NAVIGATING SOCIOTECHNICAL POWER STRUCTURES: DYNAMICS OF CONFLICT
IN WORLD OF WARCRAFT'S PLAYER VERSUS PLAYER EVENTS

by

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ABSTRACT

As a result of technological advancement and exponential increases in global access, cross-disciplinary research has recently turned to digital online video games. Most anthropological research within this area has centered around player self-identification, gender construction, and gaming communities. Yet many interactions occur at nodes of dynamic conflict where agentic players navigate intersections of power, which are unaddressed in the scholarly corpus. By utilizing ethnographic methods in *World of Warcraft's* player versus player events, I examine resources, relationships, and tools that underpin player actions and understandings. My findings reveal layered and dynamic patterns of sociotechnical conflict. Players' geographical location impacts access to infrastructure while hardware and software constrain in-game action in fundamental and inescapable ways. Player versus player events add additional restrictions and create fluid situations where players continually negotiate fluctuating social tensions while event-dependent dispersions of power fluctuate between groups and individuals. Players become leaders by legitimizing power in contextually unique ways, and competing imaginaries generate conflicts that are interpreted through game-specific subjectivities. In exploring these occurrences and utilizing theoretical explanations within *World of Warcraft* contexts, this research contributes to disciplinary understandings and discussions addressing conflict, leadership, and power, and to methodological techniques utilized in virtual world study. By foregrounding how players navigate power differentials in conflict situations, this research informs broader conceptions of how individuals and groups manage social disputes within and outside digital social events, informs game design, and has policy implications for resolving virtual world conflicts in real world courts.

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CHAPTER ONE:
INTRODUCTION

> We live at a historical juncture in which virtual worlds and online games stand to reconfigure the very character of "culture." They will do so in a range of ways, yet with some common themes. They will do so individually and also in dialogue with each other, with other technologies ranging from web pages to cell phones, and with those broader sociopolitical changes that are too often hastily glossed as "globalization" or "neoliberalism." The stakes are high, in every sense – cultural, economic, political, and personal.

> [Tom Boellstorff, Forward (Pearce 2009)]

Video games are increasingly becoming news in countries around the globe. In China, one man stole a rare virtual sword from another man and sold it. There were no laws against stealing virtual property. The offended man took matters into his own hands and stabbed the thief to death, for which he was sentenced to life in prison (BBC News 2005). In the United States, female game designers such as Zoe Quinn suffer abuse, violence, death threats, and invasions of privacy after being caught in the cross fire of hate groups and questionable video game journalist ethics, #GamerGate (Kaplan 2014). Anita Sarkeesian's Kickstarter crowdfunding campaign raised over $150,000 to explore feminist concerns of representation in video games (Wheaton 2015). She had to cancel a speech at Utah State University due to threats of mass shooting violence (Ahmed and Marco 2014). The United Nations Broadband Commission released a report titled "Cyber Violence Against Women and Girls," then immediately pulled it down due to "poorly sourced material and errors" and critical issues of censorship (Järvinen 2015). Some people have begun "swatting" live-streaming video game players, calling in anonymous tips about a bomb or terrorist threat that result in SWAT raids (Lopez 2016).

As video games reach increasingly broader audiences and the industry continues to grow, tensions flare over issues of representation, free speech, surveillance, privacy, cyber stalking and violence, hacking, and over how to handle such issues within existing systems of policing, enforcement, and dispute resolution. According to KZero Worldwide (2012), a marketing consultant firm specializing in virtual and online data, there were nearly two billion registered virtual world video game accounts in the first quarter of 2012, a staggering increase from 2009's 414 million – and many of these accounts require subscription fees to be paid monthly. The Entertainment Software Association (2015) reports that in 2015, 155 million people play video games in the United States, with an average of two gamers per household. The numbers of participants alone render virtual worlds important sites of research, but when considered from sociocultural, economic, and legal perspectives, it quickly becomes clear that virtual worlds have broad and far-reaching impact.

A virtual world is "any computer-generated physical space, represented graphically in three dimensions, that can be experienced by many people at once" (Castronova 2005:22). The designation of virtual world is often, but not exclusively, applied to video games. Some online video games contain millions of registered players. These massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) include titles such as *World of Warcraft, Destiny, Second Life,* and *EverQuest*. These MMOGs can be accessed using a personal computer or console gaming system (such as an Xbox or Playstation), and require an uninterrupted internet connection. If the internet connection fails, the player is unable to exist in the game world. These virtual worlds can only be entered by creating a graphic representation of the player, which is usually called an avatar. For all intents and purposes, these avatars are the player within the game world (Tronstad 2008).

For anthropologists, studying virtual worlds is a new and important step in ethnographic research. Bonnie Nardi (2010:27) asserts that "anthropologists have documented nearly every culture on earth" and that by turning to the study of virtual worlds, anthropologists again have the opportunity to study new and unexplored cultures. For virtual worlds, "the term "world" is not just a metaphor… they have place and space, embodiment, and objects" (Boellstorff et al 2012:121-2). Celia Pearce (2009) emphasizes that this "worldness" is the combination of narrative, behaviors, and locations that create a vast world for players to inhabit. These worlds provide new locations for interactions that transcend social, national, and geographic boundaries with ease and thus are important and legitimate sites for research (Boellstorff 2008:61). Additionally, being able to interact in an online world requires consistent access to electricity, internet service, disposable income, leisure time, and the resources to create and maintain a virtual world that points toward the "major institutions and organizations that affect everyday lives" such as stable government, consistent infrastructure, and technology (Nader 1972:286; see also Walton and Pallitt 2012). Situated at the confluence of leisure time, disposable income, and access to technology, virtual world studies are reflexive sites for researchers from the Global North and require a consideration of the larger institutions and infrastructures that provide the frameworks for these games.

World of Warcraft

One such virtual world is *World of Warcraft* (often abbreviated and pronounced as *WoW*). *WoW* is the latest in the Warcraft franchise owned by Activision-Blizzard Entertainment.[1] The first game in the series was a strategy game released in 1994 titled *Warcraft: Orcs & Humans*, where players

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[1] All historic information taken from Blizzard's official website: http://us.blizzard.com/en-us/games/ . A timeline showing key moments (including Leeroy Jenkin's rise to popularity) can also be found at WoWWiki: http://wowwiki.wikia.com/wiki/Timeline_(World_of_Warcraft)

raced to construct thriving economies, fortresses to withstand assault, and armies to decimate enemies. *Warcraft II: Tides of Darkness* and *Warcraft III: Reign of Chaos* continued the franchise within the same game world, Azeroth, and introduced the orc Thrall, who plays a pivotal narrative role in *WoW*. Released in 2004, *WoW* has had five expansions: *The Burning Crusade* (2007), *The Wrath of the Lich King* (2008), *Cataclysm* (2010), *Mists of Pandaria* (2012), and *Warlords of Draenor* (2014). In between these expansions (which are as large as some games), patches update game play and add additional content. With a peak of 12 million subscribers paying monthly access fees (on top of purchasing the game software), current membership has dropped to a pithy 6.5 million players – still far beyond the rates of other MMOs like its next closest pay-to-play competitor *Final Fantasy XIV: Heavensward* (with approximately five million players) and *Eve Online*, with just under one million subscribers (Leack 2016). Spawning dozens of novels, a digital strategy card game (*Hearthstone: Heroes of Warcraft*), incorporating the Warcraft franchise with their *Diablo* and *Starcraft* franchises to spawn the *Heroes of the Storm* game, and multiple national and international tournaments, the Blizzard Entertainment branch of Activision Entertainment is a gaming giant and does not seem to be slowing down. This year, 2016, a *World of Warcraft* movie is set to come to theaters early summer, and a sixth expansion, *Legion*, is slated for release early fall. A plethora of marketing, tournaments, trading card games, and an annual Blizzard Entertainment Convention (BlizzCon) rounds out (though by no means exhausts) the range of this vast empire.

Researcher Reflexivity: Transparency & Bias

As the setting of this research, *WoW* is a stable virtual world with myriad research opportunities. That said, my reasons for choosing *WoW* are personal: I have been a *WoW* player for eight years, and my husband, mother, step-father, and sister play. Some of my in-game friendships

span years. I mainly enjoyed the Player versus Environment (PvE) aspects of the game and for seven years I raided consistently (usually multiple times a week), and have been a team leader, guild officer, raid leader, and guild master. During this time my group cleared end-game raid content at normal and heroic difficulties and we rebuilt the guild three times. Once it completely disbanded. I promoted players to officer rank and kicked players for behavior or compliance issues. I own t-shirts, figurines, books, cards, and other paraphernalia related to *WoW;* I've purchased in game pets and mounts and purchased them as gifts for friends. In short, it is a game I am passionate about, although I will admit to having my fair share of burnout. Accordingly, I leapt at the chance to do research in an area I had very little experience with: Player versus Player (PvP). Although my husband and some of my friends PvPed regularly, I had been hesitant to try it, since what I knew about it indicated a different play style and understanding of the game than I was comfortable with. In researching PvP in *WoW*, not only do I step outside of my comfort zone into a familiar-strange place, I also utilize my existing knowledge to expand scholarly research in a new direction by leveraging in-game resources to undertake an in-depth and hyper-focused ethnographic project.

My long history as a *WoW* player also draws upon challenging and at times unpleasant experiences which offer important insight. These add nuance and balance to my enthusiasm and, therefore, a degree of scholarly distance and critical analysis to my research. Specifically, I am able to critique gameplay through long-term observation and awareness of issues concerning *WoW*, and to evaluate the relevance of academic and popular criticisms directed toward gaming. For instance, popular discussions of links between violent behavior and video games indiscriminately paint all video games in the same way. Such dialogues do not take into account different types of play within each game, or the various ways players construct meaning. While there is no doubt that video games

have significant effects upon players, these consequences are not so easily described as "good" or "bad" (Prot et al 2012). Rather, they are "complex and would be better understood as multiple dimensions rather than a simplistic "good-bad" dichotomy" (647). As game developers John Murphy and José Zagal (2011) note, narrative constructions of correct or violent behavior provide ethical frameworks for players. Yet, they argue that such constructions are not accepted arbitrarily. Instead, "players reflect on their personal identity and relationship to the world outside of the game by comparing and contrasting their in-game behavior with that in the real world" (69). Additionally, massive multiplayer games such as *WoW* support myriad opportunities, narratives, and situations wherein players assemble personal meanings. Players achieve this, in part, by reflecting on their own apprehensions of ethical and/or acceptable behavior and examining how their interpretations fare when confronted by game frameworks. Therefore, my research aims to continue complicating this "good-bad" dichotomy through an in-depth investigation of how players comprehend and establish meaning within violent, combat-oriented *WoW* contexts.

<u>Thesis Overview</u>

This thesis is divided into seven chapters, including this introduction to video game issues and *World of Warcraft*, the virtual world location of my ethnographic research. The literature review that comprises Chapter Two is split into four major sub-sections. The first sub-section addresses virtual worlds as legitimate sites of scholarly research through a survey of social science debates, anthropology-specific aspects, and ethical considerations. The second sub-section surveys sociocultural research in virtual worlds, with an emphasis on research and game boundaries and the real/virtual dichotomy, addiction, issues of identity and representation, social constructions and communities, and a brief overview of key ethnographies. The next sub-section includes additional

research conducted specifically within *WoW* that does not appear in the previous sections. The fourth and final sub-section locates a surprising yet significant gap within this growing body of research. That is, little if any focus exists on how players navigate situations of conflict, or how conflict is understood by gamers.

In Chapter Three, I utilize five separate sub-sections to discuss the research setting and the methods I used for this project. Sub-section one addresses the unique context of *World of Warcraft: Warlords of Draenor,* how creating a digital avatar is necessary to enter the game world, and the traditions of using voice chat over internet to communicate. The second sub-section reviews the ethnographic methods I utilize, how I organize my samples and conducted semi-structured interviews, and the types of data I collected. The next sub-section discusses how data are organized and analyzed, while the fourth sub-section reviews limitations and implications of this research. A brief fifth sub-section introduces the digital avatars I use to conduct my research.

Chapter Four focuses on *WoW*, with six brief sub-sections that explain how the game is set up and other background information to familiarize readers with hardware and software structures. The first sub-section examines the infrastructure of the game, such as how servers and realms are organized. Next, sub-section two discusses creating a graphic digital representation and choosing factors that impact appearance and in-game abilities. Sub-section three relates how game software frames social organization, while sub-section four reviews in-game resources that underlie and support PvP play. The fifth sub-section briefly introduces readers to the main types of voice programs used to supplement PvP gameplay.

Chapter Five is one of two chapters where I discuss my findings. It has three main sub-sections. The first focuses on conflicts that occur regardless of what type of PvP event the player is

engaged in, including infrastructure, hardware, and software issues; how the game restricts access to resources necessary to improve PvP performance; and how in-game choices later impact players' attempts to achieve rank. Finally, I engage with scholarly theory to conceptualize interactions between humans and artifacts. Sub-section two examines ways that players' choice of PvP event impacts the conflicts that arise such as how to create winning teams, increase player ranking on an individual and team basis, and how to find new partners. It also considers how larger group size impacts situations and how players respond in those contexts. The last sub-section pulls the previous two sections into a discussion of how to conceptualize the social and technological situations that frame player actions, critiquing some models and offering an alternative that incorporates conceptual space for researcher bias and disciplinary frameworks.

Chapter Six examines issues of power dispersion, leadership, and resistance in five sub-sections. First, a brief consideration of instances where leaders are not welcomed or necessary are analyzed, illuminating alternatives to a single individual leader. The next sub-section addresses how leadership is understood in the contexts of arena teams and rankings. Sub-section three investigates leaders as experts who fill a teaching role, examining the ways power is negotiated between these experts and players new to PvP. The fourth sub-section focuses on Ashran with an initial example of frustrations encountered when there is no leadership. This is followed by a case study of how leaders negotiate multiple forms of conflicting power, foregrounding their cyclical rise, reign, and fall in Ashran PvP. Sub-section five concludes the chapter with a consideration of how games are involutions, and arguing that player understandings in *WoW* PvP is best conceptualized using subjectivities rather than imaginaries, a stance influenced by the game's magic circle.

In conclusion, Chapter Seven reviews the major findings of my research and highlights how these findings interact with current theoretical models and understandings. I then reveal how this thesis contributes to the scholarly corpus by addressing the research gap, by informing ethics and methodologies for conducting virtual world research, and by foregrounding how anthropological approaches that utilize conceptualizations of human-artifact interactions can be positively applied to virtual worlds and digital environments. I conclude with suggestions for further research and potential applications in actual world policy and legislation.

CHAPTER TWO:
LITERATURE REVIEW

This research not only addresses Laura Nader's (1972) call to study institutions and Nardi's (2010) call to study new cultures, it also identifies a surprising gap in existing research: the absence of studies of social conflict within PvP contexts. In the past two decades, there has been a surge of scholarly interest in virtual worlds and other digital spaces. A review of the relevant literature reveals virtual world research has taken place from diverse disciplinary perspectives, such as management organization (Leonardi 2012), adolescent studies and social work (Flores and James 2012, Gonchar and Adams 2000), law (Bartle 2004, Fairfield 2012, Lastowka and Hunter 2004), health (Ahlstrom et al 2012, Behm-Morawitz 2012, Bowman and Tamborini 2013, Smyth 2007, Wood et al 2007), economics and policy (Castronova 2007, Castronova et al 2014, Chambers 2011, Chew 2010, Jenkins 2004, Kosminsky 2010), international trade and labor (Dibbell 2006, Zhang and Fung 2014), digital media design and art (Devine et al 2014, Kaptelinin and Nardi 2009, Turkle 1995), morality and ethics (Dogruel et al 2012, Grimes et al 2009, Robey et al 2012, Schulzke 2014), game studies (Behrenshausen 2012, Embrick et al 2012, Griffiths et al 2004, Tulloch 2014, Williams et al 2009, Wood et al 2004), and humanistic informatics (Rettberg 2008).

Virtual Worlds as Legitimate Field Sites

A number of factors should be carefully considered before beginning research in virtual or digital contexts. Issues of accessibility, veracity, anonymity, and transparency are problematic since there is often no in-person interaction. Therefore, issues arise over its qualification as human research and how established Institutional Review Boards can incorporate these unique aspects into a coherent system of oversight (Boellstorff et al 2012:152). Additionally, negative views of video

games and gamers (such as in Chapter One) are often transferred onto video game studies, which results in a perception of video game studies as illegitimate sites (Boellstorff 2006:29, Mello 2006:176). This transference requires careful consideration of the benefits, difficulties, and unique situations that emerge during the course of research and of ways to apply accepted research methods to these virtual settings. Ethical questions also arise from these situations and institutional oversight is not yet standardized, although there is progress in this area (Markham and Buchanan 2012:2). Additionally, determining how to research virtual worlds, what boundaries to impose upon the research, and how to frame the research in terms of oversight first and foremost depends upon where the research falls along an ethnographic scale (Boellstorff 2010).

Disciplinary Considerations

Significantly, there is debate surrounding what term to use to study these online spaces. Gray and Driscoll (1992:40) differentiate between the terms "cyberspace," "virtual reality," and "virtual subcultures," asserting that full virtual reality, and therefore complete cyberspace, is still decades or centuries away. However, such projections do not mean such sites are unworthy of study. Given the militaristic background of the technology, restrictions on access based on education and class, disdain for the corporeal and "real" world, and stereotypes of gamers as young and male, ample research opportunities for anthropologists exist (1992:43-46). Economist Edward Castronova (2005:9-10) also carefully considers the term for his research site. He discards the term "virtual world" due to implications that it is not real, "cyberspace" as too general, "metaverse" as lacking aesthetics, and "hyperstage" since these sites are far more than mere theatrical locations. He settles on the term "synthetic world," which he defines as "an expansive, world-like, large-group environment made by humans, for humans, and which is maintained, recorded, and rendered by a

computer" (2005:11). Anthropologist Tom Boellstorff (2010:17) similarly rejects "synthetic world," "persistent world," "artificial world," "digital world," "virtual community," "virtual environment," and "metaverse." He argues that "the 'real world' of human social life is also synthesized through human artifice" and so, in this way, all human existence is virtual. He goes on to assert that "virtual" has always been the mediator between "culture" and "nature," since everything humans experience is "approaching the actual *without arriving there"* (2010:19, emphasis in original). Without delving further into terms put forward, it is clear that terms are numerous and the is debate ongoing.

Additionally, the level of gravitas attributed to research conducted in virtual worlds is under dispute primarily due to an issue of boundaries. Boellstorff (2008) argues that virtual worlds and actual worlds are both real; therefore, research can exclude actual worlds. Anthropologist Alex Golub (2010:39) counters such thought by asserting that these worlds are only real "when we care about them, not when they look similar to our own." This ties research in virtual worlds to players' offline lives. An alternative viewpoint sees virtual worlds as linked to offline events, where the importance of online success increases in proportion to offline failures (Snodgrass et al 2014). Nardi (2010) views online spaces as extensions of offline lives, where there is no boundary. Pearce (2009) conceptualizes them as ecosystems of interacting communities.

The argument leading from this is since all worlds, or perceptions of them, are essentially virtual, then "virtual" is so annoyingly vague as to be useless. However, since this term is not widespread in either public or academic discourse except in references to massive, online worlds, it is sufficient for my purposes here. I understand the term "virtual" as currently sufficient to differentiate the worlds we inhabit sans corporeality – be they books, dreams, or online spaces.

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Within the purview of the research question, Boellstorff's (2008: 61) argument for the legitimacy of the online world independent of the offline one frames my research approach.

Virtual or Digital Anthropology?

There is also debate about what to call the sub-field of anthropology that conducts research in digital, online environments. Digital anthropology and virtual anthropology seem to be the two main camps, even though both are somewhat vague. Boellstorff (2010:5) convincingly argues that "our "real" lives have been "virtual" all along," and yet anthropological study of online spaces accesses more than virtual worlds such as websites, healthcare systems, social networks, and YouTube videos. Therefore, the digital prefix potentially permits more flexibility in the research topic and location. Additionally, it seems that the term virtual anthropology has been appropriated to denote "procedures to investigate three-dimensional morphological structures by means of digital data sets of fossil and modern hominoids within a computer environment" (Weber et al 2001:69). Overall, it seems that digital anthropology is gaining traction (i.e. Horst and Miller 2012). Yet, the "physical/digital hybridity" continues to blur worlds, and "what we once called "virtual" has become all too real" with the result that "most of the social transformations we are seeing owe their life to digital technology" (Jordan 2009:182). Brigitte Jordan (2009) argues that this physical/digital is one aspect of "the blurrings" created by technology; other examples include home/work life, industrial/private spaces, education/entertainment, and national/transnational status.

I prefer to use digital anthropology to define the disciplinary subsidiary of sociocultural anthropology, since this includes not only video games but also the digital communities, resources, and materials that spring up around them. However, I prefer to use the term virtual ethnography to specifically denote that my ethnographic research is occurring in a virtual world. Additionally,

applying the label of virtual to my research permits me to access Boellstorff's (2008) "actual" and "virtual" conceptualizations. So far, I have found this virtual/actual dichotomy to be the most easily accessible terms with which to reference the corporeal world non-gamers inhabit as opposed to the in-game digital space. In summation, I position myself as performing virtual ethnographic research as a digital anthropologist.

Nevertheless, virtual ethnography has become increasingly integral to online studies across disciplines. Due to the lack of corporeality in digital environments, the widespread and instant access to global populations, and the sheer volume of relatively easily acquired data, research in the social sciences favors qualitative, ethnographic research. Fielding (2014) notes that this ease of access opens the door for research of indigenous, minority, and non-academic groups. This makes research both accessible and less threatening to disempowered populations. Additionally, the easy ability to gather and store massive amounts of data "has proven a boon to more quantitatively inclined researchers…[has] enabled research projects that would have been otherwise infeasible" (Ducheneaut et al 2010:138). In fact, some argue for joining "technology into the best practices of ethnography," using a previous study of guild population fluctuation in *WoW* (Ducheneaut et al 2007) to extricate methodology (Ducheneaut et al 2010:139). Studies such as these illustrate how such methods can benefit other research areas including community management, customer service, and marketing (143-144). Due to the easily overwhelming volume of data, researchers need to take care when setting the boundaries of their research.

Ludoarchaeology & Archaeogaming

The increasing attention given to games and games studies has found a new home in archaeology. Called ludoarchaeology, this specialized area of archaeology focuses on finding lost or

forgotten games, as well as materials related to the games such as texts, game boards, and rule books (Fuchs 2014:528). Archaeologist Matias Fuchs (2014:532) relates that the excavation at a site once occupied by Johann Huizinga (discussed later in this chapter) in the Netherlands resulted in the discovery of annotations written in his own hand that opened new understandings on his conceptualization of play, and how playfulness can be understood as an alternative tactic to resistance. Archaeogaming takes a slightly different course. According to a blog maintained by Andrew Reinhard, the lead archaeologist who helped uncover the cache of buried Atari games (Muckle 2014), archaeogaming is a consideration of archaeology as used within video games by professional archaeologists. He asserts that it is the "archaeology both of and in video games," and that the purpose of his blog includes exploring "new methods for conducting real archaeology in gaming environments, as well as the theory underpinning studying material culture of the immaterial" (Reinhard n.d.).

Ethical Considerations

Additionally, traditional understandings of ethical human research are being reconsidered. In spite of the "almost non-existent" ability to cause physical harm, "participants can still suffer serious emotional harm," especially regarding players' attachments to their avatars (Grimes et al 2009:42). Another key issue for ethical consideration is the existence of public spaces. The current guideline is to reflexively determine how research populations define public and private, what spaces they assign to those definitions, and the "contextual integrity" of the data (Markham and Buchanan 2012:6). In fact, Malin Sveningsson Elm (2009:82) notes it is possible we "have become so accustomed to being exposed and seeing others exposing themselves that we may not even except or care for any privacy online anymore." Questions of anonymity are also a central issue, since "anonymity online is more

imagined than real" (Mortensen 2009:125). One example of this tendency is use of "passport names" that identify players across multiple games (Mortensen 2009:125). These online names are also used in public competitions and are displayed on internet sites for skill ranking or strategy purposes. Players often receive sponsorship and their websites host consumer adds, tying financial income to their avatars, personas, skill, or prestige. Accordingly, they may request to be clearly identified within research.

Education scholar Anette Markham (2009:195) asserts that the "ethic of accountability" is a key framework that underlies and guides ethical rigor. Drawing on Maria Christina Gonzalez's definition of "account-ability. The ability to account. To tell a story," Markham argues that this concept of truthfulness, context, and community guides the entire research process, from question to methodology to report (196). This framework then informs researchers to make ethical decisions and builds an ethical rigor into the entire research project.

<u>Sociocultural Research in Virtual Worlds</u>

Besides the multitude of concerns raised above, a central issue in this research endeavor is the conceptualization of boundaries and what is permitted to cross them. There has also been considerable research conducted within these locations. Major thematic topics include sexuality, gender, race, identity, representation, addiction, communities, and social constructions. Moreover, there has been targeted research on a wide array of topics, settings, and situations within *WoW*. In this section, I discuss these major themes, which I have selected for relevance to my research. I then show how this thesis is situated within the scholarly corpus and discuss the rationale underlying my research question.

Gaming Boundaries and The Magic Circle

No literature review would be complete without at least a mention of Dutch historian and anthropologist Johann Huizinga's "magic circle" (2014 [1944]:57). Huizinga, considered the father of ludic studies, set out to determine the cultural significance of play. As a result, his conception of the magic circle is similar to those of sacred and ritual spaces. In fact, he extends his conception of play from child to sportsman to priest (18). Magic circles "are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act part" (10). Yet, he did not originally specifically relate this conception to games. Fuchs (2014:533) attributes this to other scholars. Alternatively, Mia Consalvo advocates for the "frames and keys of Erving Goffman" as an alternate conceptualization, arguing that "we cannot say that games are magic circles, where the ordinary rules of life do not apply" (2009: 414,416). I will not get into further detail about this concept and its debate and issues, as these have been thoroughly addressed elsewhere (Boellstorff 2008; Mortensen 2009; Nardi 2010; Pearce 2009; Taylor 2006a; Waskul 2006). That said, three main interpretations are relevant here.[2]

Grimes et al (2009:42) compare the magic circle to a social ecology and note that researcher transgression can damage the circle. A second interpretation comes from Pearce 2009, who likens the magic circle to Turner's 1982 conceptualization of liminal space: "the play frame in which participants mutually agree to suspend everyday rules and social contracts and abide by a set of rules or constraints" (25-26). I prefer Castronova's (2005:147) explanation of the magic circle as a membrane, which is a porous barrier that permits boundary-crossing but still restricts entry.

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[2] In this discussion, I focus on Western constructions of game play. There has recently begun a trend to explore understandings of game play and online play in non-Western cultures and a reaction against the Western hegemonic dichotomy of real/virtual (for example, see Page 2012).

In this conceptualization, the outside world affects the inside world, and vice versa, yet there is still a boundary between the two that forms and shapes the ways each affect the other. An overly simplified example of this is leaving the game momentarily for some non-game reason such as eating, smoking, or letting the dog out. While the player's absence has an effect on the game, the reason for the absence does not. Therefore, all such occurrences can be covered with a simple "away from keyboard" message. More nuanced examples include understandings of fair play, work, and acceptable social behavior. These are drawn from out-of-game life, and are implicit within gameplay, which results in shared player conceptions of appropriate behavior that are modified by software and active game play. Simply put, out-of-game understandings are translated through the magic circle membrane into ideas of appropriate in-game play.

Addiction

Issues of addiction have also become a hot topic within game studies. One key point is the varying ways addiction is understood within these gaming contexts. Players often assert that they are addicted to game play, but when used in this fashion it does not connote the biomedical/clinical definition of addict. "Players who call themselves addicted are often using that term to articulate what they later elaborate upon as unavoidable obligations to their peers" (Chee et al 2006:167). Torill Mortensen (2008:214) asserts that "it is the raiding[3] which really hooks players and earns *WoW* its reputation as an "addictive" game, but it's also the raiding that causes burn-out and total withdrawal from the game." In both cases, players' use of addiction indicates a serious obligation,

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[3] *Raiding* is a PvE event where players enter and attempt to conquer fortresses held by NPCs; these fortresses are often called *raids*. Players who say "I'm raiding" is engaged in this PvE activity. Players who says "I'm PvPing" could be in a raid group. In *WoW*, a group of five players is a *party*, and a group of more than five is a *raid*. The term *raid* is used in PvE and PvP since it denotes the game's sociotechnical, structured organization.

attachment, or attitude about gameplay. These two quotations illustrate a passion for the game, in-game social obligations, and an awareness of prestige based on skill or knowledge. Like any social network or competitive play, success is partially dependent on the amount of time and effort put into the endeavor. In this way, players use the term to denote a serious, intense, and focused dedication to game play.

Another way to understand this is through the lens of public opinion regarding video games. The use of addiction by players may also reflect public and scholarly discourse about gaming addiction and the attendant fears (Casey 2015). In 2005, California passed a law to "restrict the sale of video games to minors, as it would cigarettes or alcohol" (Fulton 2016). This law was challenged all the way to the U.S. Supreme court (*Brown, Governor of California, et al v. Entertainment Merchants Association, et al* [2011]). The resulting decision upheld that video games, even violent ones, are protected under the First Amendment, overturning California's law (Appendix A).

Joshua M. Smyth's 2007 comparison of video game players illuminates an interesting dynamic. He studied the health effects of different types of games on a hundred players aged 18-20 and found that players of MMORPGs (MMO role-playing games):

> differed significantly from other groups after 1 month, reporting more hours spent playing, worse health, worse sleep quality, and greater interference in "real-life" socializing and academic work. In contrast, this group also reported greater enjoyment in playing, greater interest in continuing to play, and greater acquisition of new friendships. MMORPGs represent a different gaming experience with different consequences… (717)

This study illustrates that, like many things in life, MMORPGs have both positive and negative effects that must be balanced by the individual. The increased dedication to an MMOG may appear to actual world relations as an addiction, when in reality players are simply exchanging one social space for another. Additionally, the above benefits of MMOGs enable disabled or home-bound individuals opportunities to socialize (Boellstorff and Kruegar 2015, Ginsberg 2012).

Of course, this does not mean that issues of addiction do not exist. Studies such as Smyth's (2007) show a correlation between time spent playing video games and students' academic performance (see also Ventura et al 2012). One aspect may be players' predisposition to addiction, where "certain psychological characteristics…may predispose some individuals to become addicted" (Kim et al 2007:212). Addiction to game playing has given rise to so-called "game widows" and online support groups such as gamerwidow.com and On-Line Gamers Anonymous (www.olganon.org/home), where players can seek support in overcoming their addiction (Benedetti 2007). The idea of social responsibility for gaming addiction "finds parallels to other industries – such as gambling – which are heavily regulated" (Van Rooij et al 2010). Gamers acknowledge this darker side, using phrases such as "I'm addicted to warcrack"[4] to hyper-index their awareness.

A series of medical anthropological studies (built on a series of research by Nick Yee's conceptualization of three motivations, 2006) in *WoW* illustrate this multi-faceted issue and describe MMOGs as "technologies of absorption" (Snodgrass et al 2011:26). They later found that players who focus on achievement have negative play experiences, while those who play for social or escapist/immersion reasons are much more satisfied with gameplay (Snodgrass et al 2012). Another study shows that including conceptualizations of cultural consonance enables more accurate

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[4] "Warcrack" is a term devised by *WoW* players as hyperbolic slang, likening *WoW* to crack cocaine (Nardi 2010:127).

predictions of "problematic play," highlighting issues of cultural relativity and inherent power struggles (Snodgrass et al 2013). The idea of cultural dissonance is framed by a discussion surrounding in-game expectations. For certain end-game activities, addiction is almost a requirement for some groups, since success "in *WoW*'s most challenging environments… demands enormous amounts of time" (Snodgrass et al 2014:2). Soonhwa Seok and Boaventura DaCosta's 2014 study compares play habits of young adult MMO players and found that traits exhibited by highly engaged players were similar to, and sometimes the same as, players who were addicted. In many ways, addiction can be framed within the larger discourse of boundaries and reality. If the virtual world is more satisfying to players than the actual one, does this justify labeling them as addicted?

Sex, Gender, Identity, and Representation

When it comes to issues of gender and representation, debates and critiques can be vocal and even violent, as the aforementioned #GamerGate controversy illustrates. Julian Dibbell's 1994[1993] article "A Rape in Cyberspace" sent shockwaves throughout the scholarly community and brought to light complicated issues of embodiment, identity, sexuality, and violence, revealing that online worlds are societies and thus have social issues. David J. Leonard's (2006) call to action argued that most video game research to date that explored topics of narratives and violence ignored issues of gender and race. Including gender and race is necessary for critical analysis of story-based components and social interactions set within games that reproduce surrounding social perceptions. This was a pivotal moment in game studies and turned scholarly attention to race, gender, identity, and representation both within the game world and in the game development industry. Since these themes twine and intertwine, I have chosen not to separate this sub-section into smaller sections,

since scholarly works in one area inevitably drawn in others. Additionally, I attempt to selectively limit the items reviewed for relevance to this research.

Andrea Braithwaite (2013) tackles issues of sexism within *WoW* character dialogue and the affiliated themes of "feminist as killjoy" and "anxious masculinity" that appeared in game-related forums and websites, noting that feminism appears as a threat in these game spaces. Media studies scholar Adrienne Shaw (2011) has critical insights revealing the differences between people who play games and self-identified gamers. She unpacks nuanced understandings of how game players and gamers understand issues of identity and representation within video games with a focus on perceptions of gender, race, and identity. Nicholas DiGiuseppe and Nardi (2007) interviewed *WoW* players to determine how gender affected class choice, finding that class choice typically was based on social aspects, such as what role the player would have in a team, and that stereotypes actually serve to mask the commonalities between male and female choices.

Additional studies researched the possibilities of creating gaming and psychological predictions based on pattern choice by categories of sex, gender, age, race, and psychological factors, and how these factors interact with video game play to impact identity development in youth (Doh and Whang 2014, Homer et al 2012, Li et al 2012). Some studies take a psychological approach, examining the ways and situations in which avatars are utilized to create an ideal self (Bessière et al 2007, Przybylski et al 2011) or how this ideal-self communicates actual world markers of age and gender (Martey et al 2013).

Alternatively, some studies investigate playing avatars as forms of experimentation with gender switching (Huh and Williams 2010, Paik and Shi 2013, Martey et al 2014) and gender bending, which is becoming normalized (Todd 2012), or as doll and dress-up play (Heljakka 2012,

Fron et al 2007). A fascinating study of the effects and impacts of online game play with offline relationships considered how having a virtual world lover impacted actual world marriages and relationship satisfaction. It showed players of *Second Life* were as or more likely to be satisfied with online relationships than with offline ones, due in part to idealization of the avatar partner (Kolotkin et al 2012). Another intriguing take on self-identity in virtual worlds is the consideration of the psychological effects of avatar doppelgangers, especially autonomous ones (Bailenson and Seovia 2010). Lisa Nakamura's (2002) consideration of identity tourism touches on issues of gender but also on utilizing video game and virtual world avatars to explore alternate racial and ethnic identities.

A narrative approach to gender is discussed in Zachary R. Wendler's (2014) discussion of the *Portal* and *Portal 2* video games, where players only gradually learn that they are playing a woman, and not just any woman – a woman who outsmarted a supercomputer. By using "procedural rhetoric as the core narrative heart... Valve has created a story that relies upon… sociological bond formation" and is an excellent implementation of critical feminist theory that emphases individuality (351). A review of the gaming industry by Hilde G. Corneliussen (2008) uncovers three main approaches the gaming industry takes to appeal to female gamers: claiming there is nothing wrong, making "pink games," and making cross-gender games. Her examination of narrative characters in *WoW* reveals that the majority of prominent females are dependent upon their sex for their role in the story (i.e. mother, lover, sister), and that it is primarily the males who define racial characteristics (74). However, *WoW* also permits opportunities for gender roles to be negotiated, especially regarding professions, and she concludes that gender is present but meaningless in Azeroth, where stereotypes both exist and are challenged (79).

