players, only to kill them either just after they have resurrected or to frustrate the player by giving them a disincentive to resurrect their character in the first place. Often such events will be highlighted in the general chat channel of the zone, warning other players of the threat and voicing their frustration and resentment of the opposing players as can be seen in this example:

[Player A]: where are you?
[Player B]: is that the lvl 86 hunter?
[Player C]: theres 81 hunter and dk, a 80 monk and 90 war
[Player C]: shrine of goldrinn
[Player D]: they got me as well
[Player D]: fucking gay cunts³⁷

In another similar case where a group of players had banded together to gank enemy players, and a friendly level 90 had come to their defence, in which the situation escalated with the enemy players logging onto their level 90 characters:

[Player]: takes 1 lvl 82s to kill people but when a lvl 90 helps they need to log on there 90s lol shit cunts

While player versus player combat is a "normal" aspect of play on PvP servers, and actions such as corpse camping and ganking are not against official game policy (Blizzard Entertainment 2014a),

³⁷ Unfortunately, such homophobic slurs are not alien to open world discourse, even if there are maybe unlikely to be used in such a context. Such use of language in some cases could constitute a breach of the Terms of Use. It also opens up another set of questions regarding the typical ages, genders and ethnicities of some players and whether or not such things can be discerned from the types of discourse such players enter into.

the actions themselves represent intentional social action on the part of the players. World PvP is not regulated as it is in a rule-based game, such as a contemporary sport like football. Players can group up and effectively bully other players without reprimand as long as there is no verbal harassment taking place. Such actions are contextualised as part of game lore, even if such actions can be considered socially distasteful or undesirable by some players. To this end, the game politicises (Schmitt & Schwab 2008) the social interaction taking place by enemy players in the open world via endorsing forms of social action that are negative and not instrumental in regards to “winning” the game, as would be the case in a battlegrounds instance, where the objective *is* to kill other players.

Even though the fictional game lore endorses player-versus-player combat as players engaging in combat belong to opposing factions, the motivational context of meaning behind open-world PvP combat in contrast to an instanced PvP battleground is one where the player’s intentionality is focused on disrupting the opposing player. If we consider this alongside situations where players of opposing factions can actually choose to cooperate, it characterises an interesting tension in the game world where one is never really sure of the intentions of other players, and must rely on previous experience and the body language (indications) of the opposing player character in order to decide how to react in the presence of an a player of the opposing faction:

‘I like trying to quest alongside opposing faction members when leveling on a PvP server...but don't get me wrong; act suspicious or stand and watch me do a pull and I'll turn and start some !@#\$. If you're on a pvp server expect it ;D’ [Post #11]
(World of Warcraft Forums 2011b)

Enemy players know they don’t *need* to engage in combat upon sight. There are scenarios where it is clear that engaging in combat would get in the way of character development as the previous example in the Timeless Isle demonstrates. There is also the rare occasion where enemy players can transcend the game’s fantasy narrative and engage with each other as *gamers*:

‘I got into a pretty good fight with a Tauren paladin the other day, needless to say I opened up with no hesitation whatsoever. After going about twenty minutes without either of us dying I figured this is going no where. So I /bye'd and went on my merry way. The paladin logged onto an alt and had we had a full conversation commending each other and also talking about different aspects of the game. It's the closest I've come to seeing any actual server community in a long time.

I love it when people can be civil or even cordial about the game, it makes it that much more fun.' [Post #12]

(World of Warcraft Forums 2011b)

This example reinforces the claim that open world player-versus-player combat is not instrumental to character development, but is a choice made as part of a project of social action. Players can engage in action against an enemy for the purpose of disrupting and annoying that player (griefing and ganking). Players can engage in combat for entertainment as part of the game's fantasy narrative, and players can choose *not* to engage in combat with the enemy, but instead acknowledge the presence of the other and continue on their way in the game world.

Friends in *World of Warcraft*

The final aspect of social interaction in *World of Warcraft* for discussion in this chapter is where players are friends. I will focus on the role of guilds in the experience of play and the way in which guild membership and the development of more intimate, less anonymous relationships influences the typical experience of play.

Guilds

Guilds are an important aspect of social play in *World of Warcraft* and allow an opportunity for players to develop a form of 'bonding' social capital (Steinkuehler & Williams 2006) in contrast to the more cursory encounters players typically have with each other in the open world. Many players in guilds have reported they prefer guild runs because they are predictable as an experience in contrast to the 'different expectations for friendliness, sharing, leadership, or roles' one often finds in PUGs (Williams et al. 2006, p. 350). Poor practice or behaviour in a guild run will have later consequences that will be far greater than with a group of players one may never encounter again, meaning that social action among players now occurs in a more intimate context than with PUGs. The motivational context for the project at hand is no longer simply about personal gain but includes a regard for social capital.