Additionally, research shows that stereotypes of gamers as isolated, pale teenage boys persist but that individual cognitive associations of gamers are becoming more varied (Kowert et al 2012). An analysis of players' responses to male and female player voices in competitive play reveals that female voices receive "three times as many negative comments…[and] more queries and more messages from other gamers than the male voice or no voice" (Kuznekoff and Rose 2012: 541). A comparison of avatars in Taiwan and United States MMOGs reveal that male androgyny is far more common in Taiwan than in the United States, where female avatars are barer and more aggressive than Taiwan female avatars (Hou 2008).

Jessie Daniels' (2012) review of literature regarding race, racism, and the internet points to ways that race is imbedded in multiple forms of digital interactions, while Daniels and Nick LaLone (2012) further analyze systemic virtual world racism in connection to white supremacist movements. Nakamura's (2009) consideration of the profiling and racialization of labor in *WoW* links to larger globalization concerns and correlates to Dibbel's (2006) and Nardi's (2010) research. These studies illustrate the pervasiveness of actual and/or perceptions of Chinese video game labor, particularly in *WoW* but also in the virtual world gaming community in general. Melissa J. Monson (2012) considers the narrative racialization of characters in *WoW* that is drawn from actual world groups as notions of biological essentialism, similar to Jessica Langer's (2008) work linking in-game racial groups and factions to post-colonial conceptions of civilized and primitive. Joseph Packer (2013) takes a different approach, considering how racial characteristics of *WoW* narrative groups, specifically the Orcs, influence a collective and emergent player-created racialization. David R. Dietrich's (2013) analysis of over 70 games where avatar creation is possible found that most games' avatar creation only has Anglo features available, contributing towards a normative whiteness. Finally, Ben DeVane

and Kurt D. Squire (2008) assert that players should be studied in "naturalistic settings if they want to see what "effects" games are having on players," specifically regarding interpretations of race and violence in *Grand Theft Auto* games but broadly applicable.

Guilds, Communities, and Social Constructions

As for social constructions, interactions, and communities, these are exemplified in the ethnographies discussed below. However, a few key works also bear mentioning. Nicolas Ducheneaut (2010:135) has participated in multiple studies within *WoW* and other MMOGs in order to analyze social interactions and structures, and in this piece he outlines how MMOGs attempt to "foster interactions between their players using a common template" resulting in the necessity of a stable, software-supported social organization: the guild. He also participated in the above mentioned projects that combine qualitative and quantitative data that not only serve to explore new methods in virtual world research but also traces the objective and subjective life cycle of guilds within *WoW*. This includes how guilds are managed and what mechanisms guild leaders utilize to maintain membership for social reasons and as a source of raiding labor (Ducheneaut et al 2007).

Golub's (2010) research with a raiding guild shows that players' social production of knowledge extends beyond game boundaries into actual world interactions and that at high levels of play, players choose to disengage from the immersive experiences of game play in order to access more information that contributes to in-game success. J. Patrick Williams and David Kirschner (2012) consider the implications of coordinated action theory within raiding groups that are not physically co-present but nevertheless interact in layered ways. Nathaniel Poor and Marko M. Skoric (2014) examine how guilds are born and die within *EverQuest 2*, finding that strong intragroup ties can preserve or subvert group stability and that the regular presence of leadership is vital to ensure

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guild vitality. Celia Pearce and Artemesia (2010) explore the diasporic movements of an *Uru: Ages Beyond Mist* guild after the game goes offline, monitoring their travels as they seek to find a new virtual world to call home and the becoming members in the resulting trans-ludic community.

A fascinating exploration of the mechanisms and interactions of teams within MMOGs, with implications for work teams in actual world situations, includes how social reinforcement of leadership positions creates a perpetuating leadership structure, which perpetuates trust in that leadership despite geographic distance (Korsgaard et al 2010). I would also note that any ethnographic or qualitative research conducted within virtual worlds must address the social circumstances that frame the context of the research. Accordingly, the ethnographies I will discuss subsequently (as well as most of the literature reviewed in this chapter) have something to say regarding social organization within and outside of the virtual game world.

Ethnographies

Besides the articles addressed above, the anthropological tradition of producing ethnographies based on field research has moved into virtual world studies. A few ethnographies in particular have altered my theoretical and methodological conceptualizations. They have also strongly impacted and influenced both my research approach and my understanding of what I found. I have included these as a separate sub-section since each ethnography covers multiple topics that would otherwise be dispersed throughout the above discussion. They are instead arranged separately here for purposes of clarity and literature review organization.

Tom Boellstorff's 2008 *Coming of Age in Second Life* is a provocative work intentionally designed to evoke traditional anthropological ethnographies. Situated in the virtual world of Second

Life, where game play is free and players are able to create landscapes, buildings, and clothing, Boellstorff advances a new conceptualization of what it means to be human. Due to the open nature of Second Life, it provides a unique view on a world similar to ours. Boellstorff's consideration of political economy, space, intimacy, and techne firmly situate virtual world studies as legitimate anthropological endeavors. Edward Castronova's 2005 *Synthetic Worlds* uses multiple virtual worlds to elucidate their important real world impacts. Some examples include multi-billion-dollar gaming industries, alternate forms of currency and resulting economic instability, and the potential for these worlds as terrorist training grounds or sites of cyber intrusion. In both of these works, the unique theoretical perspectives influenced my own at an early stage.

T.L. Taylor's 2006 *Play Between Worlds* focuses on both the virtual world of *EverQuest* and the actual world, where she attended a fan convention and met her in-game friends in person. Her focus includes the social interactions in the virtual and actual worlds, how players build identities and communities, how gender is portrayed, and has an in-depth discussion of policy issues regarding ownership and copyright infringement. Celia Pearce takes a different approach in her 2009 *Communities of Play*. Initially, she gives authorship credit to her avatar, Artemesia, as an illustration of the issues surrounding identity and ethnographic research, which she argues is a form of play. Additionally, she begins her ethnography in the virtual world *Uru*, which was shut down, and follows a community of players as they migrate to different worlds in an attempt to find a new home. She charts their diaspora, establishing a place for herself as the community's archivist: she is an ethnographer playing an ethnographer.

Two Ethnographies Specific to World of Warcraft

Sociologist William Sims Bainbridge's 2010 *The Warcraft Civilization* is a book that, for players of my experience, seemed simplistic since most of the book is dedicated to explanation of how the game is played and in-game experiences, which I know first-hand. However, it was incredibly useful to me as a comparison to the other ethnographies, highlighting differences in method and approach to research in *WoW* as opposed to, say, Second Life. Additionally, it introduced me to an in-game professional conference that was held by scholars in May of 2008. This scholarly conference revolved around issues of real and virtual (such as those discussed above) and is a landmark for qualitative studies of video games. He also considers the role of narrative in the game world, something that the other ethnographers in this section highlighted but did not pursue.

Bonnie Nardi's 2010 *My Life as a Night Elf Priest* is an anthropological account of her excursion into *WoW*. Beyond the points already discussed above, her consideration of the game as a mediating software artifact within actor-network theory heavily influenced my conception of the scope of my research, which will be clearly visible when I discuss my findings. Besides the requisite section on gender, she writes regarding theorycrafting and in-game modifications, two areas that receive little attention elsewhere (although see Taylor 2006b). She also conducts research at an internet café in China, crossing the boundary between virtual and actual ethnography.

Nearly Anthropological Ethnographies

Julian Dibbell's 2006 *Play Money* traces his experience working full-time within the world of *Ultima Online*, where in the course of a year he managed to earn approximately $40,000 in both virtual and actual currencies and assets. This work underscores the importance of both virtual and

actual economies, drawing attention to policies regarding national and international labor laws and free markets. Adrienne Shaw's 2014 *Gaming at the Edge* is a new touchstone for identity and representation research in video games and the gaming industry. Tackling complicated issues of diversity and pluralism, representation, and identification-of and identification-with, she teases out nuances of individuality while giving marginalized gamers the opportunity to be heard. One important finding is that expectations of representation are dependent on the game setting. Overall, this book has clear impact for game design and marketing approaches to queer and minority groups.

Additional Research in and on *World of Warcraft*

Besides the above information, additional extensive studies have also been done with *WoW*. As with any population social sciences study, the sociocultural aspects of *WoW* are many, nuanced, and fluid. As the brief introductory history shows, *WoW* is a complex game that has had many alterations, evolutions, and additions. Research from ten or eight years ago may be completely invalidated by changes in software code, which can occur on a semi-yearly basis. Despite this fluidity, some things are too integrated and foundational to change. In this section, I will consider research specific to the *WoW* game, including: narrative; space, aesthetics, and role-play; technical game play; theorycrafting and creating add-ons; and Blizzard Entertainment itself. While there have been alterations in these things through the years, they are unchanged at a basic, general level and, therefore, remain relevant to research within the game world.

Narrative

Analysis of narrative elements and game structure reveal themes of imperialism and environmentalism, capitalist economy and work ethic, and interestingly lacks a Christian-like religion

in spite of the variety of religious views held by the civilizations (Bainbridge 2010). Esther

MacCallum-Stewart's (2008:59) extensive discussion shows that *WoW*'s Horde versus Alliance

narrative intentionally problematizes current binary understandings, since it was under development

during the U.S.-Iraqi war. Additionally, she specifically addresses the role of PvP in this narrative of

uneasy alliance, postulating that players are covert groups operating without sanction by the central

authority, who sometimes looks the other way, suggesting that this "taps into a fundamental debate

about modern war" (45).

Narrative also plays an important role in determining which elements are accessible to

players. Mortensen (2009:26) distinguishes between narrative and game code, noting that restrictions

such as the type of minion a Warlock can summon are based within the story of the game. Similarly,

some classes are restricted to certain races. Langer (2008:87) argues that this idea is based in ideas of

Western colonial ideologies that have a dichotomous us/other. Indexing issues of core-periphery

and identity tourism, she notes these constructions of power hierarchies mimic the real world and

raise attendant issues of biological stereotypes (91-92). Alternatively, *WoW* narratives can be read as

rich texts. The world-building use of maps and cultural ruins, combined with tying cycles of time to

actual world celebrations and holidays create a sense of worldness that gives texture to the rich

narrative. When considered together, all of these elements "invite players to read the world and

gameplay tasks as myth… I regard their primary importance as providing a symbolic language… a

sense for the player of being in a world… to 'think about and through'" (Krzywinska 2008:138).

Additionally, the quest structure subscribes to a pattern of deferral and repetition, and as a result this

is the underlying pattern of the game itself (Rettberg 2008). This is used to illustrate how *WoW*

dodges a paradox of narrative (the desire to know the ending, but in knowing ending it) by "endless

deferral of an end;" since the game has no traditional ending, players can "desire endlessly, have entirely, and never consume" (Rettberg 2008: 176).

Space, Aesthetics, and Role-Play

WoW's lack of graphic detail and cartoonish art style is the reason for its' global success, according to Espen Aarseth (2008). The low graphic detail speeds up processing times and reduces *lag*,[5] while the cartoonish art eliminates culturally-based appeal issues and small geographical regions contribute to "amusement park-like" gameplay (121). The sheer magnitude of the game and the numbers of players lead to individual interpretations of what the game is. In other words, there is no "norm" here, which in turn problematizes the concept of deviance (Mortensen 2008). Since the game world is code, it follows that code is also the rules. Yet, even here, through updates, patches, and expansions, there is no one norm to follow: "in this manner games become practice grounds for subversion: a place to learn about the rules, how to understand them, how to obey them, how to stretch them, how to break them, how to avoid them" (Mortensen 2008:220). Therefore, deviant behavior is defined on an individual basis: "for a raider, all role play is deviant" (2008:219).

Esther MacCallum-Stewart and Justin Parsler (2008) problematize the RPG moniker, arguing that *WoW* is not conducive or sufficiently designed to be a true role-playing game, even though its links to actual time and sustained world and its servers designated Role Playing assert that it is. This leads into a consideration of stock characters, which they argue are too stereotypical and do not permit enough customization to promote a true role play world. Ragnhild Tronstad (2008:253)

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[5] The term "lag" is common in *WoW* discourse. Castronova (2005: 83) defines lag as "the effect a user perceives when there are long delays between the time a command is executed and the time its effects appear," which in *WoW* is experienced as "rubber-banding" (things "being yanked to the proper place"). Also see Chapter 5.

asserts that role play is instead dependent upon the player's knowledge of both game mechanics and the game world and lore and the aesthetic capacity of the toon to perform; this enables "flow" (based on Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's 1990 conceptualization of being in a state of optimal experience). When players experience flow, the result is a satisfying gaming experience, role-play or otherwise (260).

An important aspect of play is creating and naming a "toon," which is what avatars are called in *WoW,* and is of relatively equal importance to all players, regardless of role-play participation (Hagström 2008). An interesting point is that since each race in *WoW* has its own culture, history, and geographical origin, it is also natural that they each have their own naming scheme. Players pick up on this and incorporate it into their toon names as "perfectly reasonable…natural" (267). Matthieu J. Guitton (2010) utilized a sample of 1,261 names from playable characters in *WoW* for analysis and found that a less-human appearance correlated with an increase in feminization and vowels in player-selected names.

Technical Game Play

Scott Rettberg (2008:32) argues that *WoW* is a corporate training platform for capitalist ideologies, utilizing Max Weber's "Protestant Work Ethic" to resolve the quandary of play, where "play that feels like *work*…must be *good.*" He correctly notes (based on personal experience) that "the majority of the play involved in advancing in *World of Warcraft* is mindless and repetitive to the extent that it verges on Taylorism… combat is a form of production" (30). This repetition is seen at all stages of the game and in all situations, even in PvP (which we shall see later).

Ekbia and Nardi (2012:172) illustrate how *WoW* is explicitly designed with gaps that human users must fill to complete the network, that one player must educate another in what they call an "expectant" organizational system. In a similar vein, Constance Steinkuehler and Yoonsin Oh (2012:155) note the need for some method of integrating new players into the "shared ways of being in the world," and argue this method takes the form of master/apprentice interaction. Jargon also plays a large role, and in end-game content where group participation is required, the "ability to at least understand the *WoW* register" is necessary (Erkenbrack 2012:37). An interesting aspect of game/player balance is confronted in death. Although death plays a key role in world building aesthetically (i.e. seeing player skeletons at battle sites) and mythologically, death in PvE is penalized more severely than death in PvP, which gives rise to issues of game imbalance and informs game design through player experience (Klastrup 2008).

Theorycrafting and Modding

Trina Choontanom and Nardi (2012) use theorycrafting in *WoW* to examine the role of education in affinity spaces. Theorycrafting is so called because of its origins within Blizzard Entertainment games such as *Warcraft* and *Starcraft*. Theorycrafting is the process of utilizing statistical data in order to maximize in-game power, requiring knowledge of algebra, statistics, appropriate methods, and analytical tools. They assert that "the schoolmarm is with us, incarnated as a theorycrafter" (206). Taylor (2006b) undertakes a study of modifications and add-ons/mods, which are changes or additions that players code and insert into the game. While some mods become actors in constructing play, she remarks on a trend of "coveillance" or "participatory surveillance" and how this gives rise to coercive systems that discipline players, especially when such "technical game artifacts" are mandatory (329, 319). She argues that emergence does not preclude

systems of control rising from below and being "strongly implemented" even in game situations, as evidenced by these modifications that "should instead be viewed as strong agents in reshaping what constitutes the game and legitimate play" (334).

Blizzard Entertainment

Blizzard Entertainment, the corporation that owns and operates *WoW,* also has a role in determining what is or is not legitimate play. Pearce (2009:40) describes Blizzard as taking the stance of "a totalitarian regime" when they banned players involved in protests that brought down a server; in other words, "making civil disobedience punishable by virtual death." Sean C. Duncan (2012) discusses how Ghostcrawler, a *WoW* game master, mediates forums and negotiates with players to create a space to discuss the game. However, occasionally he explicitly uses his power to solidify an official stance, one that players contest and resist but ultimately are forced to accept. Duncan (2012: 197) notes that "the affinity space around a game such as [*WoW*] is a space of conflict and struggle."

The Gap in Virtual World Research

Taking this research into consideration, a small but important gap is revealed. While such research addresses conflict in the contexts of racial and gender inequality, there is a significant lack of research into video games that take a broader perspective. Gender, sex, and race are only three dimensions of inequality and are all understood through larger frameworks of power structures. Considerations of the narratives in such games contribute to understandings of conflict, but within MMORPG narratives, players are mostly powerless to affect the game story line. Additionally, MMOGs such as *Destiny* and *Counter-Strike* restrict players both narratively and creatively. Though such games are moving to incorporate more diversity in avatar choice, players are restricted to a

limited range of locations, interactions, and artifacts. Games such as *Grand Theft Auto*, which are not MMOGs, may have more narrative, interaction, and artifact diversity, yet they permit only one, or possibly up to four persons to play simultaneously. While research in these single or multi-player games can inform studies, it is not possible to study the conflicts between larger groups of players within their confines. In order to study conflict between and among players, MMORPGs provide the widest range of access to players, locations, interactions, and artifacts: in other words, possibilities that affect player choices. MMORPGs are therefore an excellent location to research social dynamics, since group sizes range from dozens to hundreds, and games host hundreds to thousands of separate groups. Furthermore, the wider array of potential player choices contributes to the ways players can respond to conflicts within social engagements.

I set out to explore these conflicting hierarchies of power, group dynamics, and individual player agency that are missing from current virtual world research. Moreover, the literature only briefly and superficially addresses these conflicts within the framework of player versus player contexts (Bainbridge 2010, Castronova 2005, Nardi 2010, Klastrup 2008). This gap is surprising, since a large draw to video games is the ability to play against other players, and such situations are rife with, and in some ways based on, group and individual conflict. In such cases, player conflict is fostered and expected in these spaces.

Therefore, my research is focused on PvP events with special attention to issues of conflict, power, agency, resistance, and leadership. My research question is: How do individual players negotiate conflict between and among groups in *WoW* player versus player contexts? Beyond addressing the scholarly corpus gap, this research is an important contribution to understandings of virtual and digital conflicts. As stated above, global access to virtual worlds is expanding at an

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exponential rate. Research of these worlds must keep pace. Accordingly, I received approval in July

2015 from the Internal Review Board at the University of Central Florida (Appendix B) to conduct

this research. Understanding how conflicts are managed by individuals and groups will contribute to

better game design and inform public discourses regarding video games and violence. It also has

policy implications for resolving virtual world conflicts in real world contexts.

CHAPTER THREE:
SETTING AND METHODS

I follow Tom Boellstorff's (2008:61) method of conducting research completely within the virtual world and internet settings, rejecting the necessity of in-person meetings and accepting virtual worlds as "legitimate sites of culture." He argues that meeting players "in the actual world… presumes that virtual worlds are not themselves contexts; it renders ethnographically inaccessible the fact that most residents of virtual worlds do not meet their fellow residents offline" (61). Therefore, including the actual world would in fact be a violation of social norms (61). This is not to say that all virtual world research must adhere to this restriction. However, if the aims and questions are completely situated within the virtual world, as is the case with my research, it follows that the virtual world is the boundary.

Settings: The Game World and Affinity Spaces

I conducted research within *World of Warcraft: Warlords of Draenor*, the fifth expansion released in 2014. Since expansions update and alter gameplay in fundamental and drastic ways, each one provides a unique temporal context and logistical framework for the player. Knowledge learned in one expansion does not always carry into the next. Thus, each one is, in some ways, a new game. Therefore, the *Warlords of Draenor* expansion is the first sub-category in the hierarchy of research locations within the game world. Within this expansion, I utilized multiple and varied settings, which are comprised of a mixture of server and battleground virtual geographies and social organizations, such as within guilds and chat channels. Research conducted outside of the game world was completely contained in digital, online environments.

One main setting is within Voice over Internet Programs (VoIPs), which is third-party software usually run simultaneously with *WoW*. The most popular VoIPs are Skype, Ventrilo, Curse Voice, Mumble, and TeamSpeak3. Other locations include websites, forums, blogs, wiki databases, and other similar online locations. Membership in these communities are defined by entering a space rather than by participation, ranging "from short-term lurkers to wholesale aficionados and everything in between" (Gee and Hayes 2011:132). James Paul Gee (2004:83) calls these "affinity spaces." Duncan (2012:178) elaborates this is a "fan "space," often presented online, in which players interact and develop an affinity for the common interest as well as one another." Gee and Elizabeth Hayes (2012:69) later elaborated upon this concept, calling them "passionate-affinity spaces" that are created when "the people have an affinity (attraction) to the shared endeavor, interest, or passion first and foremost and then to others." I prefer to use Gee's 2004 concept of affinity spaces, since a website visitor can do many things that do not include interactive participation. Additionally, "fan" and "passion" seem strong terms to use for such massive affinity spaces like those around *WoW*, and it is possible not all visitors are fans or even like the franchise.

In *WoW*, it is necessary for players to create avatars in order to enter the virtual game world. These avatars are representations of the players in the game world. They are used to move around and interact within the game. Therefore, avatars are tied into virtual identities and reputations, although the degree of player investment in their avatar varies. In *WoW*, player avatars are called toons, short for cartoon, which reflects the art style of the game. As a result, I had to utilize toons in order to enter the virtual world to observe, meet, and interact with the players there. In all of these settings, it is uncommon to interact with other players or participants face-to-face or in person. I only interacted with participants through in-game avatars, in-game text chat, through VoIPs, or in

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online textual discussion threads and forums. No live video or web camera transmissions of players' person were used during VoIP chat. All players are identified by abbreviations consisting of two letters: the first letters of their toons' name and the first letter of their toons' server. Certain key informants may be identified by a single toon or gamer tag, according to their preferences.

<u>Ethnographic Methods</u>

Over the course of my research, I used six distinct ethnographic and qualitative research methods, what Taylor (2006a:17) calls a "bricolage," a combination of ethnographic methods, interviews, affinity spaces, and actual world events. These methods have been utilized by various anthropologists and virtual world researchers. Additionally, they are explicitly discussed and endorsed in three different handbooks explicitly geared towards digital and virtual anthropologies (Boellstorff et al 2012, Horst and Miller 2012, Underberg and Zorn 2013).

Participant Observation

I conducted participant observation from June 2015 to February 2016 by utilizing pre-existing toons in *WoW* in order to participate in solitary and group gameplay. As my main research method, participant observation enables me to learn "explicit and tacit aspects of … routines" (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011:1). This is especially crucial for studies of virtual worlds since game access requires an avatar and so simply being embodied in the world is a form of participation. Additionally, participant observation has been utilized in the study of virtual worlds by multiple anthropological researchers (Boellstorff et al 2012:69). Besides acquiring first-hand experience, participant observation enabled me to collect digital artifacts, locate potential interviewees, gain access to general communications, gather screenshots and chat logs for data analysis, and discover

digital out-of-game community locations. By utilizing participant observation in multiple locations, I was able to operate within clear contextual environments (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011:3). For this research, I participated in four types of *WoW* PvP: (1) arenas, (2) Ashran, (3) random battlegrounds, and (4) a few rated battlegrounds. I determined not to enter the aspects of play considered tournament play, as these gamers are highly skilled elites with corporate sponsorships and play on private servers with restricted access, and so I consider them professional players. My focus is on players who PvP recreationally whether or not they seek to climb rankings into a tournament, since these players interact with a wide range of players in general game areas as *WoW* citizens.

Samples

I collected data with three tiers of informants, categorized into groups based on the level of their involvement with this project and determined by whether or not I obtained their informed consent. These groups are not exclusive. Participants could potentially be in all three groups simultaneously or at different stages in my research. Group 1 is players who I interacted with in the game world as well as online affinity spaces that are publicly accessible. Florence Chee, Marcelo Vieta, and Richard Smith (2006) utilize an interesting approach in their research in *EverQuest 2*. They decided to be players first, researchers second. This decision resulted in not announcing their presence as researchers or obtaining informed consent except for specific instances of interviewing. I follow this example, but only for publically accessible in-game spaces where Group 1 participants are found. Group 2 participants were located in restricted-access voice and text channels, such as in-game membership-restricted guild text channels, or password-protected VoIP channels. Although I did not actively recruit these participants, I did alert them to the possibility of being quoted or recorded upon their entry into the channel and obtained their informed consent.

During my research's initial stages, I interacted with participants from Groups 1 and 2. Through these interactions I made note of potential interviewees. I recruited Group 3 interview participants from Groups 1 and 2, initially looking for interviewees based on their interest in my research, their approval and permission of my participation in their PvP events, and access to their private VoIP channels during the participant observation stage of my research. From these interactions, I used ease-of-access methods to locate additional potential interviewees and asked participants to notify in-game contacts that might be interested in doing an interview.

Semi-structured Interviews

I recruited nine interviewees as part of Group 3 to participate in semi-structured interviews based on and guided by interview questions approved by the UCF IRB (Appendix C and D). These interviews were conducted in Skype, which has been successfully utilized as a replacement for face-to-face interviews (Deakin and Wakefield 2014). I recorded all of these interviews, with participant consent, using the free program MP3 Skype Recorder (Thissen 2014). I also took notes during the interviews. I later transcribed the interviews into Microsoft Word. Interviews are an important and necessary part of my research, since they permitted me to gather information about rare events, as well as about events I did not witness (DeWalt and DeWalt 2011:14). They were also useful for uncovering additional research directions, and since I was able to exert control over the topics we discussed, I uncovered some interesting and unique player conceptions and understandings (Fetterman 2010:670).[6]

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[6] For Fetterman references, EBook location numbers are used.

Participant Inclusion Requirements

I restricted my interview participants to *WoW* players who maintained an active and current subscription, who played at least three hours per week for at least six consecutive months, and who have participated within the past six months in PvP activities. I excluded players that stated they were under 18 years of age or who I believed to be younger than 18. Since I did not request or collect personal identifiers or information, I did not interview players if I had any reason to believe they were not over 18 years of age. I based this decision on my perceptions of voice pitch and maturity and on our previous in-game interactions. No participants were financially compensated (either in or out of game) for their time or participation.

Chat Logs, Screen Shots, and Video Capture

I recorded in-game chat channels using the *WoW* in-game command "/chatlog." This exports the in-game chat channel activity to a .txt document, which I then converted into a Microsoft Word document. I also captured and saved in-game images visible on my computer screen using Microsoft Windows screen capture functions. There is a tradition of capturing screen shots in-game and sharing them online for public viewing (seen by doing an internet search for "wow screenshots"), and so I did not get consent from any person in a publicly accessible space before capturing an image or recording chat logs (these chat logs are visible in screen shots).

It was necessary to record both types of data since chat logs contain only textual chat activity. This makes retaining context for the chat logs difficult. Although chat logs register certain in-game occurrences such as receipt of an item, toon death, and entering or exiting a group, screen

shots provide valuable additional information, such as all players in a group event, or maps of the geographic layout of PvP locations and objectives.

I also recorded in-game video using NVidia ShadowPlay software. The ability to record in-game video footage is a relatively new development in online ethnographic research, since technology has only recently advanced to the point where this is feasible and cost effective. By recording in-game audio and video, I was able to participate more extensively in the business at hand (killing other toons), taking brief notes to review later. This was more important than I initially anticipated, since in arena PvP the action is often fast paced and does not stop until the toon is dead. Thus, I could not simply stop playing to make a field note about an interesting occurrence, but instead had to rely upon the recordings, which I immediately reviewed after the gaming session for more thorough note-taking. While this was not as great a concern in other types of PvP, which were longer in duration and, therefore, included some downtime, it was still useful in multiple and nuanced ways during data analysis. Since this software also records VoIP chat, I was careful to notify and get consent from everyone in that voice channel. There is a tradition of live streaming video from gameplay onto the internet (such as Twitch.com), and so I did not get consent from players whose toons were recorded in my video capture.

Virtual Texts and Artifacts

I gathered texts from in game sources, including such items as explanations and group finding utilities, along with texts from out-of-game locations such as forums, blog posts, add-on descriptions, and software agreements. Texts play a key role in understanding virtual worlds, since social interaction in most worlds occurs through a textual and asynchronous medium (Boellstorff et al 2012:113). Additionally, texts provide information on subcultures, quantitative data related to

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game operations and resources, and actual occurrences that affect the virtual world such as server shutdowns or game expansions (118-121). Virtual worlds also contain artifacts that drive social interactions. They "help illuminate culturally specific meanings and practices" (Boellstorff et al 2012:121) and can "reveal norms for commodification and sharing" (122). Taylor (2009:333) argues for the "ethnographic sensibility which seeks out "found objects" from everyday life" as an indisputable part of games research. Information on these in-game artifacts and the artifacts themselves were gathered and catalogued. In-game examples of this include specialized armor specific to PvP, add-ons such as GladiatorlosSA, maps, and architectural constructions. Out-of-game texts and artifacts gathered from affinity spaces include recommendations for optimal gear (gear denotes player armor, weapons, and accessories), enhancement configurations, PvP rankings, and forum discussions centering on aspects of PvP gameplay.

<u>Data Organization and Analysis</u>

All of my data were recorded, organized, analyzed, and stored in digital formats on my password-protected private laptop, with the exception of brief field notes that I took by hand in a notebook. I transcribed all the interviews using Windows Media Player and Microsoft Word, and utilized discourse analysis to analyze these transcriptions and textual data from in game and affinity spaces. Since "language is not a neutral medium for communication but rather a set of socially embedded practices," paying close attention to the ways words are used by utilizing discourse analysis sheds light on larger social contexts (Ahearn 2012:3). Recurring instances of words or actions can imply patterns of thought, which were useful to identify larger cultural understandings (Fetterman 2010:1357). Additionally, I use a key event "to analyze an entire culture," as Clifford Geertz did with the Balinese cockfight (Fetterman 2012: 1386). I also utilized coding and indexing to

identify key and recurring terms and themes, which I then utilized to analyze in-game video recordings. Occurrences of these codes in video footage were noted in a separate document, along with time and file information.

Discourse Analysis and Coding

An ethical debate about the use of discourse analysis on interview data suggests that it is unethical to construct findings from interviews provided under the assumption that interviewees are contributing to a shared world-view (Hammersley 2013). However, the discourse analysis I utilize in this project is for extracting shared world views and understandings, not for analyzing discursive practices per se. During interviews I incorporate sharing my own views and experiences, giving back to the interviewee during the interview and therefore both modeling my expectations of the interview and partially sharing vulnerability. According to Martyn Hammersley (2013:538), these practices negate much of the severity of this ethical conundrum, though I keep it in mind. Additionally, through chat logs and interviews, I sought to achieve thematic saturation (Corbin and Strauss 2008). Pearce's (2009) understanding of the writing process as an analytical one is also a key method in my own analysis, and by utilizing these various ethnographic methods I am able to go beyond triangulation (Fetterman 2010: 275) into crystallization as a postmodern interpretive strategy, operating with the understanding that there are "an infinite variety of shapes…and angles of approach (Pearce 2009: 206).

Discourse analysis includes searching for recurring key terms and identifying how these terms are used, understood, related, and organized to delineate cultural systems of meaning (Spradley 1980:87-88). Recurring instances of words or actions can imply patterns of thought, which are useful in identifying possible cultural patterns and systems that inform the theoretical framework

of the research (Fetterman 2010:1357). Taken together, these key terms and thematic patterns were assigned a color coded value and entered into a spreadsheet chart. I organized codes into four major categories, with additional sub-categories:

1. Social Strategies for Negotiating Conflict

    a. Avoidance (ignoring, leaving)

    b. Confrontational (trolling, critiquing, attacking, testing boundaries)

    c. Controlling (acquiring leadership or other forms of power)

    d. Accepting & Understanding (adjusting, requesting assistance, asking questions)

2. Technical Strategies for Negotiating Conflict

    a. Logistical & Skill-based (creating a new toon, changing tactics or strategies)

    b. Hardware & Provider Services (changing ISPs, upgrades)

    c. Software interface modification (including add-ons and macros)

3. Conflict Situations

    a. Player & Group (disagreements, scheduling conflicts)

    b. Opponents (cheating, trolling, camping)

    c. Software (user interface, game geography)

    d. Game software (restart, request game master assistance)

4. Arriving at Understandings & Explanations

    a. Research and Affinity Sites

    b. Referencing out-of-game understandings

    c. Accessing social relationships and knowledge

    d. Thinking, Reasoning, and Guessing

I utilized these codes for analysis of interviews and game-recorded chat logs. In order to analyze video footage, I created time-stamped summaries of major events within the recording, which were then coded using these categorical themes.

<u>Limitations and Implications</u>

Some important limitations arose during this research. Difficulties with finding interviewees, my limited experience with conducting interviews, my incomplete coverage of PvP (especially in regard to tournament, twink, role-playing, and World PvP), and my status as an established *WoW* player all constrained my research to various degrees. However, some interesting implications also arose from these difficulties. These include: a humble contribution to ethnographic and qualitative research that incorporates in-game video data; shadings of how public and private spaces are defined in-game (especially regarding garrisons); a surprise interview approach; and the benefits of being an insider in a digital backyard (http://cyborganthropology.com/Digital_Backyard).

Interviews

One of the most limiting aspects of this approach was finding players to interview. I had initially assumed that players would be willing to do an interview, since it involved talking about the game, which is usually pleasurable, and the history of player discussions in affinity spaces. However, players were not as willing to be interviewed as I initially thought. Additionally, it was difficult to meet up with players who had agreed to be interviewed due to differences in time zones and arguably to a lack of in-person contact, since it is easier to ignore a textual conversation than a verbal one. One particular interviewee stood me up twice, and several rescheduled multiple times. I discovered I was much more likely to get an interview if I conducted the interview on the spot,

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immediately after participants agreed to be interviewed. While this secured several interviews, it also meant that these discussions occurred at inopportune times. For example, one player had a previous in-game engagement, and so his responses were terse, while another participant was feeding his child and had to stop the interview multiple times.

Beyond this, my lack of solid experience with interviewing resulted in multiple versions and variations of the interview questions and some difficulty in keeping interviewees on track. Since interviews were conducted online, I did not have visual cues to guide me in the process. This was somewhat a surprise, revealing the extent to which I rely on such things. Although I have done a few interviews previously for school projects and read up on interviewing methods, it was an altogether different enterprise to do so many so quickly. Fortunately, I improved in my abilities so that when one interviewee immediately pulled his friend into an interview after ours had concluded, I was prepared and confident enough to take advantage of the situation.

Incomplete PvP Coverage

Another unfortunate restriction was lack of time to delve into all different types of *WoW* PvP. One aspect was the high-ranked and tournament level players. Although I did not initially include them within my research parameters, I was hopeful that I would have some time to observe their play and have a discussion or even interview. Although I did watch some live stream *WoW* and BlizzCon tournament play, I would have liked to be present for the before and after stages.

Similar restrictions apply to twinking and World PvP. Twinking is when players stop their toons from gathering the experience points that level the toon up. In other words, this freezes the toon at a particular experience level. I did have plans to experience World PvP, especially the areas

in Burning Crusade and a PvP server by creating a new toon and beginning at level one. In spite of three separate starts, I was unable to put in the time necessary to level toons. Additionally, I did not encounter many players in the starting zones; this may be due to the time of day that I was playing, the recent drop in *WoW* subscriptions, or the ability to purchase a level 100 character. Ultimately, I decided my time was better spent elsewhere. Finally, notwithstanding PvP servers, *WoW* does not have any active PvP zones in the latest expansion excepting Ashran, which could be alternatively be construed as a large, non-stop battleground. Consequently, I was unable to conduct participant observation in these contexts.

From the outset, I excluded research with role-playing PvPers. Role-playing has additional rules, behavioral expectations, and obligations. I have already mentioned some issues with creating and leveling a new toon, which I would have to do since none of my toons are on a role-playing server. As with the other aspects of PvP, I believe this would be a project in its own right. Additionally, time constraints forced me to more narrowly focus my research locations.

However, I am fortunate that many of my interviewees have PvPed over the course of years and, therefore, were able to relate their own stories and experiences with these types of PvP. None of the interviewees or casual discussants mentioned anything about roleplaying in general or role-playing in PvP in particular. Between my own knowledge about the game and their willingness to discuss and expand upon these topics, I was able to get a glimpse into these alternate avenues. Another limitation was my "insider" positionality as a *WoW* player, which precluded me from seeing PvP with new eyes. As anthropologist James Clifford (1986:9, emphasis added) notes, "insiders studying their own cultures offer new angles of vision and *depths* of understanding. Their accounts are empowered and *restricted* in unique ways" (see also Lila Abu-Lughod's (1991) discussion of

"halfies"). While this insider status was a boon in some ways, it was also a major restriction, inhibiting my awareness of subtle nuance in other players' responses. In earlier stages of research, I was unintentionally attempting to translate other player's perspectives using my own understandings, potentially conflating two separate views and losing depth and nuance as a result. As the research and interviews progressed, I become more aware of this tendency and was better able to delineate and resist this process. Additionally, I began to combat this inclination by asking questions that were more basic and open ended, attempting to elicit more detailed explanation and discussion using probing questions, and giving participants plenty of time to think without interruption. This permitted me to, if not completely eradicate this proclivity, hopefully lessen its impact.

In line with this, my previous experiences within *WoW* may influence the boundaries I placed on this research. For instance, I chose to exclude high-end competitive PvP play from this research. It is a space I understand as incredibly aggressive, competitive, and male-dominated due to previous gaming experience and my discussions with other players. It is intimidating to a me not only as a new PvP player without skill-based authority (discussed in Chapter Five) but also as a woman. In this way it has set a boundary on my research (Sherif 2001:438).

Benefits of Being an Insider

My status as an insider came with particular advantages. Since I already knew how to play the game, where to access PvP events, and understood the jargon, the transition from PvE to PvP was expedited. I had two level 100 toons that I was comfortable playing. I knew their abilities and their weaknesses. Since they were maximum level, they also had plenty of in-game resources to support the transition to PvP play as well as necessary maintenance. Additionally, some of my PvE friends also PvPed, and I had a few PvP friends who were incredibly helpful and patient, answering some

truly bone-headed questions and putting up with some very lousy PvP performances. Overall, I estimate that these advantages cut away several months that would have been spent learning, developing relationships, and setting up end-level playable toons, enabling me to hyper-focus my research in targeted areas since I already had a grasp of the larger contexts. This is not to say I had no learning curve. Fighting a programmed, repetitive, known monster in PvE is quite different from fighting another player in PvP events (I discuss this briefly in Chapter Six). Other advantages also relate to the fact that I am already a *WoW* player. I get to keep all the new achievements, items, and add-ons that I accumulated over the course of this research. Moreover, I got to meet new friends and establish new relationships that will continue to be used for recreational PvP and PvE in the future. Similarly, I am positioned to immediately utilize this research to become a better PvPer, perhaps achieving a decent rank and acquiring prestigious rewards. Finally, I did not have to find funding for this research since my gaming habits and associated costs are already budgeted.

Implications for Anthropology and Qualitative Research

First, this research will contribute to both the anthropological and the broader social science research on virtual worlds, beginning to address the surprising scholarly gap addressed previously. Moreover, recent technological advances within the past few years have made utilizing in-game video recordings an option. Although this type of data has been difficult for me to work with, given a lack of familiarity with video software in general and a lack of software specifically for coding and analyzing game footage in particular, it has also been informative. For example, I noticed that my own attitude towards note taking altered when I was recording video. On a few occasions I even forgot to enable the in-game chat recording function. This turned out to be a problem since trying to recover chat window data from a video is more tedious and time consuming than transcribing an

audio recording, especially since I also had to recover date and time stamps, NPC dialogue, and up to 40 different potential conversationalists at any given time. Another notable experience will be attempting to insert video footage into this thesis. Whether or not I manage to insert quality representational footage will ultimately be determined by my ability to somehow preserve player anonymity. Still, it will be an interesting step on the path of integrating new forms of data into ethnographic research.

This work will also contribute to ethical understandings of in-game, online world research. Although I had difficulty getting IRB exemption, which could be due to the nature of my research or my own unfamiliarity with the process, hopefully this research will inform and reduce potential future complications with processing digital anthropological research. Additionally, it illustrates through example that interviews conducted online and without webcams or avatars can still be fruitful methods of research while highlighting potential complications. It will also help to challenge conceptions of what so-called "real" ethnographic and anthropological fieldwork can be.

A Word on Toons

Although I will discuss this in more detail later, a word here about the toons I used to access my research locales is in order. My primary toon for this research was my main Xochiquetzal, while additional research was done using Amaranthus (Appendix E). Both toons are located on Anvilmar, a PvE server and the location of my previous PvE gameplay which included end-game progression raiding. Consequently, I was able to make initial forays into PvP gameplay while maintaining access to previously accumulated resources and social relationships. Additionally, I chose to begin with Xochiquetzal since I am most familiar with her skills and abilities, which made the transition from PvE to PvP easier as I did not have to learn an entirely new way of playing. I utilized Amaranthus

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for both the Horde faction perspective and his location on the same server, in addition to previously acquired resources. Amaranthus initially had no unique Horde connections since he was not in a guild and was somewhat rarely played.

CHAPTER FOUR:
WORLD OF WARCRAFT AS RESEARCH LOCATION

Based on a long tradition of dice-based role-playing numbers games such as *Dungeons &*
Dragons, *WoW* operates on a similar underlying random number generator (RNG). Toons are player-
created from a limited number of game-generated options and individualized with player-chosen
names and appearances. The key for competitive play, either PvE or PvP, lies in the stats – the
numerical statistics of armor, weapons, and races – that determine toons' power, level, and abilities.
The RNG is the chaotic tension, the luck, that takes *WoW* beyond the dress-up and acting aspects of
role-play and into the gaming world. However, before creating a toon, players must decide which
server and realm to roll[7] new toons in. In this section I review basic aspects for playing *WoW*.

Setting: Servers, Realms, and Battlegroups

In *WoW,* the term "server" is often synonymized with the term "realm." Yet, there is an
important distinction to keep in mind. Server refers to the computing hardware and the game
software that exists on that hardware. A realm is the unique game world that players inhabit, and is
determined by software. Overlap between these terms occurs because servers are the locations of
realms and realms exist on servers. For general purposes these terms are interchangeable.

WoW servers and realms are organized according to geographical region: Americas, Brazil,
Europe, Korea, Taiwan, China, and Southeast Asia (http://us.battle.net/wow/en/status). Each
region hosts hundreds of servers and realms, which are split according to type of gameplay and
language. Servers are clustered at central locations. In the U.S., these clusters are at New York City,

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[7] This term denotes the *D&D*-type origins, where a new character was statistically created by rolling dice. For more
information on the history of MMOs, see Taylor 2006a and Boellstorff 2008.

Chicago, and Los Angeles (wowwiki.com). Realms are taken offline for weekly server maintenance and game upgrades can be downloaded in the background during play. Players can check whether or not their realm or any other official *WoW* realm is offline at http://us.battle.net/wow/en/status. If a realm is offline, there is no current internet connectivity regardless of reason and players must either wait for their realm to come back online or play in another realm. Players can have up to ten characters in each realm and can create up to 50 toons total.

Realms can be linked together to form a type of meta-realm called Connected Realms which allow players to create toons in one realm and join guilds in another. The game world software is the same on each server. The same expansions, updates, and bug fixes are applied to them all. Differences lie in the combat permissions and social interactions that take place in each type of realm. Other types of realms include Test and Beta Realms, special locations where players can play unreleased content in order to test playability and find software bugs before the software's official release. Private realms and servers are illegally hosted by individuals and are beyond the scope of my research. Battlegroups are a type of meta-connection that pools players in order to populate randomly generated groups, either for raiding, questing, or PvP purposes. For instance, Xochiquetzal is in the Anvilmar server and can join an Undermine realm guild, while Anvilmar and Undermine are two of 20 realms in the Nightfall battlegroup.

Types of Realms

There are four different types of realms (Figure 1). A PvP server enables players to attack other players at any place within the game world with a few neutral exceptions. PvE realms restrict these types of PvP attacks to specific in-game locations such as battlegrounds. Role Playing (RP) realms are servers in which players are required to conform to guidelines that encourage role play

such as name restrictions and special speech and behavior codes. Finally, there are role-playing

player versus player servers (RP-PvP) which combine the restrictions of an RP server with the

combative freedom of PvP. RP and RP-PvP server locations are beyond the scope of this research.

As noted previously, I conducted most of this research on a PvE server, though I made brief forays

onto PvP servers Tichondrius and Illidan. Tournament servers are access-restricted for competition

and are beyond this research scope.

Figure 1:[8] Realm Selection Screen.

<u>Creating a Toon</u>

In order for players to enter *WoW*, they must first construct a toon. As mentioned earlier, by

utilizing multiple avatar embodiments I was able to observe and participate in different PvP settings

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[8] All figures are screen images recorded by Rachael Root and copyright 2004 Blizzard Entertainment.

and avatar roles. Since *WoW* is similar to many role-playing games in what sorts of characters are permitted and how they are created, I will only briefly outline the possibilities and emphasize the potential impacts of these choices on social and PvP interactions.

Figure 2: Second Character Creation Screen.

Faction, Gender, and Appearance

Within *WoW*, there is no statistical difference between a male and female toon, despite substantial visual differences (Corneliussen 2008). Appearances are selected by combining different preset visuals for things such as skin color, hair color, jewelry, faces, tattoos, tusks, and horns (Figure 2). These things, together with the player created name, do not impact in-game events. However, choosing a faction is a significant decision. Within the game narrative, the Horde and the Alliance share an uneasy truce that occasionally flares into hot-spots of combat – this provides the basis for PvP within the game. The factions are mutually exclusive and communication between the

factions is restricted. Mail cannot be sent to the opposing faction as each faction has their own auction houses, and, therefore, separate economies, though there are ways around this. Additionally, each faction has a common language that is unintelligible to the opposing faction. For instance, if a Horde player typed "lol" it would display in Alliance players' chat boxes as "kek." However, emotes are internationally and sometimes unfortunately[9] understandable.

This is important for two main reasons. First, Horde members cannot group with Alliance players. Before creating a character, it is important to ask any actual world friends with whom you wish to play to specify which faction they are primarily affiliated with. Second is the existence of alts, or alternative toons, which are created over the course of months or years of play. The majority of players I know have one to three "main" toons that they prefer to play, although they may have a dozen toons. Alts play a supporting role to main toons by generating resources, which is difficult or impossible to do with any regularity if alts are an opposing faction. When I initially rolled my first toon, Xochiquetzal, I chose to roll Alliance, since that is what my husband played. The majority of my alts were also, therefore, Alliance faction. Creating and leveling Amaranthus as a Horde member was more difficult and time consuming, since he did not have access to the shared pool of resources.

One solution to this is the recently introduced Faction Change option, purchasable for $25 U.S. By selecting this option, players can choose any toon, regardless of level, and switch it to the opposing faction, which also requires switching races, as will be discussed. This move retains all of the wealth and other accoutrements that toon has accumulated, even as some things may be altered.

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[9] For instance, the emote "PlayerName spits on you." Such emotes are often annoyingly spammed in PvP.

Figure 3: First Character Creation Screen.

Race, Class, and Spec

In *WoW*, race and class take on particular meanings that only resemble their actual world counterparts. In-game race correlates to species, denoting populations that are morphologically and biologically disparate, who speak separate languages, occupy diverse geographic regions, and have different yet historically rich origin stories and histories (on the left, Figure 3). Players can purchase a race change which enables them to switch their race while maintaining all of the toons' items, titles, currency, achievements, and other accoutrements. Each race also has unique abilities, which players call "racials," that grant them special powers. For instance, my night elf has increased dodge, resistance to nature magic, an alternating bonus to haste or critical strike, a whisp form while dead that increases movement speed, and Shadowmeld, an ability that lets her enter a stealth mode.

Class is perhaps most synonymous to actual world understandings of career or job specializations. Some examples are druids, priests, warriors, and mages (on the right, Figure 3). Class is unchangeable, though players can create a new toon and then purchase a level boost, instantly advancing to the current maximum level of 100. Significantly, not all combinations of race and class are possible. For example, in the Alliance, only a night elf or worgen race can be a druid class.

In *Burning Crusade,* blood elves and draenai became playable. Blood elves became the only Horde race able to be a paladin class, balancing against the pre-existing Alliance paladins, and the shaman class was introduced for both factions. In *Wrath of the Lich King*, players had access to the debut hero class, the death knight. In *Mists of Pandaria*, the pandarian race was introduced (players could choose which faction), and the monk class became available. In *Cataclysm,* the tauren became the second Horde race able to be paladins. There is only one hero class in the game: death knight. A new death knight, unlike all of the other characters who start at level 1, starts at level 55. After playing through a special starting area that is segregated from the rest of the game and players where they are taught to use their abilities and earn a set of rare armor, players are level 57 or 58 and able to immediately advance to Outland. In other words, they are able to skip the early stages of the leveling process. This ties into the narrative, since death knights are resurrected undead who have had their free will and awareness returned to them, which they learn in their starting zone.

There are three different types of roles in the game: tank, healers, and dps. Tanks are protectors who wear heavy armor and can withstand a high amount of damage and keep enemies focused on themselves. Healers are physically weaker since they have lower armor, strength, and agility "stats" (statistics) but are intellectually stronger with stats like intellect and spirit. They are able to cast spells to restore player health points. Dps, which is shorthand for damage per second, can

refer to toons, roles, specializations, or numerical output. There are two types of dps roles: melee dps attacks at short range and utilizes strength and agility stats while ranged dps attacks from farther away. Ranged dps can be spell casters that utilize intellect or can use agility, as is the case with hunters. Although tanks and heals are able to dps, their dps tends to be far lower than that of so-called "pure" dps. There are some exceptions to this as will be discussed in the next chapter.

Each class has three specializations, abbreviated as "specs," that once learned allows players to change at any time. The only exception to this is the druid class, which has four specs. For example, druid specs are guardian, restoration, balance, and feral. These reflect the three main combat roles: tank, heal, and dps. The tank spec is guardian, the heal spec is restoration, and the two remaining specs are dps, but balance is a ranged spell caster while feral is a melee range dps. Which spec players utilize ultimately depends upon several factors which will be discussed later though the primary factor is the toons' intended purpose. One final note is that players can freely switch between all specs, but only two are stored at any given time. If players wish to utilize a third spec, they must take the toon to a trainer and replace one of the stored specs. The more often this is done, the more expensive it becomes. Players who play "hybrid" toons, toons that can perform multiple roles, usually store a dps spec and either a tank or heal spec. Pure dps classes, such as a mage, choose two different types of dps spec. A favorite spec is called a main-spec, while the alternative spec is called an off-spec. Players can set links between specs and sets of armor, so that upon changing into a different spec, it only takes the push of a button to change every piece of gear, including armor, jewelry, trinkets, shirts, and tabards.

Each class also wears particular types of armor and is restricted from wearing heavier armor. For example, priests wear cloth but cannot wear leather, mail, or plate. Druids wear leather and can

wear cloth. Shamans wear mail but can equip cloth or leather. Paladins wear plate, and can equip any other type of armor. The armor proceeds from light to heavy, cloth to leather to mail to plate. While it is possible to wear lighter armor this usually results in the loss of a substantial armor bonus and other stat bonuses and is not usually done. Additionally, plate classes such as paladins and warriors start out wearing mail and are only able to equip plate at higher levels. The exception to this is the death knight, who starts out wearing plate. Each piece of equip-able gear has an item level, and when averaged out this level determines access to in-game group events.

In summary, I utilize my research toons to show how these factors interact. I created Xochiquetzal, my main, on Anvilmar, a PvE server in the Nightfall battlegroup. As a night elf, she is in the Alliance Faction. As a druid, she wears leather and has access to four different specs. Her two stored specs are balance (ranged dps) and restoration (healer). Restoration is my preferred spec, and the spec I used throughout my research to PvP. The other toon I used for my research, my alt Amaranthus, is also on the Anvilmar server and is a blood elf priest in the Horde Faction. His main spec is shadow, a ranged dps spell caster. His off spec is discipline, a healing spec based on preventing damage, although I do not play it and do not maintain a gear set. Both are level 100.

<u>Social Organization</u>

Social organization is an important part of gameplay in any MMO. *WoW* is no exception. Since this topic has been given extensive attention elsewhere, I will briefly relate some key points (see Bainbridge 2010, Boellstorff 2008, Nardi 2010, Pearce 2009, Taylor 2006a). Of note are guilds, and of special relevance to this research are friend lists and Battle Tags.

Guilds are social spaces that include private text channels and access to group resources, private VoIP channels, organized events, social networking, and players willing to help members. Members display guilds' names beneath their own in the game world, so reputation is a factor. Guilds are controlled by a guild master, players who control access for all other members. This person has power to invite, promote, demote, or dismiss all other guild members. Guilds usually self-identify based on their main interests, although there is some crossover (for a consideration of guilds as corporations, see Rettberg 2008).

Similar to rankings in PvP, ranked PvE guilds are the first to conquer new raids. They are also the fastest teams to clear challenge mode events and/or are able to clear the most difficult and challenging raids. For example, the current raid is Hellfire Citadel, available in the casual Raid Finder difficulty, normal difficulty, heroic difficulty, and mythic difficulty. Players who wish to join high-ranked guilds go through processes similar to finding jobs, including submitting questionnaires and forms on guild websites, being interviewed by guild officers and raid leaders, and undergoing trial periods during which they can be kicked out for any reason including social conflicts with the established team, lack of performance, and being unprepared or tardy. This shares similarities with PvP RBG play, where the size of the group requires training and acclimatizing new players to the group and its strategies.

In order to facilitate group play, *WoW* contains in-game tools to join randomly created groups. Some groups are set by the game for specific purposes while others are player-created and varied. Some examples include finding groups for questing, treasure hunting, finding and killing rare monsters, raiding, and PvP. Game created group finders seek to fill a quota of players, such as 10

players for a battleground or 30 players for a raid. Players can queue for these events solo or in social groups, called parties. This will transfer all of the players in the party into the event group, called an instance group. An instance is a geographic place removed from the main game world, and only accessible to instance members.

WoW provides an in-game list to keep track of friends, who can be added or removed at the players' discretion. There are two ways to keep track of friends within the game. One way is by the name of the toon, the other by the player's Battle Tag (or "passport name, as Mortensen (2009:125) calls it). Player-chosen Battle Tags are unique identifiers and permit players to chat, regardless of which game Blizzard Entertainment game they are playing (Figure 4).
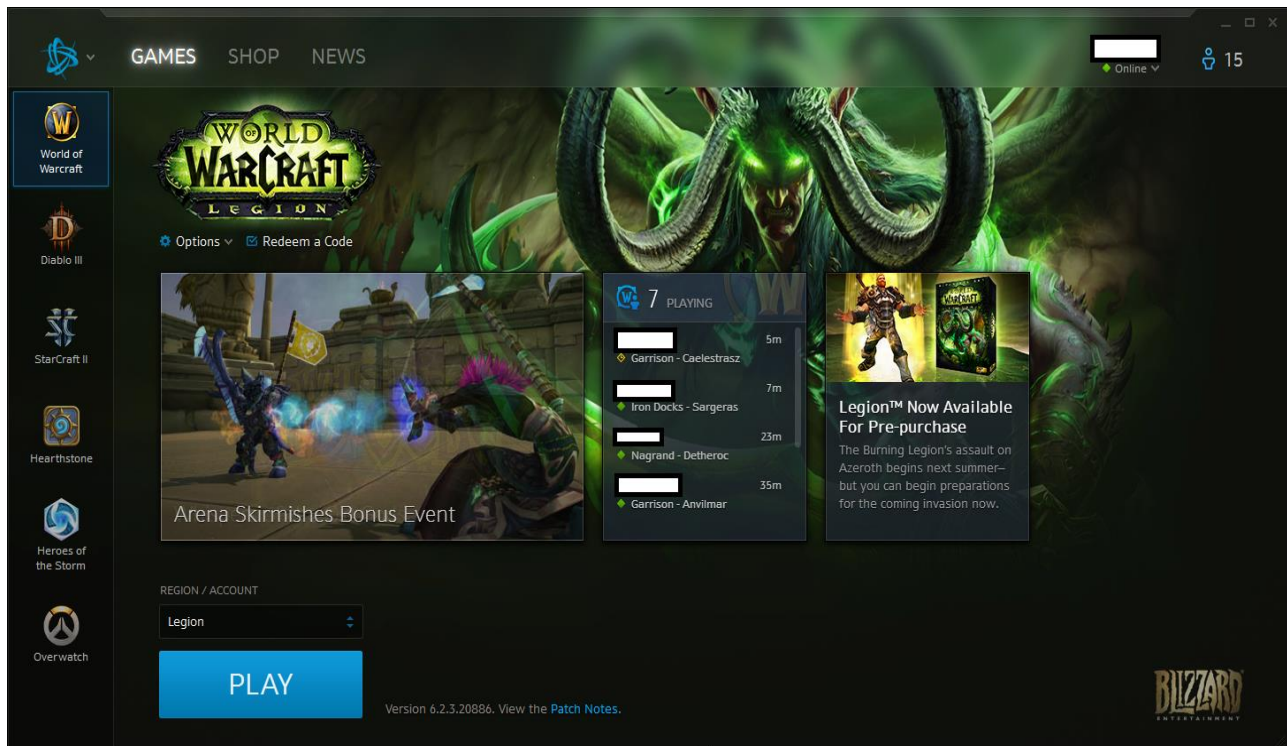
Figure 4: Blizzard Entertainment Battle Net Interface.

Types of PvP Events

Within *WoW* there are different types of PvP events. World PvP occurs within the game world either at select locations (on PvE servers) or in most locations (PvP servers). For all other types of PvP, the game randomly selects opponents. For some PvP, players may choose to join randomly selected group members, may group with friends and join the same instance, or some combination of both. Zone PvP is a section of the world set aside for PvP. It is accessible by simply moving into the zone, although each zone has a limit on the number of players permitted inside at a time. Excess players are moved to just outside the boundary and placed on a waiting list. Skirmishes are small PvP instances that can be entered by 2 or 3 players per faction (for a complete list, see Appendix E). The objective of the skirmish is to kill all enemy players first. Battlegrounds are instances that support 10 or 15 players per faction. They can be entered randomly or be specifically chosen. Battlegrounds have different objectives. Some feature a capture-the-flag style contest, while others focus on controlling strategic points or gathering resources. Players can enter random battlegrounds in groups of up to five. The game will randomly assign players in order to meet the quota. War Games are set within battleground areas but are not random groupings. Rather, one group may challenge another group to a contest (the type of contest depends upon the battleground), with only 10 players per group able to enter. None of these types of PvP are rated.

Rated PvP: Arenas and RBGs

The big draw for many players to PvP is the ability to achieve rankings, since higher ranked players win special reward items, achievements, and titles, and are eligible to play in national and international tournaments. There are two different types of rated PvP in *WoW*. Arena matches are gladiator-type battles where smaller groups compete not only for rank, but also are the location of

popular international gaming competitions. These groups must be formed by players, although the opponents are assigned by game software. Skirmishes are arena-style play in arena spaces that do not affect player rankings. They are useful to practice or to acquire conquest without risking a drop in rating. Players must be in an appropriately sized group before queueing for arenas. The type of arena entered is randomly selected by the game. Arenas are rated based on a 2 versus 2, 3v3, or 5v5 basis. Opponents are randomly chosen. A similar process occurs for rated battlegrounds (RBGs), which are limited to 10 players per faction. These have opponents randomly selected and battles occur in the same geographical zones as random battlegrounds.

There are two types of player ranking at work: current ranking (CR) and match-making ranking (MMR). CR is the current status of the individual toon in relation to all other players within the region. For example, U.S. and European players are ranked separately. MMR is a hidden number that matches teams with opponents of approximate MMR. For example, a team with a 1,486 MMR may be matched with a 1,450 or 1,500 MMR team. CR and MMR are awarded for wins and removed for losses, and the amount won or lost varies depending on the current values of each.

Seasons & Titles

A PvP season is approximately four-six months long, with two or three per expansion. The top ranked players are awarded achievements and titles they can display alongside their toon names. The current *Warlords of Draenor* Season 3 Arena titles are Challenger (top 35%), Rival (10%), Duelist (3%), and Gladiator (0.5%). RBG titles are Soldier (top 35%), Defender (10%), Guardian (3%), and

Hero (0.5%).[10] The top arena title of Gladiator and the top RBG title of Hero are quite competitive. The difficulties with achieving these rankings, especially of Gladiator, are examined subsequently.

<div align="center">PvP Resources</div>

There are various types of currency in *WoW*. PvP has two unique types: honor points and conquest points. Honor points can purchase blue gear, crafting materials, toys, and other similar times, and cap at 4,000. If the 4,000 cap is reached players must spend some of their honor. Otherwise, any additional honor earnings will not be accrued. Conquest points are used to purchase purple gear, which is called epic gear.[11] While they do not have an allotment cap, they do have a weekly cap which is a ceiling for the amount earned for the week. By the season's end, unused conquest points are automatically converted into gold.

Additionally, *WoW* hosts random weekly bonus events that grant participants special or additional rewards. Two weekly events are the Arena Skirmish Bonus Event and the Battleground Bonus Event. In the former, honor is earned at triple the usual rate, and wining ten skirmishes awards an additional 500 conquest points. Similarly, in the latter, players receive a 200% increase in honor earned. Upon winning four battlegrounds, players receive an additional 500 conquest points. An extra bonus is that these conquest points do not count towards the weekly cap, and so can acquired even if the weekly cap has been reached.

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[10] While various websites track ranked players, the official Blizzard Entertainment rankings for the U.S. region can be accessed here: http://us.battle.net/wow/en/community/.

[11] Item names in *WoW* come in a variety of colors, according to how difficult it is to get the item and how high the stats are. The item progression is white (common), green (uncommon), blue (rare), purple (epic), and yellow (legendary).

Other Resources of Note

While honor and conquest points are unique to PvP, other game resources are necessary to PvP. The in-game monetary currency of copper, silver, and gold is required to pay vendors to repair damaged armor. Armor can also be enhanced by adding gems and enchantments to boost skill. These additions are created by a toon with the jewel crafting or enchanting professions. They can be traded or bought and sold on the auction house. In order to play competitively, these enhancements are required for the boost they give to key stats. Other PvP resources for non-ranked play include consumables such as food, potions, and flasks. These items are less expensive than high-level enhancements but are not usable for ranked play in RBGs or arenas. While some players prefer crafting their own items, others favor utilizing the auction house and in-game economy.

Garrisons are also useful for acquiring currency and other necessary resources. They are instances unique to each player, a sort of home-base built as a toon levels from 90 to 100. Players can recruit followers to retrieve gold and crafting materials. Players can also create specialized workshops that boost crafting production and assign followers to work at the workshops to provide professional services such as destroying an item to gather enchanting materials that be recombined into new enchantments. Players are restricted to the types and numbers of buildings they create. One building is of special note for PvP purposes: The Gladiator's Sanctum. There are three stages of construction, and each stage gives the player an advantage while outdoors in Draenor, which includes the Ashran PvP zone (for a brief overview of Ashran, see Appendix F). At level 1, the building gives players the ability to regenerate health and mana faster when out of combat, and to collect Broken Bones from enemy players killed in Ashran. Broken Bones can be exchanged for honor points, conquest points, and gear. At level 2, the building increases the height from which

players can fall without taking damage, enables underwater breathing, and grants access to the Nemesis quests (kill 500 players of players'-selected race to earn a reward and a title). At level 3, players receive a 50% damage reduction while below 35% health as well as access to the Highmaul Coliseum gladiator tournament. In this special instance, players must kill 100 players to earn a reward of 500 conquest points and a gift bag. An achievement, The Last of Us, awards the title of Lord/Lady of War to the last living player at the end of a match. Since there can be only one winner, players form spontaneous, shifting, and untrustworthy alliances that mimic reality T.V. shows.

A Word on VoiPs

In serious end-game play, whether it is ranked PvP or raiding, most players consider using VoiPs mandatory, non-negotiable, and integral to group success. Ventrilo was the preferred VoiP for *WoW* players and is subscription-based. It costs approximately $80 for a private server per year. Subscribers set up passwords, channels, and controls access. A Ventrilo server has a static address, making it difficult to surveil who enters but also creats a social space where individuals can hang out together. Curse Voice is a newer service and is free to use once a person has created an account. Each chat session is given a unique hyperlink so that only people who have the new link are able to access the group chat, and so is a favorite for small and/or random groups. While Ventrilo is still used, it appears that most raiding teams who have 20 or more people in voice chat prefer to use TeamSpeak or Mumble, which are newer VoiPs that seem to run better with *WoW*. Both are subscription based and permit owners to set up static servers, passwords, and separate channels, which can also be password protected. PvPers, who only need software to handle up to ten people at a time seemingly prefer Curse Voice or Skype which are both free.

CHAPTER FIVE:
TWINING LAYERS OF CONFLICT

To best address my research question, I approach it in distinct components. These include determining the natures of conflict, power, and agency within *WoW*. Specifically, how are these things defined and understood by players? What mechanisms constrain or enable them? Beyond this, I delve more deeply into the types of actions available to players, the consequences of these actions, and the circumstances that influenced such choices. The main aspect of *WoW* that I intend to illustrate entails the ways that conflicts in one area of game play inform other areas to create an integrated, three-dimensional quilt so that no one conflict can be considered in isolation. To show how this meshwork is integrated, I start with two major categories of conflict: (1) conflicts that are dependent upon the type of PvP event and (2) those that are not. While this does not exclude some crossover, these boundaries are permeable.

Non-Event Dependent Conflicts: Infrastructure, Software Mechanics, and The Game

Non-event dependent conflicts are based within structures and mechanics that create, support, and enable the virtual world and all activities therein. Starting with the background considerations of infrastructure such as electricity and internet access, I briefly consider hardware and software requirements and potential issues with smooth computing operations. Once within *WoW*, modifications to user interfaces address instances where players lack knowledge or require additional utility. I then consider selecting a server, creating a toon, and gathering support for the toon in the form of in-game resources, contextualizing them to show the ways players understand conflicting requirements, desires, and game play experiences.

Technical Issues: Hunting Sources of Lag

Technical issues are usually independent of types of PvP events players participate in. The most basic requirements for the game include infrastructure such as electricity and an internet with a bandwidth capable of sustaining online play. A disruption in these services, even if only momentary, can be catastrophic for players in PvP events. This sort of disruption results in players "lagging out," being disconnected from the game server and ceasing to exist in the game world. Due to the time lag between the server and players' computers, it is possible players still exist briefly in the game world. This is the critical point: a toon not under control is an easy target. Death comes quickly to toons that are running in place. Additionally, if lagging out occurs during team play, the consequences frequently impact the entire team. Here, internet speed becomes critical. The time it takes to reset a router, relaunch the game, log in, and get uploaded to the server can spell a miraculous, just-in-time victory or frustrating failure. If lagging out happens with any frequency, and depending on the type of PvP event and the objectives of everyone involved, it is likely that team member will be removed from the group. Accordingly, finding groups in the future will become more difficult.

Similar results occur if a computer's hardware or software lacks enough power to sustain the desired gameplay. Some aspects of gameplay require more computing resources than others. These include elements such as rendering graphics, translating inputs, and managing background processes. Highly skilled players may be unable to play to their fullest capacity if they are limited by their computer. While this seems fairly obvious, it is necessary to keep in mind as one of several possible conflicts that arise during gameplay. The amount of lag players experience is also based on things like who else is utilizing internet in the household, how far players' computer is from relay stations, and how far the computer is from the game servers.

Figure 5: Deepwind Gorge area map.

For example, players may have no issues with lag in a 10v10 or 15v15 battleground. The geographical area is small, there are no more than 20 or 30 players in the area, and players tend to be somewhat spread out, such as in a Deepwind Gorge event, seen above. Figure 5 shows the location of enemy gold at the far left and right sides of the map, with three central locations (upper, middle, and lower) that can be captured and defended in order to acquire resources. The dots are friendly players, who are dispersed in small groups around the event geography. Even with the spell effects, pets, mounts, and other additional graphical rendering requirements, this is a fairly manageable situation for most computers used in gameplay. In contrast, Ashran is a large geographic zone, and

as a 40v40 there can be up to 80 players in the zone at a given time (as in Figure 6. For area map, see Figure 8). Add to this the various NPCs, spell effects, and pets, and lag can become a real issue.

Figure 6: Ashran: Battle of Two Armies.

A first attempt to remedy this situation is to utilize in-game settings so that upon joining a raid group, the graphical rendering is downgraded from, for example, "ultimate" to "fair" or "poor." Another option is to turn off spell effects, player names, and remove pet health bars from raid frames. Additionally, some players who usually play on a wireless internet will manually connect their computer to the router with an Ethernet cable. After these are done, players who still lag will seek out others who may be using the internet. I have personally heard fights over bandwidth, some that resulted in strict scheduling of allotted internet time and one that even resulted in a roommate moving out. An ultimate alternative is to change internet service providers (ISPs) where possible:

H-B: …not so much on my side anymore since I got a better internet, but I know the ping, which is semi-game related, in relation to like the other people. So like on your screen you could have finished a cast or something and then they run around the corner but it glitches out and says they're out of line of sight before you finish it. Or…just like someone runs right across a trap and it doesn't proc, so just weird and odd game glitches, I guess.

Researcher: What do you do when that happens?

H-B: Just scream and just move on… If it happens consistently, you know sometimes it's like alright, we're switching toons now, or I'm gonna go take a shower. Or you know just play a new game sometimes.

I know other players who switched ISPs because of an inability to maintain uninterrupted internet connection. Still, some players must simply continue pestering their ISPs, considering there is only one ISP option in their geographical regions.

Another type of a conflict is between VoIPs and game software. For instance, Ventrilo has generally fallen out of favor among gamers for two reasons. The first involves the in-VoIP chat lag. That is, the amount of time it takes for one person's voice to reach another, similar to international telephone calls, which becomes a concern during active play. For instance, Ventrilo caused periodic game lag. If players closed Ventrilo, the game did not lag. While this ties into above issues of computing specifications and access to infrastructure, other VoIPs do not present such issues. Players also close other programs and check background processes in an attempt to free up computing power for game processing. A running joke is that if players are lagging, they should stop downloading pornography in the background. The following excerpt, taken from chat logs in Ashran, illustrates how lag issues are discussed:

8/22 22:18:33 [Instance] S-S: takes 3 seconds for me to do my opener b/c of lag the fuck man
8/22 22:47:17 [Instance] S-S: SO MUCH LAG
8/22 22:47:18 [Instance] S-S: HOLY SHIT
8/22 22:56:38 [Instance] S-S: why is there so much lag ffs[12]

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[12] This is an abbreviation of "for fuck's sake," which is found in chat throughout the internet.

8/22 22:57:12 [Instance] E-K: Chinese hackers
8/22 22:57:15 [Instance Leader] O-K: your system sucks
8/22 22:57:29 [Instance] S-S: yeah I'm sure that's it
8/22 22:57:34 [Instance] S-R: Turn off the gnome porn
8/22 22:57:45 [Instance] E-K: dude gnome porn is too good to turn off
8/22 22:58:03 [Instance] A-T: gnome porn = best porn

In this excerpt, it is apparent that S-S's lag is so severe that it takes him/her extra time to perform opening moves, which lay groundwork for the attack sequence. Without these moves, his/her ability to successfully attack and possibly kill a target is deferred or denied. It also makes him/her vulnerable to attack and prevents him/her from utilizing defensive measures. S-S's complaints perform several functions. First, it alerts onlookers that poor performance is not his/her fault, but that of the game. It also operates to let teammates know that s/he is unable to perform his/her role, and so other teammates should not expect assistance and might need to compensate. Third, it serves as an outlet for frustration. Also notable are the time difference between his/her complaints. The first complaints are ignored. The fourth complaint is phrased as a question, though the "ffs" indicates it could be rhetorical. This sequence of statements creates openings for fellow players to join the conversation. Instead of commiserating or soothing S-S, one player blames an out-of-our-control force, Chinese hackers[13]. Another implies the lag is S-S' fault since it intimates that his/her system that is not up to the task, eliciting S-S's sarcastic response. The quip about "gnome porn" is a humorous diversion, suggesting that lag is an acceptable price to pay when it comes to disparaging gnomes (a favorite WoW player pastime).