In a PUG, the player is aware that they are a group with others with supposedly common goals,³⁸ but group cohesion is typically limited only to the end goal of the dungeon, in most cases the successful completion of the dungeon by killing the final boss. In a guild group, cohesion and capital extend much further. Guild members are more likely to engage in activities with other “guildies” for completely altruistic reasons. The player may not *need* to run a particular dungeon as it won’t contribute towards their goals of character development, but will happily go along with others in the guild to help out. There are other reasons guilds may engage in group activities. For example, it may simply be practice for working together in a raid group. In any case, the motivational context shifts from a purely individual to a more collective context where there is a shared benefit. They are also spaces where there may be more room for learning or accidental events, as my experience suggests:

We were half-way through a five-person dungeon run one Sunday morning, chatting over Skype as we played. Suddenly the tank gasped and shrieked in surprise ‘my screen just went blank!’

Even though she had lost control of her character, we watched as her paladin kept automatically running forward into the room ahead, aggroing the groups of mobs that began chasing her. Of course, we wiped, but found the whole affair quite funny. She was so apologetic.

This example highlights a difference between a PUG group and a guild group run. Although such issues can occur in any kind of group situation, for example players disconnecting due to technological issues, there are notable differences in matters of trust and regard between anonymous players and guild friends. In situations where players may not know each other intimately, they may not be afforded the same experience. Guilds allow the establishment of relationships that can transcend the drive for individual achievement, and allow the development of a culture of practice integral for working through difficult game content through a shared sense of identity (Chen, M 2009, 2010). The experience of being a member of a cohesive guild may also challenge the way in which a player considers solo play, as my reflections suggest:

³⁸ On the rare occasion, a player may decide to troll other players in the group by either not conforming to typical practices and strategies, or by deliberately sabotaging the group. I have witnessed this on a couple of occasions, whereby the tank has run forward and aggroed many more mobs than the group could possibly handle and then teleported out of the instance, wiping the rest of the group (who suffer a durability loss (damage) to their items, costing gold to repair). The group then has to wait for a new group member to be found using the dungeon finder mechanic.

One afternoon, no-one else in the guild was online but I decided to run some random dungeons on my own. After waiting ten minutes in the queue, our PUG formed and I was teleported to the dungeon.

I instantly knew it wasn't going to be a smooth run. As we started, no one was talking. The healer was still standing at the entrance to the instance – clearly the player was away from keyboard. The tank, without doing any sort of ready check ran in, pulled the first group and we began the fight. One of the other DPS, a hunter, had his pet on 'taunt' so it kept pulling aggro off the tank. The healer ran up and joined us half way through, but only after the hunter had died through the fault of his pet, and the tank was down to low health.

We barely beat the first group, after which the tank uttered in party chat 'ugh fuck this' and left the party.

I stood around for five minutes waiting for another tank to join before deciding to bail myself. I'll wait for more guildies to jump on.

From my own experiences, and in concert with existing interview research, guilds appear to serve two main functions. One is to provide friendship, camaraderie and support in the game, the second is to provide access to the highest levels of game content. To this end guilds are both *social* and *instrumental* aspects of gameplay. Guilds importantly provide a space for some established relationships to continue, as it is suggested that a majority of players play with others they have real-world associations with (Nardi & Harris 2010; Williams et al. 2006). On the other end of the spectrum, guilds in *World of Warcraft* represent a means to an end in regards to a player's goals for character development, and it can be disheartening when guilds decay:

I recall the first guild I was in – it was a large, impersonal guild on a large server. I had no idea who these people were – there were hundreds of them!

Soon after, a friend of mine invited me to a new guild – it was started by a friend of his who I had never met. It was a small, social guild, and I soon got to know these people quite well. I knew about their lives; I learned some of their names, and even the names of their children. We had a guild meet-up once in the city – it was interesting to meet these people IRL!

But, over time, the guild began to crumble. The more advanced players were held back by the lesser-developed characters of other players, and they were invited by more 'elite' guilds to join their ranks.

Soon, it was just me and a couple of others who were left. I lost interest in the game for a while, and let my membership lapse for many months, returning for the next expansion.

A Taiwanese research article in 2008 used quantitative data to analyse guild life cycles, arguing that game design influences guild development (Chen, C-H, Sun & Hsieh 2008). When the game's designers change how players can interact and associate on a game design level, the way in which players interact and associate on a social level also changes, with many threads on the *World of Warcraft* forums dedicated to discussing these kinds of changes. Many players were upset at the recent changes as part of the *Warlords of Draenor* expansion, such as the removal of guild levels and many perks:

'I feel like guilds have lost a lot of their purpose and a lot of their benefits.' [Post #2]
(World of Warcraft Forums 2014a)

However, others countered, stating:

'People shouldn't be bribed into guilds. If you don't want to be guilded, you shouldn't miss out on any Blizz-provided benefits.' [Post #6]

And

'How did people keep guilds together pre-Cata? How did guilds stay together in EQ? How did/does guilds stay together in games that do not need to bribe players into being social?' [Post #12]

(World of Warcraft Forums 2014a)

While not all players are interested (i.e. have the commitment or expertise) in achieving the highest levels of character development in *World of Warcraft*, it is important that guilds, as a social group, are able to establish shared goals to ensure their cohesiveness. The guild I was a member of during the research process was a small guild of about twelve people with existing social connections, mostly friends of friends. Yet the guild demonstrated solid cohesiveness through negotiated shared goals, such as weekly dungeon and raid runs and a positive attitude towards helping each other in the process of character development. We were not an 'elite' guild (Chen, C-H, Sun & Hsieh 2008) which exists somewhere towards the 'instrumental' side of the spectrum.

In contrast to social guilds, elite guilds employ strict recruitment guidelines in regards to player commitment and expertise, and have clear goals towards the highest tiers of game content. The

World of Warcraft forums have their own section for guild recruitment with many thousands of existing posts from guilds advertising for players to join their ranks.³⁹ Typical forum posts will usually include a summary of guild 'progression' (how far they are through the highest level game content), what classes and specialisations they require, the minimum item level (weapons and armour) required for applicants to have, and importantly, the guild's raid schedule and international time zone. An example post from the guild recruitment forums:

'Lusting on Trash is currently looking to recruit a few more players to strengthen our roster.

We are currently 4/7 Mythic

Classes we will consider

Rogue

Enhance Shaman

Hunter

-14/14H SoO

-US #91 T16

-US #73 T15

-13/13H ToT

-25man Horde

-Located on US-Arthas

Lusting on Trash has been under the same leadership for 5 years now. We are a progression oriented guild. Outside of raid our raiders enjoy wow and gaming in general. We do plenty of older content for achievs/mount/xmog and have active pvppers.

Raid Times: 9pm-1am EST Monday-Thursday

Loot System: EPGP Loot Council

Our Values:

Come Prepared

Be on Time

Don't miss Raid

Know your class/spec

Don't stand in fire' [Post #1]

(World of Warcraft Forums 2014e)

³⁹ <http://us.battle.net/wow/en/forum/1011639/>

Where guild membership represents *opportunity* in regards to both character development and friendship establishment, it also represents *obligation*, regardless of whether or not the guild is focused more on instrumental or social play. Even in large guilds where there may be hundreds of players, there is at least a greater *opportunity* for players to forge closer social relationships in the realm of consociated contemporaries (Zhao 2004) in contrast to open-world player interaction. There is a clear contextual distinction between social interaction in a PUG and a guild group, for example. Even though the player is obligated to fulfil their class role as tank, healer or damage, the requirement to do so is much greater in a guild group. A player's behaviour in the presence of others in a guild group will influence their social capital and standing in the guild. Those that don't participate are, well, invisible.

The Role of Social Interaction in the Experience of Play

The kinds of player interactions available in *World of Warcraft* may tell us something about the typical motivations for play, particularly in regards to guild membership. Evidence suggests that the majority of players are in a guild with someone they know (Nardi 2010; Nardi & Harris 2010; Williams et al. 2006). The capacity for guilds to be instrumental in forging new relationships and providing social supports (Kang, Ko & Ko 2009) suggest that relationships play a part in the experience of play, particularly in regards to motivation. My own experience reinforces this:

I lay in bed until 7:05, 15 minutes after my alarm had gone off. I was really tired; I could use another couple of hours sleep.

But I knew they'd be waiting. I told them I'd be on this morning. Right now they'd be organising a Skype conference call, asking the guild master if he'd heard from me.

After agonising another five minutes, I got up. I couldn't let them down. I couldn't let myself down.