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[13] This is indexing the long, tense history between WoW Players and "farmers," players who systematically gather raw materials in the game world for economic profit. Such farmers are often conflated into one group, reflecting players' awareness of the actual world monetary value of in-game items and the resulting China-based labor force. See Nakamura (2009) for a discussion of the racialization of WoW Labor; see also Bainbridge (2010), Castronova (2005), and Dibbel (2006). For a humorous player-created video, search YouTube for "Ni Hao (A Gold Farmer's Story) by Nyhm, or follow this link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0dkkf5NEIo0.

The user interface could also be a potential source of lag due to conflicts with add-ons, which are pieces of software able to be integrated into the game and usually written by players and freely downloadable (for example, the *WoW* section of www.curse.com boasts 3,999 unique add-ons). Add-ons that modify the user interface rearrange health bars, spell and ability buttons, and add notifications and timers that prove useful in combat. While installing add-on packs helps prevent software conflicts, players still pay heed to how much computing power they use and adjust accordingly. Although some players do not use them, add-ons seem integral for many players' gameplay, especially those concerned with ranking. Yet as helpful as they are, they also create hassles for players. One of my interviewees remarks that where add-ons are placed on screen and where alerts appear can be an issue:

> The only reason I have add-ons is they help you keep track of what's going on in the fight, who's cooldowns are used for what. They basically make it easier to win if you pay attention. Which is not always the easiest task because you have to look around all over on your screen, you can't have them all in one spot, because what if someone on the enemy team is standing in that spot and you need to cc[14] that person you're not able to use your focus mouse button or they could be right behind where all the text stuff is and you can't click them, or you can't hover over them to clone them or whatever. (Interview with O-A)

When I asked whether or not he employed a user interface organizer, he replied:

> I really wish I would have started like that. Because if I would have started *World of Warcraft* like that it would have just been amazing. It would have been like the best thing ever but I still have the same old *World of Warcraft* you know, on the bottom 1-12 and then the sidebars and the bars above that. (Interview with O-A)

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[14] CC is shorthand for crowd control. This references a range of abilities that can be used against opponents to cause temporary loss of control of their toon or loss of abilities. For example, Silence removes players' ability to cast spells for five seconds. Freezing Trap will freeze a target in place, preventing movement or action for up to a minute.

He goes on to discuss the difficulty involved with rearranging his screen and trying to learn new configurations. This is not an attractive alternative since training and maintaining specific muscle reflexes is a large part of reacting quickly and correctly in combat. Another interviewee told me he "mostly just" uses ElvUI, while another remarked:

> **M-A:** Add-ons, everything comes down to your personal playstyle…Yeah a lot of the higher end people, I mean they usually don't use it, GladiatorlosSA, it basically calls out the spells that the other team is using, so it's kind of cheating in a way but you hear it rather than trying to see it in what you're doing.
>
> **Researcher:** Do you use that one?
>
> **M-A:** Yeah, I do. Too many things going on at one time, looking at things, its bad so when you have another option of hearing things you can react to it quicker I think.

Here, M-A says that using add-ons is "cheating," a viewpoint that is uncommon but dispersed throughout *WoW*. Add-ons are considered "cheating" because they are not an integral part of the game software, and are added later by players. This indexes tensions between players' perceptions of legitimate play (Mortensen 2008). There are also add-ons that surveil enemy actions and expedite strategic choices during combat. An example of this comes from an arena match:

> **K-U:** The biggest one would be Gladius, you know that's the enemy arena raid frame thing and it shows you drs[15] which is really important, that's really the most important thing.
>
> **Researcher:** Yeah those chain ccs are so delightful to be on the receiving end of.[16]
>
> **K-U:** Right right. And the other one that's really key for me for PvP is something called Plate Buffs, so what that does is, for example when you and I were playing, you can put icons above your enemy unit frame so whenever you pop Barkskin I can

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[15] Drs indicates diminishing returns, which occurs when a type of cc is consecutively applied to a target. This results in diminished effects in either duration or potency each time the same cc is applied until the effect no longer works.

[16] I had just finished an arena battle where this interviewee kept me on the defensive and cc'd for most of the fight before completely obliterating me. My pride was a bit bruised until he messaged me a few minutes later and I realized who he was (he was playing an alt), at which point I told him an interview would be a great consolation prize. He agreed. While this could be construed as a coercive maneuver on my part, in this instance I consider it playful and a justifiable request. I have known K-U for many years and we have played together on various occasions, so this is interview is an extension of the relationship. Given K-U's skill at PvP and the fact that he is male and a member of SWAT, my request for an interview came from a subordinate position as an unskilled PvPer and as a female in a gendered relationship.

see it, I can see the timer, so that way when I'm about to burst you, and you pop Barkskin, I would wait to burst you so I don't waste that damage if that makes sense… I play with my camera backed all the way out just so I can see the field better. But the downside to that is you can't really see a lot of the animations. You can see obvious ones like a death knight's Anti-Magic Shield but you can't see a whole lot of the other ones.

This interviewee uses add-ons to supplement his ability to know what is happening. Since he keeps his in-game view at maximum distance, he is unable to see less noticeable animations such as when I used Barkskin. In each of these cases, interviewees are faced with choice to resolve conflicts of awareness, screen space, and morality. Since all of these told me they are chasing a Gladiator title (which they estimate will require approximately 2,750 – 2,850 CR), they chose to resolve technical issues with an eye towards increasing their performance and ranking. In spite of their views on whether or not add-ons are cheating or would make their lives easier, they are unwilling to take the chance of changing playstyles.

The Game

I often encounter players who talked about "the game." In these instances, "the game" refers to the virtual world as they experience it, specifically the results of underlying code such as a random number generator. Players often say things like "this game sucks" or "the game owes me," anthropomorphizing the game and interacting with it as if they had a personal relationship. For example, in this passage, one of my interviewees took "the game's" actions personally:

L-L: So for me I always feel like the game is always out to get me <laughs>. Like, for example, sometimes in arenas you'll get somebody down to below 1% health and they just- for whatever reason they don't die, and that comes down to rng… I feel like there's always some, it can go both ways. I mean there's times I know in the game where I should have died in arenas and I somehow live.

Researcher: But I'm intrigued with you saying the game is out to get you. It seems very personal.

L-L: Ugh. The struggle is real, let me put it that way.

Researcher: So is it just that rng sort of thing then or?

L-L: I think so; I mean yeah it's hit or miss. Somedays you're gonna get lucky with a crit and you can kill anything and then I feel like some other days… like this happened a few times. We were playing people that we should have just, you know stomped, but somehow the healer was living.

Researcher: Right, but is that the game out to get you, or maybe they're just lucky today?

L-L: It makes you wonder like 'how the hell did you just survive that?' or 'why didn't this critical hit?' I mean, it can go both ways I think, but… Oh yeah. I got a grudge against this game. It's taken so much of me. I need something back in return.

Researcher: You need a Gladiator title in return for all your hard work.

L-L: That's right, so I can finally retire. Jeez… But I mean for me when I have that much experience and I've played the game long enough-

Researcher: This shouldn't be happening to you.

L-L: That shouldn't happen. I mean it does so it's very, very rare and I was very shocked and upset about it <laughs>. That's the kind of stuff that makes you wonder 'how in the hell did that just happen?'

Researcher: And by upset do we mean like throwing your keyboard across the room?

L-L: Oh I raged. Yeah. I think I raged on that one. Yeah. It happens sometimes but it's just when you get up and walk away for a minute and come back and question the game.

Researcher: Just a minute? I'd be on that for half an hour!

L-L: I feel like it sometimes. I have mood swings that are very- I'll be happy one minute and then get very pissed off the next

Researcher: We totally blame the game too don't we?

L-L: Oh yeah. It's how they get me; I tell ya.

There are a few things of note in this excerpt. First is the idea that "the game" is sentient. This is a common sentiment, and phrases that use "this game" usually contain expressions of joy or anger. If some positive thing happens, players love "this game." Conversely, if something negative happens, they hate it. I have experienced times similar to those expressed above, when everything is going my

way. For example, those instance when I am riding the fine line between winning and losing a

battleground or when I am playing with an intensity that borders on manic, and then my team wins

and euphoria has me jumping gleefully around my house and startling my cat. When this happens,

"when, instead of being buffeted by anonymous forces, we do feel in control of our actions, masters

of our own fate," when "self-consciousness disappears, and the sense of time becomes distorted,"

we enter "*flow*- the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to

matter" (Csikszentmihalyi 2002:3, 71, 4). When this happens, I love the game and "the game" loves

me. If this scenario ends in a loss, I blame "the game." After all, I did everything within my power,

and despite such efforts my victory was snatched away. This loss is "the game's" fault. Enemy

combatants and their skills do not factor into this result. This feels like something personal between

myself and "the game." An important note is that flow states occur when players feel in control of

their actions, oftentimes by overcoming or conquering an opposing force in a conflict.

Players blaming an anthropomorphized game for losing is common. This tends to occur

when battles are close and, arguably, when players are in the flow. If an obvious skill gap exists

between opposing teams, or if a flow state does not exist, losing players often explain losses in terms

of skill, attention, mistakes made, alcohol imbibed, interruptions, inadequate sleep, or other similar

factors. Yet, if players are experiencing flow, it becomes keyboard mashing and desk thumping,

explosive outbursts from teammates in headsets, and the inevitable non-verbal exclamations of joy

or rage at a match's conclusion.

However, Taylor (2006:91) argues that this "flow channel" is too narrow to explain the

nuanced experience of power gamers. Combining flow with Mortensen's (2004) conception of

"alternate pleasures" and Aarseth's (1997) "pleasure of influence," Taylor (2006:91) asserts that

these concepts combine to form the pleasurable gaming experience that power gamers attain through dynamic goal setting, technical skill, and efficiency. This is why things such as add-ons, which are often viewed as distracting from gameplay, actually immerse high-end players into the game world through emersion. It is by pulling the player back from immediate gameplay, by cluttering the screen with data and warnings, that creates circumstances necessary for flow and, thus, for pleasurable gaming experiences for players of end-game content.

Gating Resources

Conflict also occurs when players attempt to gather resources for PvP play. As mentioned earlier, honor points cap at 4,000. Once players have finished gearing with honor or conquest, what then happens to the excess points? Any honor points earned above 4,000 are wasted. They are not held in reserve or distributed to players when space is available. It is therefore necessary to dispose of honor points once players' gets close to the cap. Players relate that they do this in various ways. They purchase gear for transmogrification,[17] re-sell items for gold, trade honor for Primal Spirits that can be used to purchase crafting materials, or buy heirloom upgrades. Some players simply ignore it. Conquest points have no total accumulation cap but they are subject to a weekly cap. This weekly cap can be problematic, as the following passage makes evident:

> Blizzard gives people like me, this season actually, a higher cap for being a higher rating, which doesn't make sense to me. I would think that they should give the people who try PvP and who are just the worst of the worst, they should give them the extra points because they need the help. The rank 1, like the best kid, Gladiators, in the world, the top 10 people should not have a 4k cap the first week when people only have 1700 down here. That is huge unbalanced.[18] Then it's like you can never catch up to those people, no matter how hard you try. I mean, I guess people can

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[17] The ability to change a toon's outfit without altering the armor statistics. Similar to playing dress-up.
[18] Used here, the term "unbalanced" means unfair or unjust. Unbalanced is commonly used in game parlance to denote something that is unfair due to a common occurrence of unfairness, unbalanced classes, an issue I consider later.

cause I had my weapons a week before almost anybody and had 730 ilevel last week, and that was 4 weeks in? Yeah 4 weeks in. And I dropped 200 points so, but I guess it's not impossible but it's improbable. It just doesn't make sense to me. (Interview with O-A)

This system permits higher ranked players to gear up faster at the start of the season. This gives them a substantial edge when it comes to combat since "PvP gear is everything in PvP, obviously. The higher the item level the better your damage, the better your healing" (O-A). However, there is also a cumulative effect on unused conquest point potential on a weekly basis. If players do not earn any weekly conquest, then the cap for the following week will be increased. Yet, there is a catch; if players' earns most of the weekly allotted conquest, the next week will not be increased by the unearned amount. For example, earning 1,575 out of 1,700 will not increase the next week's cap at all. However, no cap exists on how many weeks this cap can be increased. Players who have not earned any conquest for the season can have an incredibly high cap. For instance, on Amaranthus I did not earn any conquest for several months. Upon logging in to check his weekly cap, it was over 21,000. After earning several thousand for the week, I waited to see what his next week's cap would be. It was around 19,000. So, although conquest acquisition at the beginning of the season favors the higher ranked players, opportunity exists for players who have not earned any conquest during the season to catch up.

Class Balance

It's almost impossible to balance it, like perfectly. That would mean that there is a perfect world somewhere, which there's not. Sorry, we don't live in a perfect world, and we don't play in a perfect World of Warcraft. (Interview with O-A)

When asked about conflict, most of the interviewed players brought up class imbalance, which refers to perceived disparities in the powers and abilities of particular classes and roles. As one interviewee put it, "right now when it comes to PvP tanks are complete garbage so I don't play

them" (R-A). Yet tanks do have some utility in PvP. For instance, protection warriors have a glyph that, when equipped, gives their Shield Slam the ability to dispel a random buff[19] on the targeted opponent:

> I can't choose that I'm gonna dispel a bubble, I might get one of their buffs instead but it gives me that option, like it's not the "this is the go to, end-all in PvP now." The same with druid hots; I can dispel those if I get lucky enough to do it, but before you just pretty much had to be a shaman or a priest to do that and that upset the balance a lot. (Interview with M-A)

There are two main reasons this glyph "upsets the balance." The first reason is that up to this point, only priests and shamans were able to dispel buffs. This gave them a particular utility within PvP especially within arenas where player numbers are limited. In fact, this ability gives players of these two classes better utility and, therefore, more grouping opportunities. By adding another class with an identical ability but that wears plate and is less "squishy,"[20] priests and shamans were doubly de-valued. Secondly, this ability requires a shield to be equipped. The only warrior spec that is able to equip a shield is the tank spec. For the most part, tanks are designed for defense, not offense. Tanks are rarely utilized for PvP except for specific duties such as carrying a flag. They are mostly found in PvE situations where keeping an NPC from attacking squishy players is a priority. By giving a defensive role such a powerful offensive ability, the balance between roles shifted and further contributed to the blurring of the tank/dps role.

However, tanks are effectively played in PvP situations that do not meet the above criteria. M-A, quoted above, prefers to PvP with a warrior tank instead of his favorite toon, a death knight: "playing warrior, even in defensive stance, it has a lot of survivability and a lot of damage output

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[19] A buff is a beneficial increase to players's' stats, is usually of limited duration, and usually does not persist through death. These can be acquired from spells, potions, or food. A debuff is the opposite, an undesired buff.
[20] Squishy refers to how much health and armor the class has, and how easy they are to kill. Since priests wear cloth armor, they are squishier than shamans, who wear mail. Warriors wear plate, and so are not as squishy as shamans.

plus the stuns that you don't get with a dk." M-A plays his warrior in arenas and skirmishes where

survivability and damage output are critical. This results in his preference for a warrior tanks that can

take and give damage in small group situations. Yet, in Ashran, he prefers to play his death knight

since the AoE damage output is significantly more useful. In events such as Ashran, he is grouped

with a few dozen players, which usually includes several healers. Therefore, his survivability is less of

an issue and he opts to play a class with abilities that inflict higher and more widespread damage.

Additionally, each software patch that is released can change class abilities, talents, and

glyphs. This adds instability and fluidity to the game, since some classes will be better than others in

one season but less desirable in another. While some players view this positively since it adds a sort

of revolving opportunity to the different classes, others just find it to be annoying. There is a

tradition of leveling up alts for various reasons and many PvPers have multiple toons maxed out,

ready to PvP at a moment's notice. Creating multiple alts is partially due to the fluidity in class

abilities, it also gives players alternatives for grouping up.

Hero Class: Death Knights and Demon Hunters

As noted in Chapter Four, the release of a new *WoW* expansion, where new classes and races

are introduced, can also upset class balance. In each of these instances, the new classes and races are

comparatively more powerful. Additionally, it takes some time for software patches to fine-tune

such discrepancies. Despite such patches, Death Knights (often abbreviated as dk, pronounced

"dee-kay") are still considered too powerful. One reason for this is their capacity for self-healing:

> **M-A:** Like in death knight my Death Strike won't heal me as much in tank spec…I
> can only play her frost[21]. If you try to play blood spec as PvP right now, your healing

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[21] Frost and Unholy are dps specs, while Blood is a tank spec.

isn't going to be enough to keep you up cause like I said the death knight relies on their [Death Strike].

Researcher: What about, like I don't know, if you do Islands of Conquest or Alterac Valley, do you tank in there?

M-A: No, even then the bosses, you can tank them in your frost spec, you're healing as long as you're playing it right.

A key ability that makes death knights excellent in the role of target caller and a desired class in group PvP is Death Grip. This ability permits players to target enemy players or NPCs, pull them to the death knight's location, and stun them. This is a favored method to kill healers. Death knights can announce the healer as the kill target and pull the healer away from their group. The healer lands in the death knight's group with fatal results for the healer. This works best when the group is in a VoIP:

> So, the main teams they usually have a dk target call, just because a dk can pull a target out of the group and they can just pull it right into your group and they can just kill it all down. So essentially what it'll sound like in an rbg group is say the dk, if it's me calling I'll be like, "ok we're gonna switch to the dk, switch to the dk in 3, 2, 1, switch to the dk, everybody should be on the dk, pulling the dk, come on kill the dk, interrupts, make sure to get cc on the heals, interrupt, interrupt" and then if somebody's berserking you just say "hey warrior is berserking cc, cc him." (Interview with R-A)

The Death Grip also functions to pull the target out-of-range of their group. This prevents the target's group from saving them. An exception is if the target's group has a priest who can "life grip" them back. Called Leap of Faith, this ability was not released until the Cataclysm expansion, two years after death knights began wreaking havoc.[22]

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[22] This new ability also doubled the in-game trolling. For priest life grip trolling, search YouTube for "Leap of Faith Trolling" by Mixifiz: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N-c63Cuat_w. For Death Grip trolling, search YouTube for "WoW- DK Trolling" by xMrFlipx's channel: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vSjFLmjjRyo .

Currently, death knights are the game's only hero class, something *WoW* players have been vocal about changing. As a hero class, death knights have advantages other classes do not, and many players believe death knights are disproportionally powerful in relation to other classes, which is considered unfair. The upcoming expansion, *Legion*, will address this with the addition of the demon hunter hero class. Players in the beta[23] report that demon hunters are something like a melee warlock, which has received mix reactions. Although nothing is set until the expansion releases a general consensus has emerged that the demon hunter will initially be overpowered and that Azeroth will see a demon hunter spree.[24]

While some players speculate that the demon hunter will help counter the death knight, other players shrug it away. The possibility of perfectly balancing classes is not possible, according to some players. Thus, there is no reason to get worked up about it:

> I've never actually considered it possible for them to balance the game, it's just too complex; there's no way you're going to balance 8 classes with that many skills when you've got millions of people looking for ways to unbalance it. (Interview with S-A)

Alternatively, some players would prefer the classes to be unbalanced:

> I know that's an issue for a lot of people, that's never been an issue for me, I've never cared about that. To me, one thing I don't like about the way that PvP has progressed in WoW, it's kind of the same now, everyone has an interrupt and everyone has a defensive and it's all just, all homogenized to where everyone is the same... the matches are too predictable.

> And *Legion* is gonna change that. Now it's probably gonna cause some imbalance issues again, but another reason why I've never cared about imbalance is because I haven't played perfect yet, you know what I mean? So to me, I have to, I'm not gonna bitch about someone else until I've worked my faults out. You know what I mean?

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[23] The term "beta" refers to a beta test, where players have access to content before release for stress-testing and debugging purposes. This service is unpaid but is highly popular due to the advantage such knowledge gives.
[24] This references another one of Nyhm's WoW machinima movies, "Death-Knight Spree," available on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xfgbWwhmVbM.

So to me it's more of a personal challenge. And I actually like that a lot. I like that some classes are overpowered cause its more rewarding when you play that good. The game is pretty freaking balanced I mean if a class overpowers you, but you play better than them, you can still win, you know what I mean?

They can win by making a lot more mistakes than you can, and I guess you can argue that's not fair, but you can still win and to me I like that. (Interview with K-U)

These two players echo sentiments that are less frequently heard in forums and general chat channels. Part of what makes a video game fun are elements of unpredictability and randomness. Game Developer Soren Johnson (2012:45) asserts that "luck serves as a social lubricant – the alcohol of gaming, so to speak – that increases the appeal of multiplayer gaming to audiences that would not normally be suited for cutthroat head-to-head competition." Here, the problem is not so much a conflict of differences but rather one of homogeneity. Thus, the conflicts that arise out of class imbalance may be an intentional part of *WoW* designed to foster unpredictability and chaos to keep players curious and creatively engaged. This chaotic tension also creates opportunities for players to perfect their skills, as K-U discusses. In fact, K-U argues that classes are "pretty freaking balanced" since skilled players can defeat less-skilled players even if they play a hero class. The conflict between classes generated by this imbalance is part of what attracts this player to *WoW*. To him, this is something positive that he does not want to see altered. He enjoys the fluidity of class balance, noting that updates make the game feel new again. This sentiment is echoed by many. It remains one reason players look forward to new content, since familiar comfort and the nostalgia of a favorite game is combined with the excitement and uncertainty of a new one.

Actors, Agency, Artifacts: Ontological Considerations

One feature all of the above instances of conflict share is that they spring from the hardware and software artifacts. Determining how to integrate these artifacts into discussions of sociality is a

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key issue in research that considers human-technology interaction, since technology plays a role in these instances. Difficulties arise in determining if artifacts do indeed *play* a role. If so, how should they be discussed without attributing sentience or free will? Scholars incorporate artifacts into subject-object relationships with human actors, such as Taylor (2006b:333) does: "things like user-produced mods are sociotechnical actors and are always involved in reshaping the game space –and indeed what play is – in powerful ways." By introducing artifacts into social networks, scholars utilize Bruno Latour's (1987) actor network theory to discuss social and agentic roles of artifacts. Other scholars critique actor network theory for its restrictive subject-object simplicity and instead taking cues from the idea of an agentic artifact.

An alternative to actor network theory is activity theory, which focuses not on material actors but sociocultural contexts of actions and interactions. This theory relies heavily on the idea that subjects and objects act upon each other, and in so doing affect each other in contextually-bound ways. Advocating and unpacking activity theory, Victor Kaptelinin and Nardi (2009:33, emphasis in original) define agency as "the ability to act in the sense of *producing effects…the ability and the need to act*." In this formulation, tool and task related competencies become metafunctional by integrating natural human capabilities with artifacts into a system of activities with all the attendant limitations and side effects (64-65). Especially useful is activity theory's inclusion of environments. This refers to conceptualizations of integrated wholes that are both backdrops to actions but can also be acted upon, which is a result of the influence of natural sciences (175). This mirrors anthropological concepts of environments and understandings of artifacts as things imbued with natural (physical), social, and cultural properties. Therefore, artifacts have both agency and roles to play within society, such as mediating social encounters or transmitting knowledge. Recent

anthropological theory and archaeological research utilizes animist ontologies, which focus on an artifact's role and actions rather than its materiality (Barber and Sánchez 2012, Ingold 2006, and Zedeño 2009).

Additionally, this idea of action nicely compliments sociocultural anthropological conceptualizations of Pierre Bourdieu's (1977[1972]) practice theory, bringing a technological approach to the politicized understandings of structures that restrict agencies (compare with Ortner 1984). However, by shifting the actor/object focus of these theories to *actions*, activity theory bypasses issues of intentionality in understandings of agency particularly when it comes to non-human actors. Considered in light of this discussion, it is plausible that non-sentient technologies and artifacts can be considered to have agency, albeit one different than that exerted by humans. Here, I prefer to qualify artifact agency in a manner similar to "material agency" so as to differentiate between intentionality and "the way the object acts when humans provoke it," for example through commands entered into a computer (Leonardi 2012:37).[25] In addition to this conceptualization, I would also include such aspects as failure to properly "provoke" technologies such as with incorrect input commands, overloading the system (i.e. server crash), or actions resulting from lack of input such as when a computer enters sleep mode, to round out my conceptualization and use of artifact agency in this discussion.

These theoretical constructions offer viable tools for unpacking various ways infrastructure, hardware, software, add-ons, and "the game" are agents who are "out to get" players. Given this artifact agency, a stable connection is a benevolent divinity while lag is an evil dictator out to ruin

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[25] The ways technologies act independently of human intervention, such as with artificial intelligence, bugged code, acts of god, or virus and malware interference, is (unfortunately) beyond the scope of this discussion.

players' lives. In such instances, it is players who are being acted upon. Such actions can provoke strong emotional responses, especially if players happen to be experiencing a bad run of RNG. At times like this, technology is conspiring to ruin the play experience. Alternatively, players joke that sequential wins or excellent rewards indicate that the *WoW* gods favor them. M-A routinely jokes that he sacrifices gnomes to the *WoW* gods to curry their favor before undertaking a difficult in-game task. While this raises interesting ideas for studying religion and superstition among *WoW* players, it clearly suggests that players believe there is some force out there, acting for or against them. Some players call this RNG and shrug it off. Others note that RNG does not begin to account for the sporadic runs of luck that continuously pair them against the same opposing team in arenas, that bless them with an ability to spot the Ancient Artifact, or that enable them to live far beyond what their 1% health bar shows as possible.

Even in cases where it seems clear that agency[26] resides with game developers, such as with class balance, some agency is still reserved for the artifacts. A critical damage streak is the difference between glorious win and inglorious defeat. As L-L points out, "somedays you're going to get lucky with a critical hit and you can kill anything and then I feel like some other days..." It is interesting that he does not say "sometimes" but "somedays." This suggests that RNG is a factor, but somedays the game is "just out to get me" and there is nothing players' can do in the face of this uncontrollable and unalterable misfortune.

An interesting counter-explanation could construe these so-called runs of bad luck not as artifact agency but as the absence of a flow state. Such an interpretation displaces the explanation

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[26] When discussing human agency, I prefer to use anthropologist Sherry Ortner's understanding of agency as "how people (try to) act on the world even as they are acted upon. Agency…takes shape as specific desires and intentions within a matrix of subjectivity – of (culturally constituted) feelings, thoughts, and meanings" (2005:34).

from the game to the player. Alternatively, closer inspection reveals that these two theoretical constructs also bolster each other in certain ways. Remembering that flow is a state individuals discover and enter, but do not create, the question arises: who or what creates the circumstances for flow to occur? I would argue that a confluence of all these various artifact agencies, combined with an optimal experience, can expedite flow. Setting aside the potential uses of gnome sacrifice, players' abilities to successfully comprehend technological artifacts in all their iterations must be melded with a smooth flow of favorable artifact agency. This situation is necessary to enable the conditions for that critical first optimal experience. Once flow is entered, the result is "warcrack" which, once experienced, creates a desire to re-create flow experiences. This situation begs additional questions. Is it possible to enter a friend's flow state? What happens if an entire group of players enters flow? What effects would this have on the gaming community?

In-Game Event-Dependent Conflicts

Although the types of conflicts encountered in event-dependent contexts are based on different and changing circumstances, they can still be organized into a few general categories. These include a mixture of game restrictions and social encounters, where the interplay between what is or is not possible affects the roles of players within and among their groups.

Choosing Roles

Since most PvP encounters have hard and fast limits on the number of players allowed in a given event at a time, determining the roles individual players assume can be problematic. As mentioned above, different classes have different abilities. If a group of friends wants to do arenas, then they need to determine who will heal, melee, range, and whether or not they want to bring a

tank. If queuing for a random PvP event, with or without being in a group, individual players are required to choose one role. Once a PvP event starts, switching specs is no longer possible, regardless of whether or not players are in combat (players can switch at any time in the game world as long as they are not in combat). When it comes to choosing which toons and specs to play, "it's pretty much what the flavor of the month is. So whatever the flavor of the month, whatever is performing best, that's what I try and play… I just leveled a rogue to 100 today, and I think it's my 28th level 100" – (R-A). As classes are updated and changed by patches, players change strategies. By having alts of different races, classes, and specs, players can respond to changes. While having 28 level 100 toons is on the high end of the scale, most players I know or interviewed possess approximately 5-10 toons at level 100, geared and enhanced, with whom they routinely PvP. While the shifting class balance is an important reason for maintaining several different toons, playing differently and having a variety of play options is also important. Many persons I spoke with have two or three favorites that they alternate between. Most players I spoke with had one central favorite, called a "main:" "I love playing retribution paladins, but they're weak so they're not particularly that good in arenas or RBGs or anything. But that is my go-to class" (R-A).

When groups of three or more players get together to PvP, having variation in the roles and classes of toons is necessary. It is usually the role of healing that is most contentious. Players whose preferred toon has a healing spec are most likely to be chosen: "I mean I prefer damage but I always, and I mean always, get stuck with the healing" (O-A). Whether or not players are willing to play roles they do not favor relies on several factors, but two are major considerations: ranking and event type. Players who have high rankings may not want to play an off-spec as it increases the possibility of losing a game and, therefore, losing rating, which is difficult to acquire at higher ranks.

Alternatively, if players are highly ranked in one event, say 3v3 arenas, they might not care if the venue is rated battlegrounds, since each event has separate rankings. In cases like these, high ranked players are free from the pressure of maintaining or improving their ranking and so are willing to play more casually, though it is likely that they will still actively work to win.

Comps Matter

Finding the right mix of roles and classes is referred to as putting a "comp" together. The goal is to find a good comp and players who work well as a team. Depending on group objectives (YOLO, casual, or ranked), the task of finding enough players who meet requirements can take an hour. Even when the group plays and removes players who underperform, it can still take several hours for a group to find traction:

> When it comes to PvP if I build my own RBG team what I'll do is I'll figure out what's a strong comp and I'll put it together, and what I'll do is I'll armory everybody to ensure that they have the achievements to back what they're saying. I'll also ensure that they'll have proper add-ons and whatnot, and being in Curse [VoiP] is a must.
>
> Typically, I like having holy pally, resto druid, and mist weaver. The reason I like that is yes, we take into account resto druids going to just spread their dots and over-heal, where it's important to us to have a holy pally cause they can throw bubbles of protection, and the cleanses and whatnot, and we like mist weavers because they have such good utility, they can get out and in of combat and whatnot and they've got that bubble as well and yeah, it just all comes together. (Interview with R-A)

R-A often leads RBGs, and here he specifies that he has preferred compositions for his groups. He places as much or more importance on players' skill and preparation as on the balance between classes with different and complementary abilities. Here, when R-A discusses player abilities, he utilizes an understood (and possibly normalized) assumption that players with these classes have the necessary knowledge and skill to perform successfully. In RBGs, when there are enough player spots to have multiple classes perform the same role, issues of class balance are not as rigid. Conflict in

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these cases tends to center around performance. In arenas, where there are limited player spaces,

conflict is more of an even mix of both class balance and player performance. This is seen in O-A's

statement above where he says he often plays a healing role, despite not really preferring it. Several

reasons inform his decision and the practice in general. One consideration is that since his "main" is

his priest, he has a heal off-spec. Thus, he is able to achieve the rank on his "main" regardless of

whether he is playing as heals or dps. Another factor is his skill. He ranks while playing both specs,

which brings flexibility to the team. Additionally, the priest class is a balance of healing and

absorption spells, making them a favorite for ranked play. Of course, this depends on players' skill,

comp makeup, and type of arena since a 2v2 comp is different from a 3v3, which is different from a

5v5:

> I mainly play 2s, and 2s is all out of whack. But as far as 3s go, yeah I think… I mean there's better teams than others obviously but I think as far as balance goes it's pretty balanced. Like you don't see any mist weavers in the top comps which is kind of obnoxious, they have the same 2 or 3 healers, but as far as dps, every dps is doing well. (Interview with R-D)

In this response, the interviewee goes on to say that he has a mist weaver and even though he

"wouldn't mind" if they were part of a top comp, he prefers to dps: "I'll heal if I'm asked to but I

prefer dps" (R-D). Although there are players who favor healing, most interviewees prefer to dps.

Dps takes the more active role in defeating the opponent, while healers are more of a support class.

These roles have aggressive and passive implications that give rise to understandings such as "girls

play healers" while rogues are believed to generally be adolescent or young men.[27] While some

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[27] This would make for a fascinating research project. While the links between healers and women conform to traditional gendering of females as nurturing and supportive, the connection of young men to rogues has interesting implications for constructions of masculinity in-game. Rogues have substantial abilities based around stealth, speed, being positioned behind a target (backstabbing), and evasion. The rogue archetype/trope also occupies a narrative positionality in fantasy lore beyond *WoW* as sneaky, dishonorable, and/or cowardly.

healing classes such as paladins and priests are able to inflict substantial damage while healing, other classes cannot, and this is another factor to consider when building a team. For fun, some players create 2s or 3s groups of only paladin or other types of healers, attempting to defeat the other team through their healing advantage or by making the match last for so long that the other team concedes. Similar tactics have been employed with other classes such as an all-druid or all-death knight RBG. Sometimes these groups are surprisingly successful and even "epic."[28]

The Up and Down Chain

When it comes to arena comps, players experiment with different races and classes to determine which combination works best. Once a strong combination is discovered, other players watching the comp streams[29] will mimic them to achieve similar success:

> Certain classes just don't mesh well together. I mean that's why we come up with these awesome names like spicy chicken and frozen chicken and god comp and ebola, no seriously those are the comp names that are out right now. (Interview with O-A)

As O-A explains above, a good combination is named by those players who discover it. In his examples of 3v3 arena comps, the names created reflect the comp classes. Spicy chicken is a fire mage and "moonkin," aka "chicken," (see Figure 7 below), which is a balance druids' shapeshift form. Frozen chicken is a frost mage and moonkin. Ebola implies an AoE dps such as death knights or affliction warlocks that spread damage-over-time effects such as curses and diseases. God comp

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[28] This video on YouTube shows how to create a macro that enables a holy paladin (with a specific set up) to quickly put out enough damage to kill a dps: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BXOkOnAGfF8 (Search by Warcraft Bible + Holy Paladin One Shot Macro).

[29] Streams here refers to live streaming gameplay over the internet. For example, Bajheera (discussed below) streams his play over Twitch TV at: https://www.twitch.tv/bajheera/profile.

is a more general name that does not imply classes. Instead, it is used to demarcate an unbeatable combination. To illustrate:

> **O-A:** There's one comp in 3s right now, I don't know if anybody's ever beaten it, like it's so faceroll.
>
> **Researcher:** What is it?
>
> **O-A:** It's resto druid, elemental shaman and destruction lock. Nobody knows how it works. Like Bajheera[30] was playing his warlock or no, I think it was his lock or his shaman, and he was like "how are we killing things?" and they were at like 2400 MMR and he's like "how are, we haven't lost a game how is this possible?"
>
> **Researcher:** Good god.
>
> **O-A:** Yeah it was just insane. It's unbeatable. I've never beaten it. I can't, I don't know what to do. I have no clue. They're just, it's just too good.
>
> **Researcher:** The comp or the team running the comp?
>
> **O-A:** The comp. I think it's the comp, 100%. Cause I've played you know several different groups and it's just like, they just throw us around.

O-A remarks that in spite of the skill of the team who discovered it (2,400 MMR is currently just below Gladiator status), this particular comp is a god comp because less-skilled players can utilize this comp to consistently defeat their opponents. Although winning still requires skilled players, god comps are less demanding comparted to other comps, since the combination of classes helps offset players' lack of skill. As K-U alluded to earlier, god comp leaves more room for mistakes. A more powerful class or class combination can more easily recover from mistakes than other classes, as the discussion of hero classes above illustrates. However, when strong comps are combined with skilled and coordinated teams, the results can be Gladiator rank and potentially national and international tournaments, sponsorships, and even t-shirts (search Google for "Bajheera t-shirt").

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[30] Bajheera is a ranked Gladiator; Figure X is a screen shot of his current ranking in 3v3 arenas (508), according to http://us.battle.net/wow/en/pvp/leaderboards/3v3.

Attaining a high rank requires a competent team. Finding players and putting together a consistent team is preferred to attempting to find players for each PvP event:

> Well I prefer people I know. How do you group if you don't know anyone? Well then you gotta do the hard task of either trolling trade chat to find someone or go into the group finder and hopefully get paired up, someone will sign up who is decent. If not you're screwed, cause most likely even if they say they're decent and you check their achievements, they could have 2200 like me and could be completely bad. They could have bought their account. Who knows? (Interview with O-A)

O-A discusses the difficulties and uncertainties associated with finding new players. When starting a group through the in-game grouping tool, players can include specific information regarding preferable teammates. As O-A notes, even this is tactic does not guarantee competency. R-A eludes to this when states that he vets potential players by looking them up in the armory to check their gear, achievements, and rating. Despite such efforts, difficulties can still arise. Although account sharing is a clear violation of Blizzard's Terms of Use,[31] it is always possible that a less-skilled player is temporarily using someone else's account. Alternatively, players can purchase accounts online or pay for a carry. Playing ranked games with players who assert one thing but perform poorly is not just a moral violation but also has real consequences for the team's rating. In point of fact, losing a game has higher consequences for players with higher rankings. This is why often more seasoned players do not want to PvP with lower-ranked friends:

> They don't want to play with you cause they're going to lose more rating if they lose, they're gonna lose 20 points to your 10, so you lose double. So it's not really worth it for someone who's got 200 more rating than you. (Interview with O-A)

Such avoidance can be extremely frustrating for those players actively seeking a higher rank, especially Gladiator status. O-A notes that this can get especially irritating after losing one or two

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[31] For Blizzard Entertainment's Terms of Use, see: http://us.blizzard.com/en-us/company/legal/wow_tou.html

events which lowers his ranking well below that of his friends with whom he had been playing

previously:

> I've been 2.2k experienced, I've been failing ever since then, just because all these randoms I get paired with, I go up, I go down, I go up I go down, and then you know, you lose touch with the people you went up with because you went down and they're still going up, and it's like the chain of, you know the up and down, the up and down chain if you will, makes it so you lose touch with the group of people you wanted to play with but they weren't around at the time, they're on different servers, it's all like its RNG its literally what everybody says. (Interview with O-A)

This frustration with "the up and down chain" is due to the gaps it places between his rank and

those of his friends. He notes the difficulties of playing with friends on different servers, referencing

time zone differences and scheduling conflicts. Oftentimes when he plays, he must choose between

pairing up with random people or not increasing his ranking at all. Waiting for friends to become

available is not really an attractive alternative, especially since once their schedules align their ranking

could have increased substantially. O-A's reference to RNG points to his frustration with finding

new players. Whether or not they are who they say they are or are as skilled as they assert, is

completely up to chance. Similar situations arise in RBGs and as with arenas the higher rated games

come with higher standards:

> So essentially if we're playing like YOLO or just low MMR, we'll give them a couple chances and we'll try and teach them to be better, but if we're pushing 2k it's "hey, get the fuck outta the group," and we kick them. There's a lot of stuff that goes into it, we analyze their dps, how many interrupts they have, how many cc's, and we just kinda like do an overview of their game performance. And if they're not meeting what a 2k player would meet, then they're gonna get kicked of course. (Interview with R-A)

R-A states above that for YOLO or more casual games, there is a tendency to go easier on less-

skilled players, even giving them a few pointers on how to PvP better. But at the higher ranked

games, there is intense pressure to perform well. If players fall short of meeting group expectations, they may be kicked out with surprising alacrity.

However, in larger battlegrounds such as Isle of Conquest, Alterac Valley, and zone PvP such as Ashran, target calling seems to fall by the wayside. One main reason is the sheer number of players involved. Since each zone is 40v40, there are plenty of opportunities to achieve multiple objectives simultaneously. If voice is used in such situations as in "premades" discussed below, having too many target callers clutters the channel. Accordingly, chat is restricted to alerts or announcing changes in the larger strategy. An exception to this is when one particular player needs to die such those players holding the Ancient Artifact (AA) in the Ashran encounter (Figure 7). The AA increases the player's damage or healing done by 200%. It also increases their health by 25%. This poses danger to the opposing team, especially when the AA is held by a ranged AoE dps such as a hunter or warlock. With the AA, these dps can decimate enemy forces. Alternatively, a healer with shield abilities such as priests or paladins can place shields on all team players which absorbs most of the incoming damage. I have seen an entire 40-man[32] team with 70% damage reduction shields, provided by an AA-holding priest. Thus, whoever holds the AA is an enemy target and must demonstrate care so as not to get separated from the group.

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[32] Here, the term 40-man is in-game parlance. An interesting note is that for PvP, groups are designated as 2s, 3s, 5s, or RBGs, while in large groups and PvE, they are designated 5-mans, 10-mans, and 40-mans.

Figure 7: A Moonkin controls the Ancient Artifact.

In summation, PvP partner preference is largely dependent upon the type of PvP event. While arenas have specific and rigid requirements for skill and class specialization, RBGs are more flexible, since having more teammates disperses some of this restrictive tension. Non-ranked and large-scale PvP play such as random battlegrounds or Ashran further disperse and even negate the necessity of class-specific positions, since there are multiple players who perform necessary functions and overlap to compensate for ineptitudes. This is especially true in the 40v40 events, where unskilled players may not even be noticed. If they are noticed, they may never be called to account or otherwise reproved for failing to adequately contribute. This is not to say unskilled players are always ignored. It is equally possible they will be harassed, assisted, or trolled. The difficulty and stress of finding competent players is dissipated as size of the group increases, until it is nearly non-existent in casual 40v40 events.

Opposing Players

No discussion of conflict is complete without discussing opposing players. Conflicts of this

type center around strategy. Of importance is what comp defeats what, what abilities do the

opposing team possess, what type of playstyle do they utilize, whether or not they have a healer and

if so, what type of healer. All of these questions inform strategic decision-making and is often done

on the fly, especially in arena situations. Strategic solutions usually involve locking down and

isolating players through chain cc, line of sight, or distractions. One interviewee describes it this way:

> Right now I like playing survival hunter resto druid because its I can build everything
> up and I can do a worm sting, keep somebody in a cc, then shoot a trap and then
> they're in a trap, and druid can cyclone, cyclone, cylone and by the time their
> cyclones are done I have another trap up. And if they don't use their trinket[33] or are
> getting dispelled or whatever it is, then they could essentially be down in 15-18
> seconds in cc and that's plenty enough time to kill the other target. (Interview with
> R-A)

In this 2v2 scenario, he describes pairing a hunter class in survival spec with a druid class in

restoration spec because of their combined cc abilities. In this way players can focus down opposing

team members while the other is unable to do anything. Often the cc focus is the healer, so that the

dps is first to die. When this occurs, a healer is outnumbered 2 to 1. S/he often cedes the game by

leaving the arena event since the likelihood of killing both opposing players before dying is low.

> **L-L:** There's also a site that, way back in the day it was a lot better than it is now…
> Skill Capped. And there's streamers that go in depth and show you how to beat
> comps.
>
> **Researcher:** What is that, a YouTube channel?
>
> **L-L:** They had a site and you would pay for it.

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[33] Here R-A is referring to a PvP trinket, an equip-able item that enables players' to break free from cc one time every two minutes. Human races have a similar racial ability called Every Man for Himself. It shares a cooldown with this trinket, which means that one or the other may be used every two minutes. Therefore, humans are able to choose a different trinket, giving them more flexibility when it comes to gear and trinket choices.

Researcher: A subscription based PvP strategy website.

L-L: Yeah. But now they have a lot of stuff on YouTube since YouTube has gotten much bigger in the past few years. But that site was, I mean very, very good, but the cool thing about it was if you knew somebody with an account they could just share you their account info and you wouldn't have to pay for it. That's what I did. I just had people that gave me their info.

While several websites that I came across during my interviews provided PvP information, two in particular were repeatedly mentioned. One is www.arenajunkies.com, which contains information on strategies, gearing and customizing a toon, leaderboards, and videos and streams. Another website, www.arenamate.com not only shows PvP leaderboards and the current rank cutoffs for titles such as Gladiator or Duelist, but also how many games ranked players have played, how many wins and losses they have accrued, and whether or not they are currently playing. Additional affinity sites such as the *WoW* PvP reddit thread (https://www.reddit.com/r/worldofpvp), the official Blizzard PvP forums (http://us.battle.net/wow/en/community/), and Ask Mr. Robot (http://www.askmrrobot.com/wow/player)[34] offer additional resources for PvP players attempting to min/max their characters and/or achieve ranked titles. Other resources are found on YouTube or various live streams (discussed above).

Similar circumstances, understandings, and strategies operate in 3v3 and 5v5 arena matches. These are also played out in similar ways as 2v2s but on much larger scales in rated and unrated battlegrounds. As previously discussed, in these larger groups there are target callers who determine who should be targeted. As R-A mentions, target callers also request cc on toons that have activated

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[34] This site is the most contentious of those I describe, since it was created for PvE and for a long time did not have PvP functionality, thus considered useless or misleading for PvP purposes. However, it can be a powerful tool for PvP computations when properly utilized by setting stat values weighted for PvP play. For a fun experiment, go to the website and enter my main: US, Anvilmar, Xochiquetzal. Click on an item to see possibilities and adjust value weights.

special abilities to increase their damage or healing output. Yet, differences between the smaller

arena groups and the larger, varied battlegrounds and wargames exist.

A key strategy for all PvP types is to stay with the group. Separation from the group is

dangerous and usually results in death. Such fates often happen in larger PvP encounters where dead

toons are resurrected in a different geographically distant location:

10/24 00:35:41 [Instance] H-M: K I would be on my way BUT
10/24 00:35:48 [Raid Warning] G-B: last lap... hurry to AoA... for credit
10/24 00:35:49 [Instance] H-M: I am getting ganked
10/24 00:35:57 [Instance] H-M: So...3rd try
10/24 00:36:05 [Instance] G-R: try another route?
10/24 00:36:05 [Instance] H-M: Why don't we have the graveyard?
10/24 00:38:54 [Instance] H-M: Rude
10/24 00:39:05 [Instance] H-M: 4th time now heading to shit

In the above excerpt from an Ashran chat-log H-M, a paladin healer, is attempting to get back to the

main group, which is doing an event at Amphitheater of Annihilation (AoA) in the upper left corner

of the map (Figure 8, also see Figure 14 in Appendix F). H-M is resurrected at the only Alliance

graveyard at the map's southern end. S/he has made three attempts to rejoin the group but each

time is killed. G-R suggests trying another route. H-M retorts by asking about the central graveyard

location which is contested every 15 minutes. H-M's implication is that the group is slacking by not

capturing the graveyard which, due to its central location, would facilitate H-M's attempts to rejoin

the group. His/her third death is "rude," and his/her frustration is very evident in the last sentence.

Although it is not revealed how, eventually s/he manages to rejoin the group.

Figure 8: Map of the Ashran PvP Zone.

What is interesting is that all three deaths occur within five minutes of each other. This implies something beyond "rude." Perhaps some enemy players have decided to focus attention on H-M. H-M alludes to this when using the term "ganked" which suggests the enemy is intentionally ganging up on players' as a way to frustrate them. In this case, ganking H-M has the additional benefit of preventing H-M from healing his/her team members. By ganking H-M the enemy players effectively accomplish two different objectives.

Whether or not enemy players utilize this or similar tactics such as focusing strong but "squishy" AoE classes, the possibility of accosted by enemy players is ever present. Players who are

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repeatedly killed in such a manner are "farmed" which remains a frustrating experience. This has the potential to happen in battlegrounds on a group scale specifically where enemy players will drive teams back to their resurrection location and then "farm" that location. Such a maneuver is called a "spawn trap" (Figure 9) as it involves players killing the opposing team as soon as they "re-spawn" (resurrect). This tactic capitalizes on superior power to constrain enemy players, while several team members complete the objectives to win the encounter. Although opposing players have very little social interaction, their very presence adds random and unpredictable twists to PvP encounters. Such types of experiences operate in similar ways to the anthropomorphized *WoW*, since neither "the game" nor enemies interact with players socially.

Figure 9: Spawn Trap in Warsong Gulch.

For 40v40 PvP, the above discussions unfold in similar yet altered ways. Classes and roles remain important. Due to the number of players, the effects of those choices are dispersed. It is dispersal that is key. With multiple and at times competing objectives, determining who should be with whom, and what they should be doing, becomes of primary importance. For example, in Isle of Conquest, some players may be assigned to defend the keep, while others attempt to control the hanger, workshop, or docks, while still others may be assigned to capture the refinery or quarry. The objective here is to destroy the gates to the opposing team's fortress and kill the enemy general. An alternative yet tedious strategy is depleting the opposing team's resources. Alterac Valley has a similar strategy. Instead of acquiring war machines the objective is to control a chain of towers and graveyards, destroy those controlled by the opposing team, and infiltrate the enemy fortress to kill the general. Ashran also has an enemy general as a primary target of lucrative quests which include winning alternating events.

I will discuss Ashran in more detail in the next chapter, but here it is important to note the similarities it has with the two 40v40 battlegrounds. In all three cases, it is unlikely that the group will be in a VoiP. The result is that all necessary communication takes place through text chat; something quite difficult to do while in combat situations Since players are randomly selected to enter the PvP event, there is no pre-determined course of action or social bonds that can lead to organized strategized play. Since these games are not rated, they tend to attract more casual players and blend ranked players from different types of PvP. This randomness means some groups manage to cohesively and strategically achieve objectives while others fail to succeed, resulting in chat rage, trolling, and a high turnover of players. K-U discusses the complications of this unpredictability:

It's kind of hit or miss, so it's either one side is winning everything for two hours and the other side is losing everything for two hours. I want to do it to get the gear, you have to complete the quest and you have to be wining to do that. So it's like a chore, you know? You're doing it to get something and ideally you do it as quick as possible. And if you get lucky, you're on a winning team, and that happens but if you're not… you know you can go two hours without accomplishing anything and then you have to try to do it again later in the week and it can be- it's just a pain in the ass, just frustrating in that way. (Interview with K-U)

Players have multiple reasons for joining these large PvP events. Unlike smaller 10v10 battlegrounds, where the objective is to win, Ashran is a source of in-game resources and thus not all players enter with the same goals. Ashran is not a winnable encounter. Instead, there is a back-and-forth battle for winning events and controlling powerful NPCs. As a result, groups in Ashran can be scattered. Several times in the course of my research, I entered and stayed in Ashran for extended periods of time. It was then I began to notice a pattern. A complete cycle took between two to four hours. The cycle's duration depends on various factors, most especially the presence of a strong, competent leader and a group that took instruction and worked as a team.

Based on my own personal experience, participating in a successful Ashran group was rewarding and enjoyable. We would win events, farm buff items, decimate the opposing faction, and accumulate artifacts and helpful NPCs. However, as the game continued, people who completed their quests would leave the group and new people would join. Sometimes these players would work as part of the team. Other times they would request or clamor for objectives that did not fit the strategy timeline. Often, a successful team had a strong leader. Overtime this player would either leave the battleground to be replaced by newcomers or become frustrated with leadership demands and pass it to someone else. In all cases, inevitable result was diminishing success. This outcome leads to more players leaving. New players who join losing teams would immediately leave again, resulting in a less-than 40 player group. This high turnover spelled disaster since the opposing

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faction was succeeding and gaining members for a full 40-man roster. However, as the cycle wore on, the opposing faction would begin to decline, triggering a new ascendency in our own.

One time I entered a group in Ashran that was dominating the opposing Horde faction. I happily stayed, making notes and asking questions regarding their strategies. After several hours of this, I was curious as to how the group managed to maintain coherency. I had witnessed their leader change three times, seen multiple players come and go and, yet, the team maintained their momentum. In response to my chat query, one player responded that this was a "premade." S/he gave me the Ventrilo information in case I wanted to join their VoiP (this event is discussed in more detail in Chapter Six). I was intrigued. Since Ashran randomly assigns people to groups, this begged the question how was a premade possible?

"Premades" is the shorthand term for groups that are put together before entering the PvP event. Thus, all members of the group enter the same event. In random battlegrounds, up to five players can group together in order to be placed within the same event. However, it is not possible to join Ashran as a group. R-D explains:

> Well one of my best PvP friends, he told me about this Ashran, it's a premade, and they all get on Vent[rilo] and they're absolutely ridiculous they don't lose ever. I have watched them go up against another premade and they made this premade disband. I dunno if you know how long it takes to get a 40 man Ashran premade when random people are queuing for it but it was like, the guys are amazing. You gotta know someone who knows someone for that bullshit. (Interview with R-D)

R-D above remarks that getting a premade Ashran together is tedious since there are multiple, simultaneous Ashran events. Players queue for Ashran, then enter and leave events until they join the same event as their group. Once enough premade players are in the same Ashran, they control the battleground. This is accomplished by VoIPs to coordinate group strategy. If a leader needs to

leave, another fills the void with little or none of the tension found in the usual Ashran encounter. Additionally, there is no real end to a premade since as some players leave, new players get into the VoIP channel and join the event. Unfortunately, I discovered this type of premade fairly late in my research and did not have time to delve into it further. I was also unable to successfully schedule an interview with R-D's friend, who leads a premade Ashran called The Avengers. Thus, with the exception of this particular discussion, any mention of Ashran should be understood as a random event and not as a premade.

From this discussion, it is evident that game mechanics are a large part of PvP play within *WoW*. Any discussion of social conflict within these contexts necessitates an understanding of such factors. These mechanics provide the basis of social conflict which will be discussed in some detail in the next chapter. Yet these mechanics are also nexuses of conflict in their own right. For example, social issues such as playing with friends rely on technological requirements or technology matters because of the attendant social concerns. What would a stable internet connection matter if players' did not have a PvP partner or team, or did not desire the prestige associated with a Gladiator title? Suddenly the catastrophic ISP battle is transformed into nothing more than a pesky annoyance.

<u>Putting Events Together: Twining Layers of Conflict</u>

Virtual world scholarship has created different methods to model the interactions of events, structures, and actions within game worlds like *WoW*. This is necessary since unlike books or films, games "set up *frameworks* with which players think" (Squire 2012:23, emphasis in original). Although Kurt Squire is here discussing the *Civilization* games, his point similarly applies to *WoW*: "a key component of *Civ* is that there is no "one" game. Players play *Civ multiple* times…with *multiple* rule sets," as *WoW* players do (23, emphasis in original). Squire (10-11) utilizes Nitsche's five planes of

gaming to discuss these components. These are: (1) game as encoded in the box; (2) game that unfolds on the screen; (3) game in the player's mind; (4) action occurring in real space; and (5) game in its social context. While these planes are potentially useful in this discussion and can help delineate and organize different types of conflict situations, they may be insufficient in this research. As I have discussed, there is nuance to social contexts, which can be combinations of different contexts or layered atop others; to lump them all into one category is too severe. Additionally, Nitsche's plane that exists within the player's mind is beyond the purview of this research, which would require a cognitive and/or psychological approach to understand how players conceptualize the game.

Some researchers have explored similar themes of how games provide the means for players to play the game of their choosing, where meaning is constructed and unique to each player (DeVane and Squire 2008, Shaw 2014). Like Gee notes, "games are not like books, movies, or television…they are not about their content. They are about doing, making decisions, solving problems, and interacting. Content is there to facilitate and serve" (2012: xvii). Although the game itself is the same, each player interprets it in private ways. Another issue with Nitsche's conceptualization is of action as occurring "in real space." Given my discussion of real and virtual in Chapter Two, this plane of action as "real" is too problematic to suit this discussion of *WoW* PvP. Additionally, the term "space" has similar problematic understandings when applied to conceptualizations of digital spaces (Aarseth 2008, Hine 2008, Markham 2009, Orgad 2009, Pearce 2009, Taylor 2006a). For example, recall discussions in Chapter Two about research boundaries, the irrelevance of geographical and international boundaries, and the magic circle. Additionally, Lori Kendall (2009), a library and information scientist, notes that there is no agreed upon term to

describe the space of the internet. A person can move around and navigate on the internet, but how do to conceptualize the space through which, or in which, the user moves? Whether or not it is useful to apply Nitsche's plane of "real space" to *WoW* or other online games is a discussion for another time. Yet, I anticipate these criticisms would still be applicable.

How then are the complex interconnections of artifacts and humans to be understood? Csilla Weninger (2006:61) models gameplay as an event that contains multiple sub-events. That is, they tie game locations, actors, and events through semiotic analysis into a matrix event. In her analysis of *Magic: The Gathering,* she separates these events as: (1) the actual game[35] i.e. in-game play; (2) the meta-game discussion of strategy; (3) teaching events; (4) a research event; and (5) a social event (2006:62). This non-hierarchical framework nicely parallels the various types of events discussed here. It provides conceptual space to incorporate non-event dependent types of issues such as class balance and access to uninterrupted internet. However, in her visual conceptualization of a matrix event, the sub-events are isolated from each other. There is nothing to show any interaction or inter-dependency among them, only vertical lines attaching each event to the matrix (2006:62). For example, if one sub-event such as a teaching event is removed, the matrix event would remain stable.

This presents difficulties for conceptualizing *WoW* PvP. As previously discussed, each nexus that harbors potential for conflict also harbors the potential to end or drastically change the game. For example, if class imbalance is removed from the game and all classes are perfectly balanced, then the game is very different. Without the RNG variations in damage or healing done, or if all players had exactly the same abilities, the game is far more predictable. If this occurs, questions would arise

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[35] To prevent confusion with the previously discussed actual/virtual, I will refer to this sub-event as game-play.

over whether or not it is still a game. Alternatively, it is useful to consider ISPs and computing software. Obviously if the internet goes down, the game is no longer playable. Yet, often players experience lag. If an ISP throttles internet speeds, or the computer is performing multiple actions in the background (such as downloading gnome porn), then the resulting lag changes multiple sub-events. This could mean that in-game action is choppy and unresponsive (game-play sub-event), forcing the player to adapt different playing strategies (meta-game sub-event), and altering the social experience (social sub-event). In resolving this conceptual conflict, previous considerations of activity theory may provide potential solutions. If activity theory were to be combined with a matrix event, what might the result look like? Would it be a useful explanatory model?

Suppose the matrix event is *WoW* PvP and these sub events are not isolated but integrated utilizing activity theory. This would produce a dynamic model that centered not on isolated, static events but on actors acting on artifacts, an interconnected and contextualized conceptualization. In this arrangement, each sub-event would need to consider the origins of the actors and artifacts in order to understand the actions. In the above example where H-M unable to rejoin the group, the artifact (the toon's class) determines the action. Specifically, a rogue or hunter could utilize a stealth mode to sneak past while a druid could assume bird form and fly over.[36] Unpacking the rationale why H-M chose a holy paladin questions both the artifact's origins and the actor's understandings of sub-events. This mutual reliance can connect to the larger matrix event by dynamic actions, linking game-play to meta-game or to social leisure. These are linked during one gaming session but are reassembled when H-M decides to play a rogue instead.

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[36] In Ashran, flying is prohibited. However, druids are able to collect class-specific books that temporarily permit flight. Flight form is often utilized to search for the AA or to reconnoiter enemy movements.

A key concern when visually conceptualizing this activity theory-matrix event model is hierarchy. Traditional models such as a meshwork or web are useful in certain respects but only feature two-dimensions. Some sub-events are more important than others. For example, no electricity precludes choosing which toon to play. Yet, they all combine to create *WoW* PvP. In order to reflect this nuanced and sometimes shifting hierarchy, a three-dimensional model becomes necessary. While conducting this research, analyzing the data, and recording my findings, I pondered how to best visually represent this model. I considered possibilities such as flow charts, Venn diagrams, and double helixes. Once I started thinking about layers of infrastructure, hardware, software, game software, user interfaces, player choices, support play, and finally active PvP play, I kept coming back to the layers of a quilt. Here, I present rudimentary formulations of what I tentatively call *sociotechnical quilting theory*.

The bottom layer of a quilt is called the backing[37] and is the infrastructure and artifacts necessary to maintain a steady virtual world presence. The quilt top is the social and biological experience of gaming and rests upon the middle insulating material. This is the batting and it varies in thickness from quilt to quilt, mirroring the ways various configurations of mechanisms, objectives, and understandings underpin player actions. Traditionally, the backing is one uniform piece of material, reflecting the relatively restricted choices of players when it comes to infrastructure and hardware artifacts. However, the quilt top is often a wild array of colors, patterns, and cloth pieced together. This adequately reflects the different types of experiences players encounter. Just as

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[37] Quilting terms taken from WikiHow: http://www.wikihow.com/Make-a-Quilt. Ironically, while I was browsing the site, I came across an advertisement for *World of Warcraft*.

quilts eventually get thin in places and lumpy in others, so to do the underlying mechanisms of class balance, game objectives, strategies, and social networks shift and redistribute over time. The boundary fabric, which is called the binding, is analyzed as the magic circle in that it delineates what is and is not part of *WoW* PvP. Weaving all the layers together and holding the binding in place are the threads of context and situation. Initially, the threads may seem random and haphazard, but by pulling back to a macro consideration the overall patterns become clear. For instance, when attempting to solve a lag issue, changing ISPs may ostensibly seem extreme. Yet when considered within the context of the pattern and with an understanding of the social, personal, and perhaps financial importance of a Gladiator title, this course of action seems both feasible and laudable. This action is situated within a nexus of contextualized conflict. It is undertaken with an understanding of the mechanisms and underpinnings of integrated sub-events that combine to produce optimal conditions for flow that can result in a Gladiator title.

At the risk of stretching this metaphor beyond plausibility, this opens up conceptual space for a consideration of anthropology within virtual world studies. If *WoW* PvP is best represented by a quilt, then perhaps anthropologists are the ones taking it apart and piecing it together upon a table called anthropology (suggestively supported by four legs, one for each sub-discipline). This incorporates space for conceptualizing the researcher's role with attendant orientations and biases and the discipline with methodologies and frameworks as integral to theoretical constructs. Additionally, anthropology's disciplinary familiarity with the interactions of humans, artifacts, and environments is well situated to study virtual worlds. While some scholars prefer to research games such as *WoW* through the lenses of text, media, or ludic studies, anthropological approaches completely situated within the virtual world are able to tap into broader sociocultural aspects in ways

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unique to the discipline. Contributions of archaeological fieldwork and the varied tensions exhibited among theoretical schools of cultural materialism, symbolism, historical particularism, post-structuralism, post-processualism, processual-plus, and the recent ontological turn illustrate that anthropology has the tools and theoretical concepts to situate both actors and artifacts within dynamic and shifting relationships. This also opens up potential lines of research via other sub-disciplines through the utilization of existing methods and relationships.

CHAPTER SIX:
FORGING TEAMS: POWER, AUTHORITY, AND LEADERSHIP

> Power is, first of all, not a uniform state of affairs and the differences among power orders are worth discussing, and not all social relations and practices are equally infused with power, or power of an equally coercive character (Heyman 2003:151).

Armed with a nuanced understanding of the ways players and artifact agencies interact within larger sociotechnical and infrastructure contexts, I now narrow the discussion to explicit ways power manifests as authority and leadership within *WoW* PvP events. Given the wide variety of conflicts impacting *WoW* PvP play, it is perhaps unsurprising that power is not only similarly nuanced but that it too is dependent upon multiple intersections of human and artifact agencies and interactions. As discussed in Chapter Two, considerations of the ways sex, gender, identity, and representation, as well as understandings of the real/virtual dichotomy, boundaries, and addiction have already been extensively explored in video game worlds, including *World of Warcraft*. Consequently, while setting these factors aside, I still note that they too have substantial impacts on the ways conflicts of agency and power play out within *WoW* PvP. I also recall from Chapter Two how considerations of guild structures, gaming communities, and affinity spaces impact relations of power within *WoW*. Such an approach allows me to focus on articulations of power where leaders rise, rule, and fall. Not only do I examine circumstances where leadership is spurred by supporters or resisted by agitators, but I also consider player actions and understandings that arise in these sociotechnical interactions.

In this section, I unpack some of the more nuanced ways players negotiate different and opposing assertions regarding the best way to achieve group objectives. These include increasing ranked standings, completing quests for rewards, or gathering resources that increase the likelihood of attaining primary objectives. I focus on situations arising from random battleground PvP, arenas,

and Ashran. I only briefly discuss RBGs since I have only performed a few forays and did not become part of a team. That said, their similarities to raiding teams[38] can illuminate some interactions that are useful for discussions of Ashran. Considering the circumstances of different PvP events is necessary as unique aspects shape social interactions and, consequently, impact whether teams need, want, or accept leaders. However, since game software automatically assigns a special leader role to players when groups of two or more are formed, the potential for leaders to take the next step into the social role of leader is built-in to gameplay.

In this section, I utilize archaeologist Edward Schortman's conceptualization of power as "the ability to define and achieve goals or to co-opt the efforts of others in meeting those aims," rising from structures underlying social interactions and from "strategies people deploy to exert control over their own and other's lives" (2014:168). As discussed previously, the underlying infrastructure and hardware and software artifacts create rigid and bounded structures that frame in-game social action. Before delving into leadership as both tactical strategies and processes of negotiation, I want to briefly highlight one *WoW*-specific component of this underlying structure: *lead*. This concept has acquired the in-game specific meaning of game-designated leader, which is a position randomly assigned by game software. In other words, lead is the sociotechnical mechanism of group management. Players can have lead, be lead, or pass lead to other players. Possessing lead enables players to rearrange groups, mark targets, place geographic markers, appoint assistants, assign player roles, utilize special raid warnings,[39] and sometimes remove players from the group.

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[38] A group of five players is a *party*, and a group of more than five is a *raid*. Raids are composed of multiple groups of five players. The term *raid* is used in PvE and PvP since it denotes the game's structured organization. *Raiding* is a PvE event where players enter and attempt to conquer fortresses held by NPCs. These fortresses are often called *raids*. Players who say "I'm raiding" are engaged in this PvE activity. Players who say "I'm PvPing" could be in a raid group.
[39] A raid warning is a mechanic that enables a typed chat message to be displayed both in the chat box and as an alert at the top center of every group member's screen.

Lead offers these same abilities in player-created groups. Upon entering random PvP events, such as skirmishes, random battlegrounds, or Ashran, lead abilities are restricted. Lead is unable to remove group players. In these cases, the only way to remove players is for other players to report him/her through an in-game process. If enough players report him/her, the game will remove him/her from the PvP event. Yet, players can leave their group at any time. While leaving may have technical consequences such as receiving a deserter buff which prevents that toon from queueing up for another event for ten minutes, some players choose this option.

While these circumstances create fairly straightforward situations of conflict resolution in player-created groups (simply remove the offending player), when it comes to random and ranked PvP play, such solutions are rarely so simple. In the next sub-sections, I discuss the difficulties surrounding situations of creating, organizing, and maintaining successful PvP groups. For this discussion, success is achieved when groups win an encounters. This applies across all forms of PvP and also indicates success in other areas such as acquiring resources and secondary objectives. At the end of this chapter, I argue the contextualized nature of power in these cases points to a PvP subjectivity that is bounded by *WoW*'s magic circle yet still references broader gaming imaginaries.

Leaders? Who Needs Them?

I often found during my research that random battlegrounds lacked designated leaders despite one player's possession of lead. This situation may reflect the fact that *Warlords of Draenor* does not provide any new battleground or arena settings. Overall, *WoW* has limited types of PvP games. Most battlegrounds conform to three general types: (1) capture-the-flag, (2) capture and defend a location, or (3) maintain control of mobile resources such as orbs of power or mine carts. Once these general types are known, players can detect and learn the nuances specific to each

battleground. Differences in arenas are restricted to the layout of the gladiatorial arena which presents opportunities for strategic variation. These factors, combined with small group sizes and the short duration of most events which are often 15 minutes or less, deemphasize a leader's role and foster group communication. Consequently, any attempt to lead random battleground groups is often ignored. The following from an Arathi Basin event (the first team to gather 1600 resources wins), demonstrates how a leader is ignored:

12/17 12:25:56 [Instance Leader] E-M: well, gg[40] boys and girls
12/17 12:26:03 [Instance Leader] E-M: we're not winning with this playstyle
12/17 12:26:06 [Instance] X-F: mines only got like 2
12/17 12:26:18 [Instance] S-N: go go go guys cap base
12/17 12:26:55 [Instance Leader] E-M: no team fights
12/17 12:26:59 [Instance Leader] E-M: no base stealing
12/17 12:27:05 [Instance Leader] E-M: nobody is watching own flags
12/17 12:27:09 [Instance Leader] E-M: this game is done

E-M is frustrated with the group and begins to berate them for failure to obtain and defend the flags located at resources. All the other players in the group ignore his/her rant since the game is close and they do not have time or inclination to discuss it. X-F and S-N instead focus on providing useful information. X-F tells points out that mines only has two defenders and is, therefore, vulnerable to attack. S-N urges fellow team mates at his location to "cap" the base which is accomplished by removing the enemy flag and raising the theirs. This latter action grants the faction control of the location and permits resource gathering, which is done automatically based on a timer. Capping the flag takes several seconds and interruptions require the player to start over. Such situations invite strategic maneuvers since players can cap flags through stealthy means by drawing enemy players away from the flag or using brute force to decimate enemy forces before

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[40] This is an abbreviation for good game, verbally pronounced gee-gee. It is commonly used both literally and sarcastically. In this excerpt, it is likely being used sarcastically, since the group is losing.

reinforcements arrive. Since Arathi Basin has five flags and 15 players from each faction, it is important to know which location to attack, where reinforcements are needed, and what locations to abandon. These concerns, alongside individual player interactions such as defending healers or cc'ing targets, creates dynamic and fluid situations that require constant monitoring and information exchange. Continuing the above excerpt, multiple team mates exchange vital information:

12/17 12:27:21 [Instance] R-N: mines
12/17 12:28:36 [Instance] O-K: incoming lumber mill
12/17 12:28:36 [Instance] X-F: LM
12/17 12:28:40 [Instance] O-K: need help 3 or 4
12/17 12:28:46 [Instance] O-K: only 2 here
12/17 12:28:46 [Instance Leader] E-M: LM LM LM
12/17 12:28:53 [Instance Leader] E-M: spin flag
12/17 12:28:54 [Instance Leader] E-M: don't let them cap
12/17 12:30:22 [Instance] X-F: stop pushing farm
12/17 12:30:31 [Instance] O-K: hold these 3
12/17 12:30:34 [Instance] O-K: get off roads and defend
12/17 12:31:08 [Instance] A-M: Big incoming BS
12/17 12:31:10 [Instance] B-P: INC[41] BS

As string of dialogue demonstrates, the leader and six other players engaged in this information exchange, which address what strategic choices would result in greater tactical benefit. I found it humorous that once our group closed the resource gap, giving us a realistic possibility of wining the event, E-M suddenly started working with the group towards this goal. Especially interesting when E-M tells teammates to prevent the enemy from capping and to "spin"[42] the flag, things that seasoned *WoW* players would know.[43] On occasions such as this, lead is superfluous when players already possess tactical and strategic knowledge necessary to win.

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[41] Inc is a shortened form of incoming, which announces an incipient attack on a location by enemy players.
[42] The term *spin* is colloquial for a Warrior's ability, called Whirlwind, where the warrior spins in place with weapons out, harming any player or NPC in range. This and other AoE abilities would interrupt players' attempting to cap the flag, causing them to start over.
[43] In this event, we were able to close a resource gap that made some players, such as E-M and myself, think we would lose the event. I wonder if E-M's remarks spurred the team's determination to win, as it did for me.

Some events only involve brief bits of chatter during the preparation phase. Other times players assume leadership without having lead, such as this Eye of the Storm excerpt:

9/20 15:47:59 [Instance] T-B: DR, MT, hold mid if possible
9/20 15:48:08 [Instance Leader] S-V: ^
9/20 15:48:09 D-K says: healer to mid
9/20 15:48:14 [Instance] D-K: healer to mid please
9/20 15:48:17 [Instance] Xochiquetzal-Anvilmar: yup

T-B is issuing orders although despite not having lead, something common in battlegrounds. Like E-M above, his directions are fairly standard procedure since the strategic Mage Tower (MT) and Draenai Ruins (DR) are both located on the side of the map where the Alliance spawns. The same is true of her/his call for a healer to go to the middle which is the central location of the map and starting point of the flag and, as a result, the location of intense combat. My unenthusiastic "yup" indicates that this is not my first time in the battleground. I am already aware of the need for heals in the center. Subsequently, no other words are exchanged until after the battle is won. It is at this point that T-B says "good job all" and "very good." Although T-B is assuming the air of authority, spares communication throughout the event indicates little need for him/her to do so.