Even though I didn't particularly feel like playing that morning, I felt an obligation to those I'd developed friendships with over the previous months. I had never met some of them, but felt a kinship towards them. Our small, social guild really was a group of friends who 'met' to play together. It added an extra dimension to play beyond mere player character development. It was an opportunity for intersubjective experience, for shared moments and the stories that came out of

them. We could recall these experiences later: I would often talk with others outside the game about things we did and things we would plan to do. It was a strong motivator for continued play. Other *World of Warcraft* players have reinforced the friendship factor as a key motivator for play, even though they feel the game's structure and player base has changed for the worse over the years:

'What keeps me motivated is the friends I have made in the game. I like signing on, hoping in the guild vent and just hang out. There's been so many times I just around in circle, chatting with people. The game, it's there and I find things to do, but ultimately the motivation to play is the friends I have made. I know not everyone is in my same boat, I'm just saying what motivates me to play. In all honesty, I feel it's harder these days to find friends in the game. An awesome guy in vent yesterday blames it all on the SpongeBob Generation. What a great line lol!' [Post #54]
(World of Warcraft Forums 2014b)

And, as another player states more succinctly:

'If you can't find a guild that you like, I'm not sure how else you can stay motivated.'
[Post # 16]
(World of Warcraft Forums 2014b)

While social ties in guilds (instrumental or social) influence player motivation, it wouldn't be a Massively Multiplayer Online game without it being a virtual game world inhabited by thousands of other characters that one would typically only have cursory or fleeting interactions with. The afforded anonymity of open-world social interaction in the game allows for action directed at another player that is typically set in the meaning-context of character development. Allied players in the open world will typically cooperate only when it is in the best interests of the player, rather than for purely altruistic means. That is not to say that players not known to each other will not help each other out based only on kindness, only that this form of behaviour is atypical. Similarly, players who are enemies, based on their factional membership, may or may not engage in combat in the open world, dependent mostly on what the player is doing at any given time.

Sometimes, it's just easier to acknowledge each other's existence and go about your business.

Thesis Conclusion

I have reached the end of my quest. I set out to undertake an exploration of the experience of play in *World of Warcraft*, drawing upon a number of phenomenological traditions to bolster my vocabulary and framework of reflection as I did so. By employing auto-ethnography as a research method, I was able to subject my own experiences and my observations of others within the game world to a phenomenological analysis to establish *what* players do within the game and how this can be framed as play, *how* players learn to play and the social value of this knowledge, and *who* they play with and in what ways.

I can now summarise the key claims made. It was recognised that contemporary approaches to researching virtual computer game worlds, whilst perhaps useful in interrogating particular aspects of experience, often does not do so in ways that fully appreciate the multifaceted nature of engaging in action in a game like *World of Warcraft*. As a virtual social world, players interact with each other in a way that is mediated by the game world. The player character, as the player's avatar in the game world, is a conduit for the player's intentional actions in the game world, including the intentional actions a player has towards other players. Player characters become the focus of player interactions in the game world and are a 'field of expression' for other players to interpret the intentional actions of the controlling player. As such, player characters are able to navigate and interact with the game world in ways that are meaningful, incorporating typical modes of action in the game world in a synthesis of the game's design and the creativity of the player community.

The embodied relationship that a player has with the game world has many layers, expressed in terms of intention and enabled by expertise, mediated by the interactive aspects of the computer system: the keyboard, the mouse, the screen and the speakers. This relationship also incorporates a symbolic fantasy narrative, developing a distinct 'province of reality' in regards to the meaningfulness of actions in the game world. In this way, players engage with the fantastic game environment, partaking in forms of action not possible in the physical world. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, players interact with each other in a uniquely mediated way in this game world, using typical contexts of meaning framed by the perceptual and symbolic relationship the player has with the game world.

These typical practices can be interpreted as various forms of productive play in that the typical actions in the game world by players don't clearly conform to traditional ideas of play. Instead, players may dedicate considerable amounts of time and money to developing player characters in the game world and engaging in actions that at times may resemble forms of work, but the fruits of which are entirely the player's reward to do with as they see fit. In this, the player has a relationship with the player character in an intimate way, but not necessarily an intimate relationship in regards to identity play (unless the player is on a role-play (RP) sever). The player character, as well as being the player's virtual agent in the game world, is a vehicle for developing social and cultural capital, and exists as a canvas for demonstrating the dedication and expertise of the player through their character's level, items, and achievements.

Players don't interact with each other in ways that have perfect analogues in the physical world. They interact with each other in the game in distinct ways and rely on modes of practice that are typified through an enduring player community. New players must learn these rules, conventions and modes of practice in order to sufficiently master the game and develop adequate expertise in the eyes of other players, or suffer real consequences. Those players with appropriate levels of expertise develop greater social and cultural capital, allowing them access to areas of the game world reserved for those of the highest levels.