Other times, explicit and obvious instructions are not ignored, with sometimes humorous or offensive results, as in this excerpt from a different Arathi Basin event:

9/20 17:01:00 [Instance] A-B: call incs
9/20 17:01:11 [Instance] N-B: inc mine
9/20 17:01:12 [Instance] C-S: inc farm
9/20 17:01:18 [Instance] C-S: we don't own mine
9/20 17:01:26 [Instance] D-S: inc my finger in your ass
9/20 17:01:35 [Instance] C-S: now that's just kinky
9/20 17:01:39 [Instance] D-S: inc wiggle wiggle wiggle

D-S's humorous remark is a commentary on A-B's instruction to "call incs" which is such a basic

instruction that it hardly needs to mentioned. The fact that A-B says it at all reveals that although it

is a basic tactic in PvP play, there are times when it is not done. On some occasions, all players

assume someone else has responded to the call when no one actually does. This happened in this

Battle for Gilnaeus documented below.

9/13 20:29:24 [Instance] K-A: LH inc x2
9/13 20:29:30 [Instance] K-A: x3
9/13 20:29:54 [Instance] N-G: WW
9/13 20:29:55 [Instance] N-G: WW
9/13 20:30:28 [Instance] K-A: LH inc
9/13 20:30:31 [Instance] N-B: LH
9/13 20:30:31 [Instance] K-A: x5
9/13 20:30:59 [Instance] N-B: wow
9/13 20:31:04 [Instance] N-B: fucking joke
9/13 20:31:05 [Instance] N-B: no one came
9/13 20:31:21 [Instance] S-S: yea we have terrible floaters

K-A and N-B call for assistance at lighthouse (LH) while N-G calls for help at waterworks (WW).

K-A counts the number of incoming enemy targets. At "x5," five Horde players are attacking the

lighthouse. We lose control of the lighthouse when the Horde cap the flag, leading S-S to the

conclusion that "we have terrible floaters." Some players stay to defend a controlled location as K-A

and N-G do. These are the players who usually call out incs. Others "float" around the map to

reinforce occupied positions when necessary or attacking enemy locations and harassing floating

enemy players. While calling out incs is critical so that floaters can respond appropriately, in this

instance floaters chose to attack the enemy-held mines rather than reinforce the lighthouse.

Although this tactic sometimes succeeds in drawing enemy attackers away from their target

and forcing them to fall back to defend another location, this was not the case here. The last lines,

where N-B berates the team for their lack of response, and S-S says "we have terrible floaters," can

be interpreted as a passive-aggressive remark intended to spur the group to improve. Crucially, N-B does not reprove specific individuals or roles for not responding, instead using a more general "no-one came." Similarly, S-S uses "we" and neglects naming anyone specific. Whether intended or not, this effectively helps maintain group solidarity. Moreover, it also indicates that N-B and S-S are not surveilling other teammates. Eventually, we regained control of the lighthouse. This achievement combined with response time improvements helped us to win the encounter.

The aforementioned examples collectively illustrate players' ability to win events is rooted in both the cumulative execution of individual knowledge/skill and expectations that team members know, understand, and play their roles with an eye towards overall strategy. Although there is some attempt to use lead or to take a leadership position, in none of these cases was this taken seriously Accordingly, this could be seen as a failed attempt to acquire authority. The emphasis on group solidarity is illustrated when players announce critical information. This underscores both the dispersed nature of power in these situations and lack of awareness of or surveillance on teammates.

Two of Eric Wolf's 1990 conceptualizations of power are evidenced by this. First, power is inherent to individuals as "potency or capability" to achieve their goals (586). In the context of *WoW* PvP, this would include players' technical skills and knowledge such as knowing which tactics to implement and how to effectively harness their toon's abilities. The second type of power identified by Wolf is "the ability of *ego* to impose its will on *alter*, in social action" (586, emphasis in original). This can be understood in *WoW* in several ways. A players' toon acting upon another player's toon is a literal (digital) interpretation of this like when I instruct Xochiquetzal[44] to cast a spell that prevents an enemy from moving. This can also be interpreted as directing the group about what action to

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[44] For a fascinating discussion surrounding player/toon embodiment, see Pearce 2009.

take such as cases of typing "inc" that are a subtle pressure on the group to respond to the player's possible need for reinforcement. This is also illustrated in when E-M orders teammates to "spin flag" and "don't let them cap," as well as T-K's "DR, MT, hold mid if possible." These types of power generate conflictive friction, which is dispersed through mechanisms to maintain solidarity such as ignoring players, dispersing blame, or in my sarcastic retort that resists overt attempts by T-K and D-K to control behavior.

My sarcasm also polices the boundaries of what I determine is acceptable power over my actions as exercised by other players. It is possible to read D-S's "inc my finger in your ass" in a similar way. This conceptualization of power as dispersed throughout a group alongside teammates patrolling boundaries and surveilling other member's actions calls to mind Michel Foucalt's disciplinary society (1977[1975]). In this schema sarcastic and humorous retorts discipline players who overstep accepted boundaries of individual/group power. E-M's initial remark "no team fights/no base stealing/nobody is watching own flags/this game is done" strongly implies a Foucauldian gaze that monitors behaviors and disciplines players into proper actions. This is also seen where X-F's "stop pushing farm" and O-K's "hold these 3/get off roads and defend" is based on a surveillance of teammates by teammates rather than by a central leader.

When considered together, the ability to organize and control groups does not lie in a specific leader despite the fact that *WoW* provides this option. Reasons for this may be the event's short duration, the unlikelihood of interacting with these team members again, or perhaps ease of accessibility of events. Random battlegrounds are easy to join. If players do not like the group or if the event is lost, they can simply quit and re-queue for another event. Far more important is clear and effective communication so that teammates with the necessary knowledge and skills can adjust

their tactics accordingly. While similar situations and circumstances arise in skirmishes, RBGs and arenas are an entirely different matter.

Forging a Successful Team

In arenas and RBGs, pressure to consistently perform at high skill levels and continuously improve to achieve a higher CR alters above dynamics. In both arenas and RBGs, leaders are the ones who put teams together. As discussed in previous chapters, finding the right combination of players who possess toons of the necessary class and spec, who are skilled with those toons, and who are at an appropriate CR and MMR can be frustrating and time-consuming. Yet once teams are created, the dynamic in an arena team shifts, mirroring the group play discussed in rated battlegrounds above. On arena teams, group coordination and communication is essential. The necessity of maintaining a stable team lends itself towards a more equitable distribution of power. However, when considering arenas on a scale above discrete teams, there are clearly leaders.

Mimicking Successful Strategies: Top Comps

Leaders typically establish and set up teams and once the team solidifies into a competent unit power is dispersed more or less equally among the players assuming similar skill and rank. The group must work together to accomplish their goals which is accomplished by looking to arena leaders for inspiration. When I discussed this with O-A during his interview, I not only asked him who came up with the different class combinations for successful comps, but also who got to name them. I was curious if there was a list I could look up online:

> Well I mean it's not something…it's just like, you know the rank 1s, they come up
> with these names, they are our leaders so to speak. They have the right to make up
> whatever name that they want for the comp they run to the best rating in the game,

to be rank 1s. I mean if I was rank 1 I would definitely name mine like O-A's 5 like the O-cleave, cascade cleave. I could come up with some names but I'm not allowed, I'm not one of those people. Who's going to listen to me? That's the reason most kids make up these names, because they run it so well together and they make it work and then they stream it. Everybody else sees their tactics, and everybody else starts playing it, it's just how it goes. (Interview with O-A)

O-A explains that comp names such as ebola and frozen chicken originate from rank 1 arena teams whose players possess Gladiator status. As top ranked teams, these players set the standards, so to speak, for the tactics and strategies to use in arena play. Aspiring PvPers search the *WoW* armory website (http://us.battle.net/wow/en/community/) to find top ranked players of their class and spec in order to mimic choices of gear, talents, and glyphs. Watching ranked players' live streaming of arena combat affords opportunities for observing their tactics and listening to their communications. By emulating top ranked players' strategies, an aspiring PvPer hopes to mimic their success. O-A goes on to explain that he is *not allowed* to create comp names since he is not a top-ranked player. Even if he did come up with a new comp and name, "who's going to listen to me?" By intentionally providing methods for other players to surveil their gameplay, top ranked players create a context where prestige is directly linked to skill, knowledge, and performance. They can then translate such prestige into sponsorships, marketable goods, tournaments, or website revenue.

In this way, prestigious players are the leaders in the arena community. Their position grants them the power to create and name comps that further increase their prestige. Each time game software is updated and class mechanics change, these community leaders experiment with new class combinations to determine which is most successful. Yet this is also a fluid situation since class changes are made intermittently throughout the expansion and multiple PvP seasons periodically reset all rankings to zero. This not only produces a dynamic process of discovering, practicing, and emulating new comps, but also creates the opportunity for other players to acquire these prestigious

positions. This calls to mind Bourdieu's (1977[1972]) practice theory, *habitus,* and *doxa*, whereby the recursive actions of agents create feedback loops of change with the institutional structures that surround them. In this example, the underlying structures are the game software and interface which frame player understandings and responses (Ortner 2005:33).

For instance, Bourdieu's conceptualizations of doxa illuminate O-A's assertion that he is not allowed to create new comps. Ortner (2001:271) defines doxa as "forms of cultural knowledge that are so deeply taken for granted that alternatives are unimaginable." For achieving higher ranks in PvP play, the understanding that the only comps that matter are those that have succeeded at highly ranked play. So it naturally follows that lower-ranked and aspiring PvPers would emulate these specific comps rather than spend the time and energy to develop and explore alternatives. Additionally, with *WoW* PvP in its 18th season,[45] there is a history of game developers altering gameplay in a recursive response to issues unearthed by players as the discussion of class balance in Chapter Five illustrates. This revision highlights the recursive relationship between PvPers' and game developers' agencies in their alterations of the software structures that shape player comp choices, showing "how people's actions reproduce or change a world that is never free of, and often centrally organized around, inequalities and power differentials" (Ortner 2001: 272). These dynamics are also present in the RBG community, where highly ranked players assemble and maintain specific combinations of classes and roles that can be mimicked by other players. However, since RBGs have ten players, competent leadership and target calling is a necessity that introduces additional complexity to considerations of agency and conflict.

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[45] According to http://wow.gamepedia.com/PvP_season.

RBG events utilize the same geographic maps and objectives as random battleground events. This produces a wider range of class and spec requirements. The geographic area of the encounter is larger than the small gladiator arenas. Therefore, they require ways to organize various smaller teams so that secondary objectives are met. It falls to raid leaders to determine which roles are necessary and which classes and specs best fit such requirements. With nine other player positions available, the raid leader must determine how many of these should be reserved for which type of role. As I had only brief forays into RBG play and did not actively seek out or join any RBG teams, I simply point out that RBGs operate in similar ways to Ashran, which I will discuss in detail below. A key difference from Ashran is that players who join an RBG group know and expect to have a leader giving explicit instructions. All players are seriously focused on and dedicated to the same objective: winning the event. Also, Chapter Five's excerpts from an interview with RBG leader R-A illustrate the ways concepts in this chapter can be comprehended in RBG play. Since finding skilled players of specific classes is such an integral part of the PvP experience, I turn attention to how these players are initiated into *WoW* PvP.

<u>Leading as Teaching</u>

In the course of this research, players often brought up the difficulty of finding skilled partners for competitive play. One solution that was consistent across types of PvP events was the option to teach friends how to PvP. In such situations, friends may already have proficiency playing a level 100 toon. The first steps in learning how to PvP include becoming familiar with PvP events, which can be done by going to affinity sites to see event maps, understand event objectives, and read forum posts that include other players' experiences and advice. Additional affinity spaces such as Arena Junkies (discussed in Chapter 5) help players customize their toon for optimal PvP

performance and understand basic situational tactics. Players can also queue for random battlegrounds and learn by observation and experience. This process is expedited if players' have friends who agree to help them, either by joining their party and doing random battlegrounds together or by looking out for them in world PvP situations as H-B does:

> It seems like here lately I've been more of a guardian, because I had a bunch of friends that were doing recruit-a-friend, and they're getting super camped in Hellfire so I just kinda fly out there a lot. (Interview with H-B)

H-B's brief remark encompasses three aspects of PvP with friends. First, the recruit-a-friend program gives benefits to players who bring actual world friends into *WoW* which helps to create the social networks that are valuable while leveling and invaluable for both PvP and PvE end-game play. Second, H-B's friends are "getting super camped" in Hellfire Peninsula, the zone where death knights join the main game world. The term *camp* indicates players who harasses other players by killing their toon, waiting for players to return their spirit to their body and resurrect, and then killing him/her again. Camping is repeating these actions repeatedly. Some campers even build fires and put up tents next to the corpse while they wait for players to re-spawn. Some players group together, camping a particular toon for hours or days at a time.

There are only three ways out of this. First, resurrecting at a Spirit Healer, carries a hefty downside: Resurrection Sickness, which is a 10-minute debuff that reduces all of a toon's stats and damage output by 75%. Second is logging off and doing something else for a while, hoping that the camper loses interest and goes away. A third option is requesting help from a friend, preferably one who has a powerful toon and is skilled in PvP such as H-B. Calling on players' social networks for assistance is often utilized at various points of gameplay, and asking a friend questions about PvP mechanics, strategies, or affinity sites is a critical part of player learning.

For arenas especially, individual instruction is crucial since play differs from solo or group

questing which are typically leisurely events; from PvE group play and raiding; and from PvP

battleground events.[46] End-game PvE such as raiding can be similar in pressure and performance

expectations to PvP. However, in raids group size is between 10 and 30 players, so performance

expectations are more dispersed throughout the group. Both casual and progressive[47] end-game play

target NPCs who are programmed to act in specific ways, modified with RNG to randomize

encounters. This results in the ability to perfect the movements, spell rotations, comps, and

strategies necessary to successfully achieve the objective.

Yet where PvE imposes structure, PvP prevents it. While opposing players have a limited set

of abilities and options, the range of their potential for action is far broader than PvE NPCs. This

requires not only a different mindset but also the ability to shift strategies immediately and reactively.

Non-ranked PvP such as Isle of Conquest, Alterac Valley, and Ashran combine aspects of reactive

PvP with redundant PvE expectations. This results in players who are skilled and have the potential

to translate game knowledge into different venues and events such as I did when I stopped raiding

to explicitly focus on PvP.

Moving from PvP to PvE is also viable, though not without its own difficulties. For

instance, imagine a raid encounter has an NPC that periodically emits a melee-range AoE. When this

happens, melee players are required to move out of range of the damage. While the immediate

reason for this is to prevent toon death, another reason is to conserve healer mana which is a critical

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[46] It is not my intention to imply that players prefer one type of play over the other, or engage in only one type of play. Often players engage in all types of play, though they may prefer to emphasize or focus on one.
[47] The term progressive denotes competitive groups and guilds in PvE who seek to conquer new content before other players. PvE guilds are ranked according to the chronological instances of the first success.

resource that needs to be strategically reserved for key points in the fight. Some dps have abilities that mitigate some of this damage. The conflict here occurs when the PvP player, accustomed to individualized pressure to excel, choses to stand in the AoE and use a mitigating ability in order to maintain damage on the NPC. In and of itself, this may not pose a problem. However, when ten players do this, healers must expend mana inefficiently in order to compensate for unmitigated damage. Additionally, this is usually a violation of explicit raid leader commands. Committed raid teams have a clear hierarchy of leadership and strict expectations that, if not met, are disciplined. The PvP mentality of group communication is in direct conflict with PvE expectations, where raiders utilize add-ons to surveil combat events and the status of teammates in order to keep VoIP channels clear of inessential chatter. This is critical for group success, since each member needs to react quickly to raid leaders' commands. PvE emphasis on group success, while not entirely foreign in PvP, is altered enough that some adjustment is necessary when moving from PvP to PvE.

Accordingly, when players begin to PvP, some skills and knowledge from other aspects of *WoW* or other MMORPGs can prove useful. However, there is also a need to learn PvP specific information and strategies and adjust understandings of individual and team performance expectations. As discussed, some basic information is gleaned from affinity spaces while friends can provide nuanced and situational understandings and assistance. Yet achieving PvP rank requires tactical understanding and cutting-edge knowledge of comps to create and maintain viable teams and to counter opponents (recall Chapter Five's discussion of comps). Players must also have the ability to successfully alter strategies on the fly, which can only be acquired through experience. Consequently, new PvPers often rely on the advice and guidance of more experienced players.

One important reason that experienced PvP players are willing to mentor new players relates to PvPers' experiences discussed in Chapter Five, where finding partners that work well together in order to climb the up and down chain is critical. In this way, new players benefit from PvPers' assistance. Experienced PvP players' benefits include future potential partners and friends to help increase ranked standing. Additionally, PvPing with newer players enables PvPers to increase the rank on alts, permitting these alts access to the next higher link in the chain without risking the ratings of higher ranked toons. For example, when I began to PvP on Xochiquetzal, O-A and R-D would both join me in arenas on alts, simultaneously teaching me how to arena and accumulating resources and rank. Once we reached an MMR window of 1450-1500, which is approximately my current skill level,[48] they would switch to a different toon. Since I was more concerned with practice than ranking, sometimes they would bring in toons that were inadequately geared to quickly accumulate conquest points, even though this increased the number of games we lost. During a period of intense arena play over about three-weeks, my 2s ranking vacillated around 1,200 to 1,400 CR. O-A got five toons to approximately 1,400 CR and fully geared two while R-D geared and ranked three (we were not exclusive partners during this time).

When it comes to RBGs, the trend for more experienced PvPers to take the lead and instruct less knowledgeable players continues. In Chapter Five, R-A mentions that he sometimes tries to teach players to RBG when playing low-stakes games (page 29). In this excerpt, R-A further explains the need to recruit and instruct new players:

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[48] My current CR in 2s is 1290. I initially intended to push for a ranked title (Challenger, top 35% rank) for this research, but time constraints, my learning curve, and my lack of sufficient determination were limiting factors.

> Yeah, it seems like all the good players are, they're just like horded and then it takes a lot to make somebody an actually good player because you have to sit down, show them how to macro, teach them their rotations, teach them dos and don'ts, strategies… For example, I had to teach a hunter how to play when hunters were good at base sitting. I had to teach him tips and tricks about how to sit at the thing without getting sapped by a rogue and having him cap it, and how to call out "hey, I'm sapped" and you can – there's a certain distance between the flag and whatnot, how to use your flares and your traps properly in order to hold that base. (Interview with R-A)

R-A states that "good" players are "horded," referencing the up-and-down chain. These skilled players are part of competitive teams. Such commitments prevent skilled players from using the committed toon as it risks damaging ranking, while time constraints often prevent them from using alts to participate in other events or be a reliable member in other teams. As a result, new players are recruited from PvE, other video games, or actual world friends. Regardless of their origins, all of these newcomers must learn how to PvP. Their ability to learn will influence whether or not they become a member of a rank-driven team. However, there is also risk involved:

> **Researcher:** Once you put all this time and energy into teaching this person to play a hunter, what are the odds that they'll stick around?
>
> **R-A:** I mean like everything, life happens and I understand that. So this guy, he just got a new job, he's not able to play on our schedule. So you just got to find somebody else and teach them, and hopefully they'll stick around.
>
> **Researcher:** And you never know, maybe a year or two down the road he'll come back…
>
> **R-A:** Yeah and he'll remember it, and you'll just be like, "so the hunter class has changed a little bit, and this is what you should be doing" and whatnot.

R-A spent time helping this hunter learn to base sit and other tips and tricks involved with playing a hunter in PvP. While, as R-A says, "life happens," it can be frustrating for players attempting to climb the chain since the timeframe is limited by the season. Yet it is unlikely this hunter will stop playing altogether. If he does, there is the possibility he will return to the game soon. As time passes and circumstances change, it is possible R-A's efforts will eventually cause the hunter to become a

PvP partner in a later season. Yet, as R-A points out, the hunter will have to become acquainted with changes made during the interval such as changes to the hunter class.

Learning in Non-Competitive PvP Play

Teaching newcomers to PvP is not always about increasing rank or pool of potential partners. PvPing for fun and socializing is a component that relates to but does not require ranked play's seriousness. In this excerpt, H-B, who is not currently playing for rank but intends to push later in the season, enjoys doing arenas casually with his friend L-L. In this instance, casual play lays the foundation for future competitive team play:

> For example, if you're doing 3s, like overlapping ccs, calling out whenever you're cc'd, depending on who you're playing with you learn how they react to certain situations. Sometimes you get stuck in an arena when someone will run clockwise around a pillar and they're in trouble, and then you end up at like 12 and 6 o'clock and you're on opposite sides and you're just running circles, and you're like "if you keep going that way I can't help you." Like that…it's just learning if it's something that you do. Like in arena with, for example L-L, if you play with him, you start to learn little things that they tend to do. (Interview with H-B).

H-B discusses learning through experience and observation. In this case, learning how L-L reacts to situations in PvP, while casually acquired, may eventually be useful when H-B starts to climb the chain towards a Gladiator title. H-B also discusses the need to learn to communicate, something with which new players often struggle. I personally encountered this difficulty. I consider that perhaps my previous PvE experience as a progression raider is an underlying cause.[49] Recall that PvE raiding trains players to keep the VoIP channel clear, since having 20 raiders verbally announcing difficulties or requesting assistance would drown out the raid leader's directions. In PvP situations where I am cc'd or in need of assistance, my first instinct is to get myself out of trouble

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[49] I would like to acknowledge other factors, including my gender as a female in a male-dominated play space (see Taylor 2006a. Also see Kendall (2009) for a consideration of researcher gender and sexuality in qualitative online research).

without help rather than alerting teammates my difficulty. I suspect this may also suggest a desire to not be seen as incompetent, especially when playing with higher ranked and skilled male players. Adjusting to calling things out and not running away from the team, as in H-B's running around the pillar example, has been surprisingly difficult. O-A has patiently given me tips and suggestions. When I make a mistake, he says things such as "so, we fucked up a lot there, kids" (field notes, 09.05.15). By making it about the team, O-A chooses to positively focus on ways to improve, turning failures into learning experiences and preserving my self-confidence.

After playing several dozen arena games, I now have a better grasp of PvPing in arenas. For example, instead of attempting to get away from heavy damage on my own, I usually call for assistance over VoIP and run toward my teammates, the exact opposite of what I would do in raiding.[50] My long experience as a PvE raider is something that hinders my success. Although my emphasis here is on difficulties that require altered thinking, new knowledge, and training, some aspects of PvE raiding are also helpful. On Xochiquetzal I am accustomed to maintaining high amounts of healing and anticipating incoming damage while under pressure, things I learned as a raider that are also critical in PvP. This highlights that some skills and knowledge in *WoW* are event dependent, while others are broadly useful (i.e. knowledge of strategy versus game mechanics). These skills can be translated from PvE into arenas, battlegrounds and RBGs. Perhaps most clearly, they can be applied in Ashran which combines the raiding format with a PvP event and experience.

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[50] In PvE raiding, players taking damage are often told to run out of the group, so that the damage does not spread. Also, some raiding add-ons announce which player is taking damage, and healers continuously monitor health levels. This eliminates the need for players to call for help (with some exceptions), and fosters a run-away-from-trouble mindset that, as discussed above, is problematic in PvP.

Learning How to Ashran

When it comes to Ashran, learning takes a more impersonal guise. Similar to battlegrounds, learning how to Ashran can begin by simply following the bulk of the group to objectives and helping to kill enemy players and defend teammates. Additionally, leaders and some other players often provide explicit directions that, combined with an awareness of team movements, is usually sufficient to orient new players and help them be a contributing member of the group:

8/22 20:41:04 [Raid Warning] D-L: ALL MEET FLAG 2
8/22 20:41:57 [Instance Leader] D-L: hold ground at xr
8/22 20:42:10 [Instance Leader] D-L: push to flag
8/22 20:42:29 [Instance] M-B: TARGET HEALERS
8/22 20:42:54 [Instance Leader] D-L: PUSH TO FLAG
8/22 20:43:45 [Instance] A-Z: AA?
8/22 20:45:08 [Instance Leader] D-L: druids with flight and rogues should look for AA

Although knowing the jargon and objectives is helpful, in this instance the entire group is cohesively organized and focused on attaining control of the flag at the crossroads, a strategic victory that removes opponent NPCs from the area and gains control of the geographic center of the Ashran zone. Additional information, such as D-L telling two classes to search for the important Ancient Artifact, and M-B telling dps to target healers, helps organize the group and keep moving towards objectives. It also simultaneously provides information that new players can use to piece together Ashran operations. Some leaders take an active interest in helping newcomers to PvP:

12/17 12:53:05 [Raid Warning] D-S: DONT LET THEM PUSH US OUT! IF YOUR HUNTER MAX CD. MAGES DROP OUR BARRAGES AND ICE SPHERES IF THEY ARE UP
12/17 12:53:14 [Instance] D-K: WE LOST ABG
12/17 12:53:28 [Instance] L-A: going RoC
12/17 12:53:34 [Instance] H-E: wow they r so buffed
12/17 12:54:10 [Raid Warning] D-S: for all the newbies in this Ashran. When I say Max CD I want you guys to use all your buffs, I want you to use your highest cooldowns (stampede, etc.) and I want it now
12/17 12:54:39 [Instance] Xochiquetzal-Anvilmar: is anyone here a newbie?

12/17 12:54:47 [Instance Leader] D-S: most are but won't admit
12/17 12:54:53 [Instance Leader] D-S: well not most but at least 10
12/17 12:54:55 [Instance] R-E: I think we all are
12/17 12:55:07 [Instance Leader] D-S: I've gotten lots of replies to asking earlier
12/17 12:55:13 [Raid Warning] D-S: don't go ABG it is lost

In this excerpt, the group is fighting for control of Ashmaul Burial Grounds (ABG). The leader D-S uses a raid warning- which is text that flashes across the center of every group member's screen- to command players to stand their ground and use offensive AoE abilities (Barrages and Ice Spheres). At time stamp 12:54:10, D-S provides explicit instructions and explains what those instructions are, what they include, and when to use them. D-S even gives class-explicit directions, which is somewhat uncommon. I just joined this Ashran event at 12:50, and I somewhat jokingly asked if anyone was a new player. I thought it curious that D-S would say "newbies" in the raid warning. I was pleasantly surprised when D-S spared attention to address my query, reinforcing the observation that s/he attends to the needs of players unfamiliar with Ashran. R-E's "I think we all are" is puzzling as it could be a literal conjecture or it could be a sarcastic comment about the group's difficulties with achieving objectives since they lost ABG as I was entering the zone.[51] Although D-S seems to be a leader attentive to new players, the overall indicators of an unsuccessful group hint that his/her leadership was soon to be actively contested as evidenced by R-E's apparent disgruntlement, D-K's use of capitalization and by L-A announcing that s/he is "going RoC" and the attendant implied invitation for the group to follow.

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[51] I lean towards the sarcastic interpretation, since in the 7 minutes I was in this group 11 players left and 9 players joined the event. This high turnover is typical of an unsuccessful group.

The Role of Humans in Gaming Systems

The role of leaders as teachers, and the use of affinity spaces to explain game mechanics, areas, and objectives suggests gaps in game design where players must find their own ways of producing solutions to their needs. This is especially true in connection to teaching, as Ekbia and Nardi (2012:165) argue that *WoW* is expectantly organized and that "experienced players act as both enablers and gatekeepers of the overall system," since *WoW* delegates "the work of teaching… to the leaf nodes…the end users…Through human mediation, gaps are closed, completing the network, yielding the capacity to play." In a nuanced discussion of how players are de-materialized, they suggest "the embodied person as a material object is subject to manipulations by expectant technological systems awaiting completion through human cognition" (172). This process of incorporating players into technological gaming systems is an interesting inverse of subject-object relationships where the human is the subject, and hints at larger issues of integration and blurring of boundaries between virtual and actual worlds and between human and artifact. In comparison, Steinkuehler and Oh (2012:176) argue "because online game spaces…are interest-driven and voluntary, roles such as "teacher" and "learner" are situated and temporary, to be negotiated, enacted, and displayed rather than designated institutionally." In their view, it is better to leave the teaching to fellow game players who are able to dynamically adjust to the learner's needs.

Yet this process produces more than an interesting theoretical discussion. It also generates robust social interactions. Discussing players as producers, Taylor (2006a:60) notices that providing class-specific abilities to other classes as a paid service not only creates feelings of a populated world and active economy but also extends player networks through the social interactions to acquire these services. However, in her *EverQuest* research, she found that game changes designed to make the

game more fun by giving all players access to these abilities, things that "many players claim…were not any meaningful part of the game," or as "nuisances or difficulties" are in fact "exactly the mechanisms that propel the creation of emergent cultures and social networks" (Taylor 2006a:64). By creating games that have tedious repetition or lack teaching modes or environs, developers produce the circumstances and creative space for players to generate their own methods and systems to compensate, building a game community and player relationships.

This discussion also strongly suggests analysis using Bourdieu's (1984) idea of social capital as reproducing class inequalities. This not only relates to inequalities between casual and ranked PvPers but also among ranked PvPers at different points of the up-and-down-chain. Since higher ranked players have greater prestige and standing in the PvP community lower-ranked players strive to attain similar status. Of special note are the social aspects of class reproduction, where more skilled and experienced PvPers reproduce their class by exercising substantial technical knowledge and social capital vis-à-vis the newcomer. The necessity of reproduction becomes inescapable due to mechanisms that constantly erode the pool of players available for high-ranked gameplay such as real life in R-A's example above. The example taken from Ashran, where D-S uses the term "newbs," is interpretable as derogatory and effectively reinforces boundaries between seasoned players and their less experienced counter-parts.

A provocative notion is the additional application of the Foucauldian gaze in these circumstances, especially in regards to examinations of player performance by their leader-teachers and other community members. Ekbia and Nardi argue that the "disappearance, or rather the invisibility, of spatial enclosures, and at the same time the spatio-temporal extension of the Foucaltian gaze" through digital technologies broadens to include "leader-teachers and other co-

players" (2012:174). Additionally, the leaderboards organize players hierarchically by their achievements create and enable "spatial 'nesting' of hierarchized surveillance" of players by players and the public, as well as increased visibility of the human/object, in this case the ranked PvP player/toon (Foucault 1977[1975]:171). In this way, PvPers are disciplined by surveillance and taught by leader-teachers in a naturalized setting of reasonable expectations based on ability or advancement (179). An example of this is the CR and MMR system, where good performance or, dare I say, a disciplined one, is awarded ranking increases that alter leaderboard standings and invite public scrutiny. This is especially the case when players live stream their game play. Players have internalized this disciplinary gaze and, in turn, further contribute towards the normalization of surveillance.

However, there are also capable and experienced players that require new players to further their goals. As Josiah McC. Heyman (2003:152) points out, Foucault's conceptualizations of power de-emphasize individual intentions. O-A's need to find new players to PvP leads him teaching-leading positions, accessing Wolf's (1990:586) conceptualizations not only of individual and impositional power but also of structural power. Heyman (2003:140) explains that "structural power inheres in…the very form and pattern of a given set of social and cultural relations." The ability of leader-teachers to manipulate the situations and locations of learning to encourage specific actions and provoke labor in the new players is the "clout" necessary to set up, maintain, and defend relationships (Wolf 1990:587). Combinations of these powers not only establish and maintain the roles of leader-teacher and student-subaltern, they also defend the relationship from other potential leader-teachers who are looking for new partners.

The benefits reaped by the leader-teacher from the student-subaltern such as O-A's and R-A's increases in rank and accumulation of gear while tutoring me illuminate what Heyman (2003:141) calls the "tributary mode" of structural power. It is here where "producers directly control their labor, and controllers… appropriate a portion of the products." In this political-economic reading, leader-teachers leverage student-subalterns' labor for their own gain aside from the potential benefits of acquiring a new PvP partner. Throughout our relationship, it is probably obvious to O-A that I will not achieve the level of skill and/or commitment that he seeks. Despite this, he continues to include me for arena matches, but only on toons where CR is of no consequence. It is not my intention to downplay or ignore our years-long friendship which is a large part of our PvP enjoyment. Although we fortunately have access to various non-ranked PvP events that reinforce our friendship and interaction through *WoW* gameplay, O-A's quest for Gladiator enforces a political economy on our PvP play.

As this discussion demonstrates, the need to find PvP partners creates new relationships which trigger teaching roles. These positions often fall to the more experienced players and places them in authority that easily translates into leadership in PvP contexts. Experienced teacher-leaders then actively seek out new partners or team members which further perpetuate social interactions that may otherwise fade away. This is possibly intentional expectant organization on the part of the game developers. It may save on costs and game design requirements, permit the creative spaces for players to socially interact, or simply be an unconsidered by-product of converging aspects of game

design is unclear. In any event, it indicates that providing game mechanisms to shift the burden of teaching away from experienced players would further erode the game's social aspects.[52]

My depictions of these interactions of social relationships and expert players are informed by Chapter Five's discussions regarding the difficulties of finding players of the appropriate class and ranking. In these instances, players enter into the relationship with clear expectations not only of who is the experienced player, but who will be the team leader or target caller. Resistance to these experts rarely surfaces. When it does, the parties involved prefer not to spend time contesting leadership and instead find new partners or teams to join. However, when it comes to Ashran, these relationships play out in different and complex ways.

<u>The Cyclic Nature of Tactical Power: Organizing Victory in Ashran</u>

While Ashran resembles battleground encounters that contain multiple secondary objectives, it differs in that leadership is far more critical. This is due to a multiplicity of zone and player objectives which splits focus and can cause confusion (see Appendix F for a brief explanation of these factors). Out of the dozens of Ashran events in which I participated, only one was successful in repeatedly achieving objectives without clear organized leadership. This was similar to above examples of unrated random battleground events. All the other events lacked clear leadership and failed to achieve event objectives. They exhibited a chaotic character that resulted in player frustration and turnover, further perpetuating the cycle of disarray.

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[52] This has especially been a concern in this expansion, since the introduction of Garrisons resulted in players no longer having to travel to major cities for services such as accessing their banks or the auction house. The upcoming expansion *Legion* will do away with Garrisons and instead have Order Halls, a special area for each player class to congregate. (See Appendix G for a forum discussion found at http://eu.battle.net/wow/en/forum/topic/15161250482).

The sub-sections that follow showcase one Ashran event where the intersections of layered conflictive tensions and critical interactions with dynamic and shifting forms of power. Individual players endeavor to achieve their objectives, police boundaries, and enforce norms by harnessing, acquiescing, resisting, or rejecting tactical power that is temporarily embodied by leaders who also control the sociotechnical lead mechanism. When considered together, these sections illustrate the cyclical nature of Ashran as groups organize, successfully achieve consecutive objectives, destabilize and fragment, fall into disarray, and re-organize and rise again. Interwoven in an event's cycle are evidence of each individual leader's rise, reign, fall, and replacement.

Who Wants Lead? Effects of Disorder

8/8 14:22:32 [Instance] N-D: how's this raid?
8/8 14:22:40 [Instance] F-M: so far not doing well
8/8 14:22:58 [Instance] M-T: ALL TO FLAG 4
8/8 14:22:58 [Instance] K-B: raid fucking blows
8/8 14:23:09 [Instance] D-G: ok I don't know who's really leading but ALLLLLL get to road flag as one big group
8/8 14:23:09 [Instance] S-T: stick together and we can do great things
8/8 14:23:19 [Instance] L-K: nobody is leading
8/8 14:23:23 [Instance] D-G: healers stay back and don't get death gripped
8/8 14:23:31 [Instance] F-M: horde at flag killing us
8/8 14:23:48 [Instance] M-H: lord of wind - give lead to someone who cares
8/8 14:23:55 [Instance] S-T: go as group. Else you get pick up 1 by 1
8/8 14:23:59 [Instance] D-G: fml[53]
8/8 14:24:09 [Instance] F-M: go as group how? We're all spread out

This excerpt speaks volumes about normalized expectations regarding leadership. N-D, who just joined the Ashran encounter, asks a typical new-to-the-encounter question: how are we doing? The situation is chaotic and players are dispersed across the map. Despite this, D-G and S-T attempt to instill group order, yet L-K still complains that "nobody is leading." M-H tells "lord of wind,"

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[53] This is a common abbreviation in *WoW* PvP, and stands for "fuck my life," usually a sign of resigned frustration.

players' who currently has lead, to give it to "someone who cares," which will help to organize and coordinate the raid using the tools discussed above, especially the ability to issue raid warnings. It is easy to see that this situation is a disorganized mess, and there are several reasons why this is a very bad thing in Ashran.

The main reason is sheer numbers. Due to the Alliance's disorganization the Horde players are dominating this event. In concrete terms, this means that the Horde has a low rate of player turnover they tend to stay in successful Ashran events to achieve personal objectives, such as weekly quests. Taken further, this means that while the Alliance numbers are in a state of almost hyper-fluctuation, the Horde raid is both stable and full at 40 players. Any attempt to win an event by the Alliance at this point will almost automatically be a failure, since even the buff given to the less successful team still requires players to be present. This is a self-perpetuating cycle. It will continue until the Alliance manages to win something, at which point it is possible to rally and gain momentum that will eventually tip the balance to the Alliance.

Another issue that arises is the competition for leadership since multiple people attempt to step into a leadership position and organize the group. This splits focus from wining objectives into inter-raid disputes, wherein multiple would-be leaders issue different or conflicting directions. I find it an interesting instance of Bourdieu's (1977[1972]) conceptualization of doxa because players seem to share an understanding that in order to win there must be a leader. This continues to be the case despite the example of random battlegrounds, where 10 to 40 players win encounters with no central leadership and sometimes without any discussion at all. In Ashran, it is understood that in order to win, someone must lead. In this situation, D-G, D-S, and F-M agree that the best course of action is

to wait at the crossroads for the next event and then arrive at the event before the Horde in order to

have the strategically desired position of defending instead of attacking:

8/8 14:30:41 [Instance] T-A: ALL X ROADS?
8/8 14:30:49 [Instance] D-G: we can push them as far as possible
8/8 14:30:50 [Instance] F-M: yeah…horde doing event
8/8 14:30:52 [Instance] D-G: all to x-roads
8/8 14:30:52 [Instance] D-S: yes, all x roads please
8/8 14:30:58 [Instance] T-A: k
8/8 14:31:08 [Instance] D-G: as SOON as next event is announced, ALL to that and defend

At this point, D-G's hour long attempt to organize the group, which is supported and assisted by F-

M, is punctuated by E-K's sudden realization that s/he is in possession of lead:

8/8 14:31:12 [Instance Leader] E-K: ty
8/8 14:31:23 [Instance Leader] E-K: wow I'm lead
8/8 14:31:23 [Instance] F-M: yes…stop what you are doing and go to event
8/8 14:31:36 [Instance] D-G: death grip the moonkin
8/8 14:31:37 [Instance Leader] E-K: who wants lead
8/8 14:32:31 [Instance Leader] E-K: who wants lead
8/8 14:32:55 [Instance] D-G: I really hope you all are reading this but please stop dpsing the dps
8/8 14:33:10 [Instance] D-G: healers need to die, if you let them heal then it's pointless
8/8 14:34:32 [Instance] P-T: Actually, you all should be targeting the Ancient Artifact carrier
8/8 14:34:34 [Instance Leader] E-K: who wants lead!!
8/8 14:34:57 [Instance] Z-G: that's fucked when I got to go into healing spec because healers aren't goddam healing
8/8 14:34:58 [Instance] D-G: NO do not all target AA if he's surrounded by 4 healers not being attacked!
8/8 14:35:05 [Instance] D-G: god stop telling people that

The underlying frustration with ineffective leadership and event failure prompts F-M's irritated

response "yes…stop what you are doing" to E-K's surprised exclamation of "wow I'm lead." Here,

as is common in *WoW,* the ellipses do not signal a dropped word. Rather, they serve as a temporal

representation of disapproving and pointed silence. The curious note here is that E-K goes on to ask

who wants lead, despite the fact that both D-G and F-M have been attempting to lead the group.

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The lack of response to E-K's query also suggests that the answer should be obvious. This occurred many times throughout my research. If players ask questions the group believes are obvious, they are ignored, trolled, or verbally attacked. The frustration is further evident in Z-G's comment about having to switch to a heal spec. It insinuates that this may not need to happen if only the group could manage to be more coordinated.

At time stamp 14:32:55, D-G is nearly begging players to stop attacking the dps to focus on healers. This is a standard tactic in all types of PvP and indexes D-G's low opinion of the competence of players in this group. P-T contradicts D-G's attempt to coordinate the raid. At this point D-G explains himself, thereby showing a tenuous hold on the raid group. Overall, it takes four minutes from the time E-K realizes s/he has lead for D-G to finally acquire it. Six minutes later, D-G leaves Ashran without passing lead before he does. Ironically, the software reassigns lead to E-K. The cycle of disarray and failure continues for another half hour until I leave the event. Even for purposes of research, I find that there are limits to the amount of frustration I am able to endure despite knowing that eventually Ashran will cycle back to Alliance domination.

This situation highlights a struggle for Wolf's (1990:586) third type of power, a tactical and organizational power that "controls the settings in which people may show forth their potentialities and interact with others." The ability to organize groups and direct their individual power makes use of impositional power on a larger scale with the additional element of channeling how that power is utilized. Several players attempt to do this, especially D-G and F-M who repeatedly issue orders that tap into this tactical power. They seek to assert this power at the strategic level (as at 14:30:52, where D-G says "all to x-roads"), at the tactical level (as at 14:33:10, where D-G says "healers need to die"), and on the individual level (as at 14:31:23 where F-M says "yes…stop what you are doing and

go to event"). These instructions also serve to mold the group into a docile team that is subject to the leader's orders. Although the ability to punish deviant players by removing them from the group is limited by the game software, leaders often seek to implement tight control over the order and timing of group movements.

While Foucault (1977[1975]:149) explores how temporal control over activities and cyclic repetition is used to discipline physical bodies, this concept can be extended into digital spaces such as Ashran. For example, this line at timestamp 14:31:08, where D-G gives explicit temporal instructions, stating: "as SOON as next event is announced, ALL to that and defend." Since group movements are strategically important, controlling the timing of those movements is critical to leadership. The cyclic nature of Ashran events- which are released in a timed manner- suggest the establishment of a cyclical group pattern. One common example of this involves regrouping at a specified place, such as the crossroads, to perform specific tasks including rebuffing and allowing stragglers to catch up. When an event is announced, leaders directs players to go to the event immediately to get a defensive position. Once the event concludes, leaders instruct players to regroup at the previous place although the place may change if the faction loses control over the rendezvous. This not only creates a predictable geographic and temporal cycle that leaders forge into a strategic tool, it simultaneously disciplines and orders chaotic groups. Yet as these examples show, acquiring tactical power is not always easy or possible.

Pass Me Lead: Acquiring & Maintaining Leadership

Since players who join the Ashran encounter usually have clear and specific goals for their time spent, the disarray and chaos of the above examples are an unwelcome aspect of Ashran gameplay. Players typically seek to impose order on such events. But as these excerpts demonstrate,

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there are often conflicting notions about how to do so. Possessing lead makes the job of leadership

much easier. Typically, players call on the person with lead to step up and assume command, as the

following excerpt demonstrates:

1/23 15:49:02 [Instance] D-K: who is in charge
1/23 15:50:17 [Instance] N-G: is there no lead
1/23 15:50:33 [Instance] S-S: not really
1/23 15:50:55 [Instance] N-G: this was worth the 20 min wait
1/23 15:51:19 [Instance] B-D: they are at the crossroads
1/23 15:51:20 [Instance] B-D: lots
1/23 15:51:41 [Instance] D-K: that's because they have a lead
1/23 15:51:56 [Instance] B-D: D-K. you are lead
1/23 15:52:05 [Instance] B-D: take charge
1/23 15:52:14 [Instance] D-K: nope I'm leaving waste of time

Queries about who is leader reveal the group's disorganized state but also lack the undertones of

intense frustration evident in the previous Ashran excerpt. This makes it potentially easier to create

stable raid groups as there is less resistance to overcome. B-D points out that D-K has lead and calls

on him/her to assume authority. Yet D-K thinks leading the group is too much of a hassle and

instead choses to leave the event. S-K attempts fill the void by trying to direct the group to Ring of

Conquest (RoC), an area of NPCs which is currently an easier target than the enemy Horde:

1/23 15:52:19 [Instance] S-K: 1 rare
1/23 15:52:20 [Instance] A-L: lol
1/23 15:52:21 [Instance] S-K: is up
1/23 15:52:23 [Instance] S-K: at
1/23 15:52:25 [Instance] S-K: ROC
1/23 15:52:29 [Instance] M-F: Give me lead
1/23 15:52:32 [Instance] S-K: But all mobs are up
1/23 15:52:35 [Instance] S-K: GO ROC
1/23 15:52:42 [Instance] S-K: 1 RARE IS UP
1/23 15:53:02 [Instance] S-K: WE can get that Honor
1/23 15:53:27 [Instance] I-S: someone lead
1/23 15:53:39 [Instance Leader] L-L: alright, all to dark woods
1/23 15:53:47 [Raid Warning] L-L: all right, all to dark woods
1/23 15:54:02 [Instance] N-Q: go guys

Sometimes, players who are willing to lead in Ashran will not say a word about it until they manage to acquire the lead role. In the above exchange, M-F requests lead but it is L-L who acquires it. He directs players to go to the Dark Woods, an area similar to RoC that provides items that increase players' stats for one hour. This Ashran encounter takes a turn towards success with N-Q encouraging the group to follow L-L who, it turns out, has extensive practice leading Ashran premades. J-D told me that L-L has previously led the Ashran Avengers, a premade Ashran group.[54] This was obvious in the way L-L utilized repetitive raid warnings to both direct the group and in his/her grasp of the way non-event objectives such RoC build team coherency:

1/23 15:58:56 [Raid Warning] L-L: alright, all to RoC
1/23 15:59:02 [Instance] F-T: mine
1/23 15:59:02 [Raid Warning] L-L: need scrolls fast
1/23 15:59:14 [Raid Warning] L-L: give them mines this turn. to RoC all
1/23 15:59:22 [Raid Warning] L-L: all RoC
1/23 15:59:33 [Instance] S-K: ALL RARES ARE UP AT ROC
1/23 16:00:02 [Raid Warning] L-L: all to RoC
1/23 16:00:41 [Raid Warning] L-L: healers grab flame coming up from braziers

By directing the group to both Dark Woods and RoC, L-L does several important things. First, s/he utilizes the relatively easy and time-consuming objectives to give players ample opportunity to assemble at one geographic location and restore players' confidence in the raid group by killing things together. Second, as mentioned earlier, these NPCs drop items that provide beneficial individual and group bonuses and everybody is able to stock up. Third is skipping the mines event. By allowing the Horde to win the Ashran Excavation event, our Alliance faction receives an

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[54] Upon further investigation, I discovered that The Avengers have their own Ventrilo server. When I asked how it was possible to have a premade group in the same Ashran event (there are multiple events, and players are randomly assigned to one of them), I learned that players would enter and leave Ashran events until they were placed into the correct one, and that it could take up to an hour to assemble a substantial number of players in the correct Ashran event. In this way, large groups using VoIP communications can decimate the opposing faction.

additional five percent boost to damage and healing. S-K's announcement that "all rares are up" underscores the fact that L-L has chosen corerctly since these rare NPCs drop especially powerful items. Not only will killing the rare NPCs permit the Alliance to gather resources, it also prevents the Horde from gathering them because takes an hour for the rare NPCs to respawn. L-L's exclusive use of raid warnings keeps players' attention away from the distracting chat channel and on the field of action where raid warnings appear.

At this point L-L has to step away from the game to answer the door. During this interval we win the event at Molten Quarry. The next event is ABG, and L-L issues explicit instructions:

1/23 16:20:06 [Instance] J-D: horde still at XR, no real movement
1/23 16:20:23 [Instance] J-C: ABG
1/23 16:20:25 [Raid Warning] L-L: all ABG
1/23 16:20:33 [Raid Warning] L-L: groups 1 2 3 and 4 under waterfall
1/23 16:20:38 [Instance] J-D: horde moving to ABG, seem to be spread out
1/23 16:20:52 [Raid Warning] L-L: see your group number above your name
1/23 16:21:16 [Instance] J-C: Horde Inc
1/23 16:21:23 [Raid Warning] L-L: 1 2 3 4 and 5 under waterfall*
1/23 16:21:31 [Raid Warning] L-L: 6 7 and 8 spread out
1/23 16:21:37 [Raid Warning] L-L: under waterfall
1/23 16:21:51 [Raid Warning] L-L: northeast waterfall
1/23 16:22:28 [Raid Warning] L-L: STOP MESSING WITH RARES.
1/23 16:22:41 [Raid Warning] L-L: DO NOT EVER MESS WITH RARES WHILE HORDE ARE ATTACKING
1/23 16:23:39 [Raid Warning] L-L: 6 7 and 8 spread out and get spirits
1/23 16:23:46 [Raid Warning] L-L: all others defend horde
1/23 16:25:09 [Raid Warning] L-L: get here if you're not, we're about to win
1/23 16:25:37 [Raid Warning] L-L: now walk into them
1/23 16:25:42 [Instance] N-Q: good job
1/23 16:25:42 [Raid Warning] L-L: all forward
1/23 16:25:52 [Raid Warning] L-L: walk into the middle of them
1/23 16:26:02 [Raid Warning] L-L: never mind, they're running away
1/23 16:26:28 [Raid Warning] L-L: all back to F2
1/23 16:26:29 [Instance] M-F: To whoever life gripped me away from being gangbanged, you're my hero
1/23 16:26:35 [Raid Warning] L-L: flag there right?
1/23 16:26:45 [Instance] J-D: flag at f2
1/23 16:26:57 [Instance] J-D: horde regrouping at XR

1/23 16:27:09 [Instance] Z-S: you're welcome
1/23 16:27:09 [Raid Warning] L-L: f2 all
1/23 16:27:15 [Raid Warning] L-L: we're pushing Volrath fast

From the above situation it is apparent that L-L's explicit instructions are concise, specific, and repetitive. They clearly indicate specific tasks for specific players and briefly explain how to perform them. L-L tells players to look at the number above their names and then execute the task assigned to their party number. Six, seven, and eight are instructed to perform the tasks to win the event, while the rest are ordered to combat the attacking Horde. When L-L instructs players to move forward, s/he orchestrates the plan for repelling the Horde away from the location, preventing Horde from interfering with players performing the tasks. We win this event. L-L immediately provides further direction by ordering all players to regroup at F2 to capture strategic points along the Road of Glory. This weakens the Horde forces, easing access to the Horde fortress in order to kill Volrath. By asking for verification that the flag at F2 is in Alliance possession, L-L underscores that successful groups requires coordinated group effort. This turn for success lifts the group's spirits. M-F's gratitude to a priest for a timely rescue illustrates the group's competency. Z-S's polite response further solidifies the improving group dynamic. L-L continues to exhibit strategic knowledge as s/he simultaneously juggles player demands for nemesis quest[55] grouping, ensures that the group stays together, and oversees buffs renewal. The raid group is able to successfully attack the Horde fortress and kill High Warlord Volrath.

These excerpts show how single players can acquire the lead mechanism and manage to gain social support for their leadership. As the active "agent of a solution," players who subscribe to a

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[55] The nemesis quests are discussed in Appendix F. By putting players on the same nemesis quest in the same party, the players are able to receive credit for each other's kills. While not necessary, it is a sign that L-L is paying attention to the needs of the group and helps gather support for his/her position as leader.

meritocratic individualism can gain the sociotechnical lead and the social capital to create and control successful raid groups (Newman 1999:233). This combination of acquired and ascribed status results in socially-approved legitimate leadership and a smoothly successful raid group. Each additional win further contributes to L-L's status and prestige. In effect, s/he cements his/her legitimacy and, therefore, his/her ability to direct the group to more difficult objectives. The consistent and repetitive use of raid warnings disciplines the group into accepting direction. Helpful players such as J-D provide surveillance information about enemy movements and objectives that further contribute to L-L's successful leadership. When this happens, the raid group stabilizes and player turnover drops since most players remain to reap game benefits and rewards. Without drawing too perfect a picture, it is clear the situation is much improved. Yet in Ashran the potential for disruption remains constant. The cycle now begins to shift towards group destabilization.

#MakeAshranGreatAgain: Contesting Leadership

At this point a player enters the event and makes a bid for leadership. It must first be noted that this example is the most extreme and rare contestation for leadership that I have ever come across. Still, it follows a pattern where players either enter the raid group and/or decide to assume leadership by requesting lead and attempting to marshal social support. It also includes additional interactions that are typical of contested leadership in Ashran. Although the way this conflict plays out is somewhat atypical, it incorporates many examples of typical ways players act within such contexts. James C. Scott's (1989:146) framework for thinking of prestige as "the public face of domination," as "something of a zero-sum game... [where] the accumulation of prestige by some entails the loss of standing for others" becomes discernable in the next excerpt where a struggle over leadership throws the group into disarray.

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1/23 16:43:00 [Instance] B-T: World's R1 RBG Leader B-T here
1/23 16:43:11 [Raid Warning] L-L: did I say go straight to AoA. no. because that never works.
1/23 16:43:12 [Instance] F-L: roc?
1/23 16:43:37 [Instance] B-T: what's our win: loss for the last four events?
1/23 16:43:46 [Instance] J-D: won them
1/23 16:43:53 [Instance] J-D: won last 2
1/23 16:43:57 [Raid Warning] L-L: win since I got here
1/23 16:43:59 [Instance] F-L: holy fuck it's the real B-T
1/23 16:44:11 [Raid Warning] L-L: all stack RoC ENTRANCE
1/23 16:44:12 [Instance] F-L: give B-T lead
1/23 16:44:15 [Instance] F-L: seriously
1/23 16:44:18 [Raid Warning] L-L: we're not going RoC yet
1/23 16:44:27 [Raid Warning] L-L: can't do anything if people aren't stacked
1/23 16:44:35 [Instance] B-T: let's start killing ogres
1/23 16:44:42 [Instance] F-L: give B-T, legit he is fucking amazing at leading
1/23 16:44:50 [Instance] J-D: L-L is doing a good job too
1/23 16:44:59 [Instance] B-K: yeah he's doing just fine
1/23 16:45:05 [Instance] J-D: it's clear he's led Avenger's Ashran games etc.
1/23 16:45:21 [Instance] B-T: push into ROC
1/23 16:45:23 [Instance] B-T: we have enough
1/23 16:45:26 [Instance] J-D: 2/5 so far
1/23 16:45:27 [Raid Warning] L-L: guys... why are you going into RoC?
1/23 16:45:35 [Instance] B-T: to get scrolls and wands obviously
1/23 16:45:38 [Instance] S-G: why RoC there's no rare here
1/23 16:45:39 [Instance] B-K: Don't start confusing everyone

When B-T enters this Ashran event, he immediately announces that he is a rank 1 RBG team leader.

He then requests the current event win to loss ratio. Possibly out of respect for his rank but

potentially attempting to forestall any future moves by B-T to take control, J-D responds less than

ten seconds later. When F-L realizes that B-T actually is the rank 1 player, not someone with an

intentionally similar name, s/he gets excited enough to push for an immediate leadership change. I

wonder whether a rank 1 arena player would receive the same level of immediate support. As

previously discussed, RBGs and Ashran have more in common with each other than with arenas.

Although B-T's remark "let's start killing ogres" at 16:44:35 indicates a willingness to undermine L-

L's leadership, it is interesting to note that the initial confrontation begins not with the leaders but

with their supporters. J-D, S-G, and B-K support L-L's leadership and therefore resist F-L's

assertion that B-T should be given lead. While I do not know players' individual reasons for resisting this potential coup, the potential group ramifications are immediately apparent. Simply put, divided groups are largely unsuccessful. When B-T orders the group to push into RoC at 16:45:21, it seems that enough players obey for L-L to notice the shift and demand to know why his/her orders are ignored. It is unclear if B-T's response is a sincere answer to the question, although tagging "obviously" onto the end of his response appears to indicate his scorn for a leader who is unaware of such basic information. When S-G tells B-T that there are no rare NPCs in RoC (recall we had killed them at 15:59), and B-K asks B-T not to confuse the group, F-L's response to this resistance intensifies the struggle for leadership:

1/23 16:45:41 [Instance] B-T: lol, why aren't you guys pushing in
1/23 16:45:42 [Raid Warning] L-L: and why is 1/3 still at base?
1/23 16:45:47 [Instance] B-T: you don't need rares to collect scrolls and wands
1/23 16:45:50 [Instance] F-L: GIVE LEAD TO B-T
1/23 16:45:54 [Instance] B-T: stop whining and let's farm
1/23 16:45:56 [Instance] F-L: I SHIT YOU NOT HE IS ACTUALLY FUCKING RANK 1
1/23 16:45:59 [Instance] A-R: because we have no lead
1/23 16:46:08 [Instance] B-T: push into roc now and collect scrolls + wands
1/23 16:46:17 [Raid Warning] L-L: stack RoC entrance
1/23 16:46:18 [Instance] B-K: shut up
1/23 16:46:19 [Instance] J-D: 3/5
1/23 16:46:22 [Instance] B-T: stfu[56] about stacking
1/23 16:46:26 [Instance] B-T: you've been spamming that for the last five minutes
1/23 16:46:28 [Instance] B-T: just push in
1/23 16:46:36 [Instance] M-D: we got no heals

B-T is surprised that the entire group is not following his instructions. At this point, L-L decides not to fight B-T, tacking on an additional reproof to B-T's conversation. B-T continues to push for the group to move into RoC even as F-L pushes for B-T to get lead. A-R's sarcastic remark indicates that not all players agree with F-L's stance. Similar to 16:43:11, L-L admonishes players to wait for

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[56] This is an acronym for "shut the fuck up," and is used in general internet chat.

the group to assemble. This indicates that despite improvements, the raid is still having difficulty operating as a cohesive unit. By telling players to group at the entrance to RoC, L-L is attempting to gather the raid group in preparation for launching an assault on the AoA event. It is necessary to attack an event in progress en masse since the enemy faction is already there in large numbers and possess defensive advantages. It is also critical from a perspective of maintaining power, since "domination, once established, does not persist on its own momentum…it generates considerable friction and can only be sustained by continuous efforts" (Scott 1989:147). As discussed above, L-L utilizes different sociotechnical methods as part of the effort not just to succeed in Ashran but also maintain his/her power. When L-L directs the raid to stack at the RoC entrance, B-T attacks this decision and attempts to divert the raid into RoC. This is a move that also functions in the zero-sum prestige game as an attempt to take from L-L's social capital to increase his own. While B-T's attempt to direct the group to RoC may be a strategically sound decision, the majority of the raid would still prefer to get another event win.

Scott (1989:150) points out "forms of dominance in which the skill and control of the powerholders are palpable and easily verifiable" do not require the "symbolic trappings" or "rituals of subordination" necessary for institutionalized forms of power, which is descriptive of B-T and L-L respectively. B-T's prestige-based power, therefore, relies not on social mechanisms that require maintenance as L-L's do but on "crafting a stage presence that appears masterful and self-confident" (1989:152). Unfortunately for B-T, this understanding of power as skill-based prestige neither accounts for the unique social interactions within Ashran nor the necessity of rallying substantial player support to achieve objectives. This friction and B-T's inattention to and mishandling of this specific social and PvP context spurs L-L supporters go on the offensive:

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1/23 16:46:44 [Instance] F-L: GIVE LEAD TO B-T
1/23 16:46:47 [Instance] F-L: he is a god
1/23 16:46:50 [Instance] F-L: give him lead
1/23 16:46:55 [Instance] B-K: Dude you blow him a lot?
1/23 16:47:00 [Instance] Z-S: F-L, why not just get on your knees and just blow him?
1/23 16:47:01 [Instance] F-L: stfu nigga
1/23 16:47:01 [Instance] S-K: are you his hype man or what?
1/23 16:47:03 [Instance] B-T: World's R1 RBG Leader, R1 rogue, multi legend hearthstone, top 4
college, professional gamer, partnered Twitch Streamer B-T is here to win, and to win, and TO
WIN!

F-L tries to understand why other group members remain unwilling to back such an advantageous

leader when L-L speaks up:

1/23 16:47:37 [Instance] F-L: trying to help you guys
1/23 16:47:44 [Instance] B-T: I am the best leader in the game
1/23 16:47:47 [Raid Warning] L-L: B-T is a troll and F-L is in his party. they're just confusing
people to listen to them. we're not going to win anything so long as they keep confusing people.
also, I'm not passing you lead. I don't care what you do or say.
1/23 16:48:02 [Instance] E-S: ^^
1/23 16:48:04 [Instance] B-T: someone is on a power trip^
1/23 16:48:08 [Instance] Z-S: just listen to whoever is leader
1/23 16:48:10 [Instance] K-T: hey whatup B-T
1/23 16:48:10 [Instance] B-K: Yeah yew
1/23 16:48:11 [Instance] K-T: big fan
1/23 16:48:15 [Instance] B-T: I come here to help people win, not to aggrandize my ego
1/23 16:48:26 [Instance] K-T: you don't want the worlds #1 RBG leader to lead this?
1/23 16:48:27 [Instance] K-T: the fuck?
1/23 16:48:36 [Instance] B-K: Hahahahahah
1/23 16:48:38 [Instance] F-L: for real he's fucking #1 in RBGs
1/23 16:48:42 [Instance] B-T: if I wanted the best chance of winning, I'd want the best leader
possible
1/23 16:48:53 [Instance] S-K: we've been winning though
1/23 16:48:54 [Instance] B-T: you guys can still listen to me in instance chat
1/23 16:48:55 [Instance] K-T: #BTForLead2016
1/23 16:49:01 [Instance] B-T: #MakeAshranGreatAgain
1/23 16:49:05 [Instance] B-T: #BT2016
1/23 16:49:10 [Raid Warning] L-L: so you told people to immediately ignore me and event once you
get here because? oh no. you're no troll. just focused on winning.

As I mentioned at the outset, this is a unique case due to the duration and the level of active support

on both sides. Most conflicts of this type that I have witnessed are brief struggles that result in

leaders either retaining power or transferring lead to the newcomers, especially if the newcomer exhibits greater knowledge or organizational competency.

This excerpt takes an extended and unmistakable turn towards the political as players choose sides and organize around different individuals. This is spurred by L-L's assertive statement that s/he will not surrender lead, which E-S, Z-K, and B-K support. Humorously, B-T claims that L-L is on a power trip. B-T adds that he is "here to help people win, not to aggrandize my ego" at 16:48:15.[57] As Scott reminds, "there is a certain amount of bluff and pretense in almost any display of power" and that if players believe B-T is "powerful, the impression will help him impose himself and, in turn, contribute to his actual power" (1989:152). When K-T joins the raid group, F-L gets a helper. The pressure for B-T to become lead increases. Ashran continues in this vein for some time. K-T actively promotes B-T's website and asks B-T to RBG with him/her. B-T continues to say what he would do better and attacks L-L's competency. However, with players becoming disgruntled and turnover increases, several players remark that the group is increasingly spread out and arguing over lead is unproductive. Despite their attempts, B-T and his followers are unable to instill a sufficient sense of B-T's authority in other players. According to Scott, this would assist B-T with accumulating power in a social-power feedback loop. This oversight/failure on B-T's part becomes critical in light of L-L's next action.

Ashran is Hard! Trolling as Resistance

1/23 16:53:41 [Raid Warning] L-L: cool story bro. you and your lackeys are on ignore. now I'm soloing stuff for an hour or two till I get a new group since nobody's going to listen for a while.
1/23 16:53:49 [Instance] B-T: LOL

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[57] I would like to point out that as a rank 1 player with sponsors, B-T may be contractually (or otherwise) obliged to advertise. However, in this case I interpret his actions as an insult, since it insinuates that we are incapable and in need of his assistance. I cannot speak for the motivations of the other raid members, but it seems likely I am not alone in this view, discussed further in the next section.

1/23 16:53:53 [Instance] B-T: he's going to solo stuff?
1/23 16:53:55 [Instance] Z-S: v.v
1/23 16:53:55 [Instance] F-L: omg...
1/23 16:53:56 [Instance] F-L: LOL
1/23 16:53:56 [Instance] B-T: for an hour or two
1/23 16:54:01 [Instance] Z-S: well that's useless then
1/23 16:54:02 [Instance] B-T: great leader
1/23 16:54:11 [Instance] J-D: everything was great before you got in here to be honest
1/23 16:54:12 [Instance] B-T: okay everyone listen to me in instance chat and we'll win without this clown

L-L decides to remove him/herself from the situation but still retains lead, which prevents B-T or

anyone else from getting it. This power play is an effective troll that seemingly reinforces B-T's

contention that L-L is an incompetent leader. However, L-L's resistance also annoys some

ambivalent players, such as Z-S above and M-Q in the next excerpt. His obstinacy directly impacts

opportunities for them to complete individual goals. Since kicking players from the group is not

possible in this situation, B-T appeals to the group to help him manipulate the game system to

remove L-L from the group:

1/23 16:55:27 [Instance] B-T: everyone report L-L
1/23 16:55:32 [Instance] B-T: so we get a game master to kick him out
1/23 16:55:35 [Instance] B-T: he's just AFK in base
1/23 16:55:52 [Instance] B-T: everyone report L-L for cheating "AFK in base"
1/23 16:55:57 [Instance] M-Q: L-L REALLY?
1/23 16:55:57 [Instance] B-T: say he's botting.

As the event progresses, B-T attempts to take control of the raid. It soon becomes obvious that he

fails to acquire enough players to support his bid for tactical power. He directs players to push into

the Ashran Excavation event, and pushes too far ahead of the group:

1/23 17:01:19 [Instance] B-T: I'm only one up here
1/23 17:01:19 [Instance] K-T: nice aa
1/23 17:01:20 [Instance] B-T: help
1/23 17:01:24 [Instance] B-T: HELP AND PUSH
1/23 17:01:26 [Instance] B-T: OR THEY GRAB IT AGAIN

1/23 17:01:27 [Instance] B-T: OFF THE GROUND
1/23 17:01:29 [Instance] B-T: PUSH UP
1/23 17:01:42 [Instance] B-T: okay....
1/23 17:01:50 [Instance] B-T: I told you guys you had to push up and AoE
1/23 17:06:17 [Instance] B-T: HELP
1/23 17:06:18 [Instance] B-T: DISPEL ME
1/23 17:06:19 [Instance] B-T: DISPEL
1/23 17:06:19 [Instance] B-T: DISPEL
1/23 17:06:24 [Instance] B-T: I GOT JAILED
1/23 17:06:38 [Instance] C-Q: ggggg[58]
1/23 17:06:57 [Instance] A-P: we have less than half the raid in mines
1/23 17:06:57 [Instance] K-T: WTF HOW ARE WE LOSING
1/23 17:07:16 [Instance] B-T: well, it's a lot harder to organize Ashran
1/23 17:07:24 [Instance] B-T: when you have the guy with lead AFK in base and doing nothing

B-T's intentions for over-extending beyond the main group were good since he was after the AA carrier, it set a tone not of group cooperation but of supporting and backing him up. I cannot speak for all the healers in this excerpt but I admit to following B-T for the group's sake. While I did everything I could to assist my teammates, I intentionally did not heal or dispel B-T, K-T, or F-L for the duration of this power struggle. It is possible I was alone in this secret troll, although it seems odd that a player of B-T's skill would not be able to survive if he had at least one healer assisting him. He died three times in approximately ten minutes prior to his teleportation into the Horde base prison. I would not go so far as to call this an instance where hidden transcripts are enacted. Scott (1990:118) argues that safe social spaces are necessary to move from individual to collective forms of action, a process which is vital to organized resistance and the creation of anti-hegemonic hidden transcripts. Since there is no off-stage, private chat channel, private space to collectively organize does not occur in this Ashran. Although I was unaware of such a space, it is possible that such channels were created, possibly as offshoots of an emerging premade. Unfortunately, I did not think to pursue this because it was here that I first discovered the existence of Ashran premades.

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[58] Recall that gg represents "good game." Here it is used humorously used to indicate that B-T got what he deserved.

As player turnover continues and new players join the group, social dynamics redistribute

and rearrange power relations. This is exemplified when R-S joins the group and begins trolling B-T

and K-T, which ignites a public confrontation. R-S first remarks upon the group's failure, which

prompts B-T to immediately retort. Trolling ensues:

1/23 17:07:55 [Instance] R-S: so ally still losing from 2 days ago???
1/23 17:07:56 [Instance] R-S: wow
1/23 17:08:02 [Instance] R-S: shit really ain't change
1/23 17:08:25 [Instance] B-T: you sound ignorant. there are multiple instances of Ashran at any point of time any day.
1/23 17:08:32 [Instance] B-T: so alliance isn't "still losing" after two days.
1/23 17:08:33 [Instance] K-K: no we were winning lol
1/23 17:08:55 [Instance] B-T: let's regroup f2
1/23 17:08:56 [Instance] R-S: I sound ignorant? lol every "instance" I have joined has been terrible the last 2 days....
1/23 17:08:58 [Instance] B-T: all come f2
1/23 17:09:02 [Instance] R-S: so technically you sound ignorant
1/23 17:09:12 [Instance] S-B: how is that technical
1/23 17:09:19 [Instance] B-T: you summarize things based on the color blue or red respectively alliance or horde
1/23 17:09:27 [Instance] B-T: "alliance is still losing"
1/23 17:09:28 [Instance] R-S: I'm colorblind
1/23 17:09:29 [Instance] R-S: so yes
1/23 17:09:31 [Instance] R-S: I do
1/23 17:09:44 [Instance] B-T: half our team is AFK[59] in base
1/23 17:09:51 [Instance] R-S: lol
1/23 17:09:51 [Instance] B-T: please wake up and push down road of glory
1/23 17:09:54 [Instance] K-T: stop AFK-ing in base morons
1/23 17:10:03 [Instance] R-S: if they are AFK
1/23 17:10:05 [Instance] R-S: who r u talking to

While K-K reminds B-T that he is the one who destroyed the group's success, R-S fixates on B-T as

a troll target. R-S's response to B-T's insult is an effective offensive maneuver, whether or not R-S's

claim of colorblindness is true. It also precipitates additional trolling which begins with R-S's

observation that if players are away from their keyboards, they are not paying attention or possibly

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[59] This term is an abbreviation for away from keyboard, indicating the person is not physically present at the computer.

not even present to be aware of K-T's admonishment to stop slacking. K-T, no doubt frustrated and

annoyed by this time, fires back:

1/23 17:10:23 [Instance] K-T: yo you some kind of faggot?
1/23 17:10:31 [Instance] R-S: some kind?
1/23 17:10:35 [Instance] R-S: there is more than 1 kind?
1/23 17:10:48 [Instance] R-S: you must be the other kind
1/23 17:10:53 [Instance] R-S: explains how you'd know
1/23 17:11:36 [Instance] K-T: I think R-S has two dads and its hereditary faggotism
1/23 17:14:29 [Instance] K-T: if you aren't first, you're last
1/23 17:14:35 [Instance] K-T: this group doesn't like to lose
1/23 17:14:39 [Instance Leader] L-L: going AFK to make food: D
1/23 17:14:42 [Instance] R-S: by the looks of things
1/23 17:14:50 [Instance] R-S: y'all been losing
1/23 17:14:51 [Instance] Xochiquetzal-Anvilmar: does anyone like to lose? lol
1/23 17:14:56 [Instance] R-S: ^^^
1/23 17:14:57 [Instance] B-T: I can kill AA
1/23 17:14:57 [Instance Leader] L-L: don't worry, I'll keep making sure to do something so I don't
actually go AFK
1/23 17:14:58 [Instance] B-T: in a stun
1/23 17:14:59 [Instance] B-T: 5 seconds
1/23 17:15:00 [Instance] B-T: GET READY
1/23 17:15:01 [Instance] B-T: PUSH
1/23 17:15:01 [Instance] B-T: PUSH
1/23 17:15:02 [Instance] B-T: GET
1/23 17:15:04 [Instance] B-T: I'm dead

Here K-T elevates the trolling to a seriously offensive level. R-S stands his/her ground by refusing

to back away from confrontation. I insert a comment in an attempt to break the tension with

humor. My remark is also a subtle poke at K-T's assertive elitism. Ignoring the conversation, B-T

announces that *he* can kill the AA carrier and that the group should be ready to support this

endeavor. Amusingly, he dies again. L-L also makes a brief cameo, announcing that s/he is aware of

B-T's attempts to get him/her kicked for being AFK and that s/he will continue to do things in-

game in order to prevent this possibility. K-T finally notices that s/he is not receiving heals, and R-S

does not hesitate to prod K-T in response:

1/23 17:16:39 [Instance] K-T: do we even have healers in this group I swear
1/23 17:16:48 [Instance] R-S: y'all like to win I thought
1/23 17:17:45. [Instance] B-T: guys let's just leave and re-queue a different Ashran without some dumbass leader
1/23 17:18:30 [Instance] B-T: I don't have the time to battle my own team and horde
1/23 17:18:35 [Instance] B-T: apparently he has the time to AFK in base for 1-2 hours
1/23 17:18:36 [Instance] B-T: I don't

All the trolling seemingly pays off. After a parting shot at L-L, B-T voluntarily leaves the raid, instructing his followers to accompany him. Neither F-L nor K-T do. This clearly illustrates that despite similarities in the sociotechnical structuring of RBGs and Ashran, the social atmosphere is vastly different. The conflict between B-T and L-L and their followers illustrates that Ashran leadership requires significant team acquiescence. Even majority support, if it is by a narrow margin, may not be enough to successfully defeat enemy factions in combat. Therefore, it is necessary for leaders to harness and channel the labor of most raid members. Not only is trolling an excellent method for annoying someone else, "the concession of politeness always contains political concessions…the symbiotic taxes due from individuals" (Bourdieu 1977[1972]:85). By refusing to interact politely, players on all sides attempt to exert dominance over other group members without seceding their own power. L-L has been paying attention to how things are progressing. When B-T leaves the group, s/he decides to re-stablish his/her authority in a novel way. This illustrates his/her knowledge of Ashran, technical and class-based skill, and understanding of Ashran social dynamics.