Being a Massively Multiplayer Online game, the player is aware that they are playing in a virtual game world inhabited by other players, and at times that they must interact with these players in various ways. The fantasy narrative is instrumental in the outcomes of player choice in regards to their player character, depending on their faction. Other players will be framed as an enemy by the game, thus incorporating a political aspect to the experience of play. Allied players often need to cooperate to ensure that players can fulfil their intentions in the game world, particularly amongst the highest character levels of gameplay. Yet the anonymised nature of much of the social interaction in the open game world can be counter-productive to this, setting typical, observable boundaries to player obligations among strangers. In contrast, guilds can offer a much more intimate and important aspect to the experience of play by facilitating the development of enduring social ties and friendships. Guilds may serve different purposes in the game world but are seen as instrumental in achieving the highest levels of character development through the opportunity to

engage with endgame content. They also serve as a key motivator in continuing play, and may act as a counterbalance to the often mundane grind of solo play in the game world.

Limitations and Future Research

A limitation of this research is that it took place in a space that is ever-changing. Although having played on and off since 2006, I could only capture a snapshot of the game over a limited period of time. The claims made in this thesis are therefore temporally contextual, like any social research should be. A notable difference in this instance is that *World of Warcraft* has constantly evolved over its current 10 year lifetime. Some of the claims I have made may not be readily applicable to earlier versions of the game, and I have noted some of these differences in footnotes. Likewise, prior to the completion of writing of this thesis, the *Warlords of Draenor* expansion was released instituting changes to guilds and the ways in which players interact with each other.

Another limitation of this research, but also perhaps one of its benefits, is that the research method allowed the player-as-researcher to take a “step back” from the immersive experience of play and deconstruct the broader, typical meanings associated with some of the more salient aspects of this. As such it offers the reader a “big picture” look at *World of Warcraft* in a way not previously undertaken, where I used the philosophical and phenomenological considerations developed in the first half of the thesis. This approach is a limitation in that it doesn’t allow for a more focused interrogation of particular aspects of player action in the game, due to restrictions of both time and word count. For example, I was unable to undertake a discussion of the ethical considerations that can arise during player interactions during play, like ganking and grieving.

I am, however able to generate some ideas of *where* more focused interrogation could take place, and what sorts of questions we could ask about different aspects of play in *World of Warcraft* but also other games as well. For example, in considering the idea of productive play, future research could examine any potential relationships between a sense of fulfilment *World of Warcraft* players perceive in everyday life versus those that don’t play, or who play different *types* of games, or perhaps don’t play games at all. It would also be interesting to undertake an ethnography of one of the elite player guilds to examine how they interpret things like their own cultural capital in the *World of Warcraft* community, and how they perceive themselves in contrast to other players. We could also interrogate in more detail the role of social influences on player motivations, looking at

the depth of guild and guild-type relationships in more detail, including those in other games, such as the ‘clan’ system found in many contemporary multiplayer first-person-shooter games: do these games, for example, demonstrate similar aspects of social obligation and cultural capital to *World of Warcraft*, or are they much more casual due to the nature of play in these types of games?

This thesis suggests that there are also potentially useful things for future game design. While the style of dedicated, committed play is one of the key factors in *World of Warcraft*, and is perhaps a reason why many appear to stay, it also works in the contrary. My experience of informal discussions with former *World of Warcraft* players suggests that the level of commitment required is the very reason why they stopped playing, and more importantly a key reason why they would never go back. It appears that there is a divide between gamers who *can* dedicate considerable amounts of time and money to play, and those who love to play but can’t dedicate that amount of time to player character development and be available every night for guild runs. This is indeed an aspect that appears to be direction taken by many contemporary games, including the *Warlords of Draenor* expansion released late 2014, with countless player threads in the *World of Warcraft* forums arguing that the game has become *further* casualised and has lost even more of the community feel it once had. There is also the fact that to date no MMORPG since *World of Warcraft* has been able to match its success as measured through ongoing player subscriptions. The paradox for game designers, then, is how to develop a game that allows players to engage in character (or otherwise) development at their own pace, but do so in a way that allows and encourages social interaction and the formation of enduring relationships, whilst making sure that players are not being left behind in regards to dedication and expertise. It’s a balancing act that *World of Warcraft* designers have been engaged in for some years now, and one that is likely to continue unfolding in the future.

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