Re-establishing Legitimate Leadership

Less than a minute after B-T leaves the group, L-L makes a critical strategic move:

1/23 17:18:56 [Instance Leader] L-L: anyone take offense if I solo Volrath?
1/23 17:19:09 [Instance] Z-S: do it
1/23 17:19:10 [Instance] R-S: BET BRO

1/23 17:19:18 [Instance Leader] L-L: it's cool, I've done it before
1/23 17:19:24 [Instance] K-K: well we were winning before old boy jumped in and tried to take over
1/23 17:19:34 [Instance] Z-Sn: well he left now
1/23 17:19:36 [Instance] R-S: SOLO VOL BRAH
1/23 17:19:39 [Instance] K-K: didn't get his way and left
1/23 17:20:41 [Instance] F-L: dis nigga gonna solo Vol LOL
1/23 17:20:47 [Instance] R-S: lmao
1/23 17:20:54 [Instance] I-S: you going to lead now the rogue left?
1/23 17:21:20 [Instance] K-K: they are doing Tremblade so AoA should be easy
1/23 17:21:26 [Instance] D-G: just win
1/23 17:21:47 [Instance] R-S: AY HE REALLY SOLOING
1/23 17:21:49 [Instance] R-S: LMAO
1/23 17:22:09 [Instance] T-A: and it's a 9-minute window for Vol... AoA then Vol
1/23 17:22:22 [Instance] T-A: if people want Vol
1/23 17:22:30 [Raid Warning] L-L: Vol dead
1/23 17:22:33 [Instance] R-S: LMAOOOO
1/23 17:22:34 [Instance] R-S: WIN
1/23 17:22:37 [Instance] R-S: my nigga
1/23 17:22:40 [Instance] Z-S: nice
1/23 17:22:52 [Instance] R-S: he really did that
1/23 17:22:55 [Instance] Z-S: HES A PROVEN LEADER, FOR HE HAS SLAIN VOL

L-L kills High Warlord Volrath, who is surrounded by NPCs and Horde players. This is a difficult task for a raid group. But doing it alone? R-S is a staunch supporter, encouraging L-L to go for it, while F-L, B-T's supporter, mocks L-L. The group also questions L-L as to whether or not he will resume leadership of the group. They place blame for the substandard group performance squarely on B-T's shoulders, while K-K and T-A provide L-L tactical information. By killing High Warlord Volrath, L-L not only dramatically proves his/her Ashran competency but also shows the raid group that B-T's accusations were hollow. L-L legitimizes his/her leadership with technical knowledge and competent skills. This display has re-focuses group attention on him/herself. After L-L succeeds, F-L leaves the raid group.

The raid group goes on to win an event at Molten Quarry before heading to RoC to kill the rare NPCs that have respawned. This is also the process by which L-L resumes his/her leadership position, with support voiced every so often by other raid members:

1/23 17:29:15 [Instance] K-K: weird we won without worlds number 1 lol

1/23 17:42:23 [Instance] B-A: you just motivate me so

1/23 17:45:13 [Instance] E-D: lead us leader

The win at Molten Quarry is easy since few Horde players arrive to oppose us. Things are more difficult at the Ashran Excavation event where the Horde arrive en masse. Interestingly, K-T, who appeared to be a staunch supporter of B-T, is actively engaged with the raid group, with no traces of bitterness over B-T's resignation:

1/23 17:59:03 [Raid Warning] L-L: yeah... this is why you group up at the entrance.
1/23 17:59:19 [Raid Warning] L-L: alright, everyone push up
1/23 17:59:21 [Instance] K-T: PUSH
1/23 17:59:22 [Instance] K-T: PUSH
1/23 17:59:22 [Instance] K-T: PUSH
1/23 17:59:24 [Raid Warning] L-L: just walk forward
1/23 17:59:30 [Raid Warning] L-L: walk in the middle of them
1/23 17:59:32 [Raid Warning] L-L: Scroll 5
1/23 17:59:36 [Instance] F-L: someone take this fucking artifact
1/23 17:59:41 [Raid Warning] L-L: put down a prism
1/23 17:59:55 [Instance] M-S: what you guys pushing?
1/23 18:00:00 [Instance] K-T: mines
1/23 18:00:04 [Instance] K-T: but no one is doing it
1/23 18:00:27 [Raid Warning] L-L: nobody's walking forward.
1/23 18:00:29 [Instance] D-G: hero?
1/23 18:01:11 [Raid Warning] L-L: in the middle to the left
1/23 18:01:16 [Raid Warning] L-L: we have to take middle
1/23 18:01:57 [Instance Leader] L-L: ok, I have to go. too hungry
1/23 18:02:12 [Instance Leader] L-L: not enough people listening
1/23 18:02:16 [Instance] K-T: ^^
1/23 18:02:21 [Instance] Xochiquetzal-Anvilmar: we got middle
1/23 18:02:26 [Instance Leader] L-L: we did?
1/23 18:02:30 [Instance] Xochiquetzal-Anvilmar: yes

1/23 18:02:35 [Instance Leader] L-L: .... coming back to Ashran
1/23 18:02:38 [Instance] M-S: XD
1/23 18:02:41 [Instance] K-T: LOL
1/23 18:02:43 [Instance] K-T: get back in here
1/23 18:02:46 [Instance] F-L: omfg[60] this fucking death knight leader again...
1/23 18:02:53 [Instance] K-T: not sure how the fuck
1/23 18:02:54 [Instance] K-T: we did this
1/23 18:03:00 [Instance] K-T: GJ BOYS
1/23 18:03:05 [Instance] K-T: after this event
1/23 18:03:06 [Instance] K-T: we go Vol
1/23 18:03:09 [Instance] K-T: we won 4 already
1/23 18:03:11 [Instance] Xochiquetzal-Anvilmar: again? Jeez

Amusingly, F-L rejoins this Ashran but does not immediately realize it. When s/he does, s/he is annoyed but resigned and continues to participate despite the previous confrontation. Additionally, this is a humorous account of L-L attempting to direct the raid group but under the impression that the group is failing. S/he actually leaves the Ashran PvP zone. I tell him/her that we managed to push the Horde out of their strategic foothold in the mine's center Despite a desire to get food, this sign of improvement leads L-L to return to Ashran. I am surprised to realize that within 38 minutes, we managed to won four events and it was again time to kill Volrath to complete the *Ashran Dominance* quest. With L-L as lead, we kill Volrath and continue to win events. Unfortunately, things are about to change. In Ashran there is always potential for disruption.

Passing Lead: Transferring Leadership

At this point, I have been in the Ashran event for at least three hours. L-L was already in the event before I joined. L-L finally begs off so that s/he can eat and realizes that it is almost time to uphold his/her commitment to raiding Hellfire Citadel with his/her guild:

1/23 18:33:17 [Instance Leader] L-L: who wants assist for a bit? I need to eat for like 10 min

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[60] Another common internet acronym, this is "oh my fucking god."

1/23 18:33:43 [Instance Leader] L-L: lol, G-S, you want assist while I eat?
1/23 18:33:50 [Instance]|h F-A: REGROUP
1/23 18:33:54 [Instance Leader] L-L: how about you Z-W?
1/23 18:33:59 [Instance Leader] L-L: F-A?
1/23 18:34:05 [Instance Leader] L-L: who wants assist
1/23 18:34:16 [Instance Leader] L-L: how about this. I'll make all assist while I'm gone
1/23 18:34:42 [Instance Leader] L-L: there, all assist
1/23 18:34:57 [Instance Leader] L-L: crap, my guild's raiding Hellfire Citadel in like 10 min
1/23 18:34:58 [Instance Leader] L-L: I've got to go
1/23 18:35:10 [Instance] Y-A: Who's got timers
1/23 18:35:26 [Raid Warning] Y-A: XR
1/23 18:35:27 [Raid Warning] Y-A: XR
1/23 18:35:28 [Raid Warning] Y-A: XR
1/23 18:35:36 [Raid Warning] L-L: Y-A is your new leader. BOW TO HIM.
1/23 18:35:42 [Raid Warning] Y-A: <3

Before leaving, L-L attempts to find someone to take over the group so that they can continue the

completing events. First, L-L asks a general question to the group, then switches to asking specific

players who have recently stepped forward in some way, such as F-A who ordered the raid to

"REGROUP." Whether L-L randomly selects Y-A as the leader or responds to private message

where Y-A requests lead is unknown. When L-L finally leaves the group, a high player turnover is

triggered. I decide to leave as well, since I want something to eat and a break from the tension in this

Ashran. As soon as I leave the group, I realize that staying in the group for another 15 minutes or so

would be a good idea. I could observe the transition of power and see whether or not the group can

maintain its upward trajectory. After a few tries, I managed to rejoin:

1/23 19:09:51 [Instance] T-E: omfg this group sucks
1/23 19:11:48 [Instance] F-K: straight up GAVE them the AA
1/23 19:11:48 [Instance] F-K: good job
1/23 19:14:03 [Instance] A-D: what the hell is going on with this group

I quickly determine that the group has fallen on hard times and promptly accept the invitation to a

random battleground. Another hour or two will likely pass before the group succeeds again.

The Power of Leaders in Ashran

The above case study is rich with data. It requires multiple and integrated theoretical understandings of power to begin unpacking the mechanisms underlying these raw, aggressive, and occasionally offensive confrontations. In Ashran, the primary player objectives tend to involve completing the weekly quests at least one time. Due to both the sprawling geographic PvP area and that events are activated by game software at specific, timed intervals, completing the quests in a quick and efficient manner can still take approximately half an hour. This optimistic estimate is only possible if players are lucky enough to enter an Ashran event where his or her faction is competent. Additionally, players enter at different stages of quest completion. One player may need to win three events while another may need to kill the enemy faction leader before doing events. This creates timing discrepancies that impact which events and objectives are selected, generating conflict.

Since players have personal goals, they appear willing to be lead in the expectation that obedience will expedite goal attainment. Additionally, since most objectives require substantial numbers, it is to the benefit of players to assist with the creation and maintenance of a cohesive and successful group. This is best facilitated by leaders who intimately know Ashran mechanics and strategy, manage to acquire the sociotechnical lead mechanism, and garner the support of the raid group. By negotiating conflicts of individual, impositional, and tactical power within the structured software artifact/environment, leaders such as L-L are able to control the raid group. This creates a positive feedback cycle that enables leaders to maintain their positions of leadership by overcoming, dispersing, or preventing resistance.

Involution & Subjectivities: Understanding Dispersions of Power

In this chapter I examined the nuanced complexities underpinning nodes of conflict and the multiple ways players utilize power to negotiate them. Wolf's (1990) theorizations of power as individual, impositional, tactical, and strategic is clearly represented in this Ashran raid group's rise to success and its struggle to maintain that success in the face of competing leadership. Bourdieu's (1977[1972], 1984) theorizations on the recursively interactive nature of agency and structures, combined with understandings of habitus, doxa, and social capital illuminate mechanisms operating beneath arena and RBG player rankings and the drive to produce new, competent players. Ekbia and Nardi's (2012) expectant organization highlights how intersections of sociotechnical structures and human players create functioning systems that invert subject/object dichotomies in a Foucauldian gaze; where leader-teachers are integrated to fill holes in *WoW*. Throughout these theoretical discussions, Foucault's (1977[1975]) conceptions of surveillance tie the leader-teacher and the student-subaltern into relationships of inequality and political economy, while leaderboards, rankings, and live streaming underscore this surveillance as a disciplinary gaze turned inward. By integrating these theoretical constructions, the cycles of shifting power within disciplinary and normalizing sociotechnical structures become clear. They produce and reproduce endless variations as pieces of the system recursively react to one another but never substantively develop new structures. Aram Yengoyan (2001: xi) draws upon Alexander Goldenweiser's 1936 "involution" to describe this situation as:

> a pattern [that] becomes dominant and internally more and more complex but… cannot be transformed into a different or new structure. The structural parameters of the pattern become dominant and continually yield elaborations, but each of these changes is internal to the "crystalized pattern" which becomes virtually a straitjacket for future developments.

When players in Ashran seek a leader rather than utilizing a more communal approach in Ashran, it further ingrains the pattern of leaders' rise, reign, and fall despite each unique unfolding. The processes involved with teaching-leading new players to achieve PvP ranking, continuous player adaptations to game design alterations and code changes in response to their discoveries, and the communal random battlegrounds' consistent lack of incorporating lead as a part of game play are all examples of how these patterns have solidified the boundaries of what can be understood as normalized game play. A key point is that these solidifications of structures summarily prevent future developments. While this "delimits the nuances of power to the banality that everything can be reduced to power," it also opens avenues for anthropological approaches "to determine how power is multi-stranded and to what extent the cultural logic can "harden" or "soften" the overt and covert influences of power relations" (Yengoyan 2001: xii). The ways players explain and understand intersections and conflicts of power specifically within *WoW* PvP contexts affects the tactics and actions they undertake to negotiate them. How then can a shared desire, such as players who request someone to leadership in Ashran, be understood? One way is by comprehending that layers of conflict combined with expectations of power and leadership create player-shared PvP subjectivities.

In *WoW* PvP, players must determine their goals and make strategic choices to achieve them. These can both align or deviate from group objectives. Attaining effective leadership roles requires the acquisition of legitimately ascribed and acquired authority in addition to a meritocratic individualism, technical skill, and understanding of the PvP encounter. However, leaders must balance their own desires with the group's requests. Failure to do so results in competition from aspiring leaders that fractures groups into cliques, players attempting solo acquisition of their goals,

or players leaving the zone. These doxa underpin *WoW* PvP and occur in different guises based on the social and event contexts.

This collection of knowledge, actions, and anxieties collectively create a PvP subjectivity. I utilize Ortner's conceptualizaton of subjectivity as "the ensemble of modes of perception, affect, thought, desire, fear, and so forth that animate acting subjects… as well as the cultural and social formations that shape, organize, and provoke those modes" (Ortner 2005:31). Of critical importance in choosing subjectivities is the "complex set of feelings and fears, which are central to the whole argument" (37) and the "inherent anxieties about the fragility of order and meaning" (40). These are clearly visible in the Ashran case study of contested leadership but are also present in arena players' concerns with ranking and anxieties involved with finding a PvP partner. The centrality of emotion in this formulation is a key factor that impacts player perceptions and the explanations. Additionally, the way this psychological experience links subjectivity and politically dominated peoples provides ways of understanding PvP subjectivities situated in larger *WoW* contexts (Luhrman 2006:346).

Arguably, PvP subjectivities are actually imaginaries or cultural models. However, the values and other references that formulate understandings are drawn from larger cultural conceptions of individuality, competition, rewards for completing tasks, and value of skills which exist in *WoW* and video games in general, as well as in actual games such as sports. This, then, is where imaginaries assume relevancy. Charles Taylor (2002:106) notes that

> the social imaginary is that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy . . . it incorporates a sense of the normal expectations that we have of one another [that] is both factual and 'normative'; that is, we have a sense of how things usually go, but this is interwoven with an idea of how they ought to go, of what missteps would invalidate the practice.

From this excerpt, Taylor's description is eerily reminiscent of Huizinga's magic circle, the boundary that surrounds the game space but that has intimate relations with the larger world within which it is situated. Claudia Strauss (2006:329) similarly notes that some scholars view imaginaries as "the central world view associated with a particular group" or as "a concept that has spread well beyond the borders of any one group" where group members imagine other persons in their community.

This is problematic because it is possible for PvP subjectivities to comprise a shared worldview of a larger gaming community and, thus, constitute a social imaginary. However, the unique and complex values, systems, goals, and understandings discussed here are firmly situated within and rely upon the *WoW* PvP events, referencing "the ongoing work of reflexivity, monitoring the relationship of the self to the world" that constitutes a PvP subjectivity (Ortner 2005:45). This is clearly identifiable when ranked players habitually compare their CR to the leaderboards and top ranked players continually seek to discover advantages located within the software artifact. Software advantages are altered in turn, creating "a fully cultural consciousness [that] is at the same time always multi-layered and reflexive…its complexity and reflexivity constitute the grounds for questioning and criticizing the world" (Ortner 2005:46). It is also visible in both the leader-teacher of ranked PvP play and the meritocratic Ashran leader that "partially internalizes and partially reflects upon – and finally in this case reacts against – a set of circumstances in which she finds herself" (45). Additionally, the community of PvPers can be directly engaged via forums, in-game events, actual world tournaments, interpersonal relationships, leaderboards, and other on- and offline affinity spaces. It is more precise to say that *WoW* PvP subjectivities are situated in a larger MMORPG PvP imaginary, referencing the specific subjectivities bound within *WoW*'s magic circle, which are situated in turn within larger imaginaries of what PvP means to players of MMORPGs.

Utilizing these concepts, the Ashran case study of L-L and B-T's leadership struggle, and the raid group's response of either assisting or resisting can be constructed as conflicting imaginaries. The line is a fine one, since competitive and casual game play can be understood as imaginaries that are found in games and sports in a broader sense while subjectivities are contextually situated in specific circumstances. B-T and his supporters bring a worldview of PvP as competitive play to a pre-existing view of PvP as casual. Although this occurred in Ashran, it can just as easily occur in a rated battleground or ranked arena match. This illustrates the differences between PvP imaginaries and PvP subjectivities. Imaginaries are the view of play as competitive. Subjectivities are players' understanding of their position specifically within Ashran, a large group event where achieving personal goals requires group effort or, alternatively, arena players' subjective and reflexive considerations of their position on CR leaderboards. The *WoW* PvP subjectivity is bound by *WoW*'s magic circle. The circumstances and understandings specific to subjectivities only make sense within it, while PvP imaginaries can penetrate and move freely into and out of the magic circle.

In conclusion, the understandings and explorations of power, authority, and leadership discussed in this chapter help to more clearly conceptualize the ways broader social and behavioral conceptualizations are enacted in restricted and potentially stressful environments.

CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUDING REMARKS

> Well, I mean at the new expansion everybody's in the same area… you know you
> just start fighting somebody through there and you would see them in every zone, so
> you kind of make rivals in a sense when you're leveling up, so then as you're leveling
> you're like, "it's that asshole again, I'm going to try to kill him" or… you know you're
> about to kill a named [rare] mob and then they kill you before you get to, before it
> dies and then you don't have the tag on him and you're like "uughhh" you know?
> Just…that's just kind of fun with that competition. H-B

When H-B discusses the rivalry that emerges between players of opposing factions on a PvP

server, he speaks fondly about the ways that conflict is *fun*. Games are based on random events,

some level of uncertainty, and surmountable challenge. The ways risk, failure, and conflict are

interwoven has just as much to do with game success as narrative themes, and game mechanics are

critically important to game play (Johnson 2012). Throughout this thesis, I trace threads of conflict

as they interweave game mechanics and player actions.

Understanding power and conflict nuances require examining the range of structures that

underlie, restrict, shape, and enable the range of actions available to players. These are often based

within infrastructures and artifacts wherein players act and interact with each other and with the

artifacts themselves. Johnson (2012:33) asserts that "a game's theme does not determine its meaning.

Instead, meaning emerges from a game's mechanics." The meaning for *WoW* PvPers depends upon

the social relationships and game mechanics that frame their play. None of my participants discuss

meanings through frameworks of game narrative except for places it directly impacts game

mechanics, such as specific factions or races having advantageous PvP abilities or fun play styles. In

O-A's interview about the up-and-down chain in arena rankings and in R-A's account of teaching

newcomers to PvP, their emphasis is on establishing and maintaining advantageous social relationships. It is through such interactions between players and artifacts that conflict fluctuates. At times artifacts take on a form of agency that changes the dynamics of gameplay. Situations seem to take on a life of their own, such as when game software seemingly possesses a streak of helpfulness or when internet connections result in players' lagging out. In these cases, players often describe the game as intentionally setting out to impede their gameplay fun.

It is, therefore, important to utilize theoretical constructs that integrate potential for human and artifact agencies with conceptual spaces in order to account for variations and connections between and among these agencies, and to include larger positionality and disciplinary contexts. I argue that my *sociotechnical quilting theory*, complete with crafter and crafting station, provides the conceptual space to incorporate consistent and relatively immovable structures, semi-permanent artifacts, and fluid social interactions. This gives a holistic and nuanced model for conceptualizing players' experiences. Sometimes these layers bunch together such as when an optimal experience results in a flow state or when a combination of social and/or game resistance culminate in feelings of anger and frustration. Sometimes researchers choose to cut some sections away from others, as I do in order to focus on conflict situations within PvP. Researchers could choose to quilt these layers together with threads of a different theme, such as identity or addiction. All this occurs within the crafting station of disciplinary and theoretical approaches. Although I created this theory specifically within and for virtual world video game analysis, by drawing on multiple theoretical contributions regarding actions, agents, and artifacts it can be extended beyond game studies into sociocultural research as a way to discuss physicalities and materialities that are often the basis for social interactions. While it is a modest contribution to theoretical reciprocity (Falcone 2013), it is also

relevant for anthropology. It creates spaces to weave the sub-disciplines together by incorporating more materiality in sociocultural and linguistic studies and integrate multiple threads of social theory into archaeological and biological explanations.

My discussion of power, authority, and leadership within *WoW* PvP illuminates how interdisciplinary research on PvP subjectivities, imaginaries, and the magic circle are useful to analyze and player understandings and anxieties within the sociotechnical game world, simultaneously drawing upon larger sociopolitical and gaming contexts. Drawing examples from random battlegrounds, I show that players often focus on interaction and group communication and reject the necessity of central authority. Arena teams, while often created by a particular player, eventually morph into a similar type of group effort where power is balanced within the team. RBGs are an interesting cross between dispersed and centralized power where one or two people are typically in charge. Yet it also requires approximate levels of skill, ability, and dedication from all team members, where micro-flows of power fluctuate between players with different roles and abilities. A unique form of leadership is displayed by highly ranked PvPers who stimulate lower-ranked players to aspire higher. In this way, lower-ranked players' emulation puts ranked PvPers into positions of prestigious leadership, something I discuss in detail in the Ashran case. Although operating in different ways, teachers-leaders from all types of PvP, although operating in different ways, function both as parts of the technological game structures and as hubs of expanding social networks that stimulate social interaction and contribute to players' senses of the game world as vibrant and active. These leader-teacher and student-subaltern social interactions generate potential partners while using student-subalterns to generate in-game resources, co-opting their labor for personal gain. Additionally, cycles of leadership and group cohesion within the never-ending Ashran event foreground ways that power

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is acquired, contested, and transferred. Detailed considerations of these various influences within Ashran, when combined with unique interplays of power, discipline, resistance, and domination, suggest ways that PvP subjectivities are dependent upon perceptions of the seriousness of PvP play. These subjectivities fall along a continuum from casual and relaxed to high-ranked and intense. PvP subjectivities are located within the game's magic circle boundary, and both are nested within larger PvP imaginaries that apply to and across multiple games, worlds, and play styles.

<u>Disciplinary Contributions & Future Research</u>

Although *WoW* is one of the most-studied virtual worlds this thesis contributes to the scholarly corpus surrounding the game by extending research into new areas and topics. It augments understandings and research opportunities and contributes to the gap in virtual world scholarship pertaining to PvP. Regarding *WoW* PvP in particular, this research highlights how different game structures found in PvP events shape social interactions differently from other types of *WoW* play. Virtual world studies need to incorporate, or at least acknowledge, the game world's vastness and all the ways multiple types of play and player experiences interact on a macro scale. This enables well-founded and robust discourses that are dynamically responsive to the integrated and ever-changing digital-software game world. With its holistic and multi-level approach, anthropology has a role to play through integrating diverse individual understandings and behaviors with the artifacts, structures, and systems that are always present in the background. These considerations include areas such as actual world game requirements that suggest socioeconomic access, geographic location and infrastructure, technical knowledge and education, language competency, and sociocultural expectations and norms.

This research also contributes towards bridging the sub-disciplines in anthropology by incorporating materiality and artifacts into sociocultural and linguistic studies and incorporating archaeological perspectives of artifact interacts with social networks. This opens the door for biological research that integrates artifact, social, and linguistic perspectives to conceptualize the ways technology impacts humans and what these impacts mean for *homo sapiens*. Combining biological and archaeological understandings of in turn deepens ethnographic and linguistic understandings by providing fertile contextual frameworks. These in turn open new perspectives and forge new methods for examining nuanced complexities on the macro scale. For example, this research highlights the potential interactions of ethnographic research with linguistic discourse analysis and artifacts, and in a brief way extends analysis to include corporeal effects on players both physically and psychologically.

Additionally, this research begins to address the gap found in digital anthropology and interdisciplinary research that addresses conflict beyond issues such as gender, race, identity, and representation. A dearth of research exploring variations of power and conflict in virtual worlds at the multiple and varied levels of social experience, player action and alteration, and gameplay structures and mechanics still exists. By utilizing anthropological approaches to incorporate these factors and analyze the places they intersect, this thesis foregrounds the ways anthropology contributes to larger discourses on power and the ways individuals navigate conflicting and restrictive social, physical, or digital structures.

This thesis also explores broad cultural conceptions within gaming communities and by pairing these conceptions with analysis of specific, contextualized events, I contribute to anthropological understandings of human-technology interactions. While this is useful for

theoretical incorporations of materiality as previously discussed, this also lays foundational groundwork for future studies as technology continues to merge with our daily social lives. As global societies become increasingly reliant on digital and virtual technologies, now is a critical time to ensure that research keeps pace with these developments. Such work is necessary to create and maintain a nuanced understanding of the impacts of technology and to competently tend ethical and social concerns of representation, equality, and justice.

Therefore, the importance of how power is understood, utilized, and resisted within digital and virtual spaces will continue to increase. After the shift in anthropology in the 1970s to a power-centric orientation, there are still substantial gaps to be addressed in virtual and digital studies. The nuances of power explored here enrich these understandings by paying due attention to how underlying infrastructures restrict social conceptions of what power is, where it is located, and how it is used. For instance, in spite of perceptions of *WoW* as based on conflicts of authority and power in reality PvP events rely more on communal and egalitarian social structures than the game's themes, settings, and narrative disclose. Even the name, *World of Warcarft*, clearly invokes a process of perfecting war, and the current expansion *Warlords of Draenor* again emphasizes conflict, yet social interaction is paramount. The critical point here is that game mechanics and structures underlie and shape player social interactions, and accessing this interaction is only possible through inductive ethnographic approaches and in-depth analysis. Situated in an age of explosive technological advancement, the implications for the ways these hidden technologies channel social interactions is as diverse and limitless as the technologies themselves.

This thesis incorporates different types of data into ethnographic research, specifically video recordings. My forays in this area are limited by a lack of video manipulation knowledge as well as by

time constraints. Since technology has progressed to the point where collecting and storing video as data is both possible and feasible, their uses and efficient methods for organization and analysis need to be further explored. My feeble attempts to analyze game play data highlights the need to develop social research methods for video analysis that do not include analyzing the human body. Spatial analysis could be promising in this application. Gameplay footage analysis has potentials for comparing player behaviors or charting group organization and tactics. Utilizing video footage in an ethnographic or systematic way is applicable to other areas, both on and offline, such as in studies of diasporic movements or population-level reactions to catastrophes or outbreaks of disease.[61] This research also highlights and challenges conceptions of what ethnographic and anthropological fieldwork can be within digital spaces.

Yet there remains much to be done. This thesis is but an initial foray into the ways that conflicts of power are understood and navigated, and as this research shows, these actions operate at micro contextual levels and macro societal levels. Therefore, research into areas of PvP I have not covered, such as premade PvP groups, tournament play, twinking, role play PvP, and RBGs would refine and enrich these findings. Premade PvP groups would be a fascinating entry into how players subvert game processes by forming premade groups to join events specified as random. Tournament play would be an excellent path for anthropology sub-disciplinary integration, since these players compete in specific geographic locations, brand their toons and their personality, interact with corporations through sponsorship and advertising, interact with players in-game, and train their

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[61] For example, consider the Corrupted Blood pandemic in *WoW* in September 2005, which attracted the attention of epidemiologists. A software glitch enabled a deadly, spreadable disease to escape its designated confines and ravaged the player population for a week. Some players radically altered their playstyle in an attempt to avoid catching the debuff, while others ignored official direction to maintain quarantine (some rushed to heal other players while others intentionally spread the disease). http://content.time.com/time/health/article/0,8599,1655109,00.html.

minds and bodies to handle the stress of high-stakes gameplay. Twinking would be an interesting foray into considerations of subversive play styles, since twinks effectively stop the game, freezing it at a particular chronological time or toon level in order to play the game of the players' choosing.

Role play PvPers provide an exciting challenge to understandings of identity and performance, since players bring their actual world expectations into in-game role play. These players must justify hostile actions towards an enemy faction that they are technically at peace with, potentially creating complex intersections of actual and virtual world meanings. In these instances, variations on themes of power, conflict, agency, and resistance are so deeply integrated with issues of representation, gender, race, age, and identity that this also presents opportunities for holistic, four-field anthropological research. Building upon this thesis, comparisons of world PvP with arenas, and RBGs with raids, would contribute to understanding how authority and power exercised in one type of event operate in others of similar size, formation, expectations, and social structure. Finally, explorations of leaderless battlegrounds and Ashrans hint at interesting possibilities for examining rejections of leadership and authority despite explicit enablers within the game software. Does this point to larger implications for actual world social organizing, or is it innocent casual play? Does this have sociopolitical implications?

<div align="center">Beyond Academia: The Actual World</div>

As the introduction shows, video games impact the world in complex and important ways. This thesis in particular and virtual world research in general has a great deal to contribute beyond academia. At a basic level, this research contributes to dismantling the stereotypes and stigmatizations of video games and video game players, which are still strongly embedded in public sociocultural and political discourse in the United States. Illuminating how social theories cross from

the actual world to the virtual, digital anthropology and other digital ethnographic research foregrounds that people are people no matter where they are, what they are doing, or how they interact. Virtual worlds are as real as thoughts, dreams, and relationships, all non-tangible "virtual" things that have enormous impact on our societal, emotional, psychological, and physical health. By situating this research within known conceptualizations of social relationships and disputes, it contextualizes the importance in-game occurrences have for players. It attempts to shift non-player perceptions away from undervaluation and stigmatization of video games as "just a game," "not real," or an unproductive "waste of time," into an empathetic realization of how virtual conflicts impact actual people.

Additionally, by understanding how players use sociotechnical structures to navigate conflicts in different types of events, game designers can alter standards and procedures, modifying ways that players in sociotechnical-enabled positions of power are able to use that power. By doing this, game designers can utilize this information to create more peaceful gameplay experiences or generate greater friction in areas such as in-game governance, authority, and disciplinary action. What if an Ashran leader had the power to kick players out of the event? What if guild leaders had the ability to ban deviant toons? This also implicates interesting directions for simulations and experimentation with different forms of political governance within virtual worlds, where stakes are, arguably, less catastrophic. Analogously, as individuals conduct increasing numbers of actual world tasks and interactions online, virtual world research has interesting implications for existences that are more virtual than corporeal.

As video games move from sub- to mainstream culture, they become factors in legal cases and legislation, civil rights and social issues, and in crime and violence. Video games become tools

for subverting ideas, beliefs, and governments. Recalling the instance of theft and subsequent murder over a video game artifact from the introduction, current systems of redress separate crimes in the virtual world from actual court systems. Any such crime within the game world, or even actual world hackers appropriating player accounts, are handled by the customer service division of the game developer. This is laying a foundation for a system of policing, enforcing, and litigating disputes as parallel to legal courts, implicating that game masters and developers hold authority similar to legal judges. This raises questions beyond day-to-day litigation of thefts, harassment, or violence. What will this parallel judicial system look like in decades to come, as technology becomes ever more entwined with daily life?

MMOGs also crisscross national boundaries and foster international communities. In so doing, they transport the sociocultural values, beliefs, and understandings of their developers and players. Castronova (2005:233) considers how this could enable, support, or even foster terrorism, since many video games enable players to create and simulate actual world locations:

> there may not be any way to know what synthetic worlds the terrorists may be exploring. Yet as they explore, they are getting to know that particular world very, very well, and if it happens to be *my* world, well, their wanderings are fairly unnerving.

He continues this idea by noting that in virtual worlds, it is our minds that are exposed and thus vulnerable to manipulation, which has implications for security, since "the army must fight where the war is, and the war will go where the people are" (243). This is one of many ways that virtual world studies have potent implications for safeguarding individuals who interact in digital spaces from potentially hazardous situations. Castronova (2005:39) calls such situations "toxic immersion," where people may not even realize the danger they are in until it is already too late: "we cannot

expect the victims to cry out for help, for that is exactly the problem. They won't cry for help

because they won't know they are in trouble." Although this may seem alarmist, it was also

somewhat prophetic.[62] Therefore, digital anthropology and other social science disciplines oriented

towards online spaces operate at a historical juncture of online sociality with global issues of power,

conflict, and violence. This thesis, which grapples with meanings of power and authority that

operate within restrictive sociotechnical systems and are bound by artifacts, contributes to larger

discourses that infuse daily sociopolitical conversations around the world.

In conclusion, this thesis' focus on conflict and the ways players understand and behave at

social, structural, and infrastructural nexus highlights fundamental interplays that have impacts in

sociopolitical, judicial, enforcement, and even militaristic institutions. It also has implications for

game design, dispute litigation, social stigmatizations, and actual world expectations of games and

players. It does this by contributing to discussions of the various forms of power that permeate

society and are an integral part of everyday life, thereby normalizing in-game play experiences in the

eyes of non-gamers and illuminating the ways virtual worlds impact the actual world.

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[62] Consider, for example, how ISIS is using social media to recruit Westerners to their cause:
http://www.cbsnews.com/news/isis-uses-social-media-to-recruit-western-allies/.

APPENDIX A: U.S. SUPREME COURT OPINION

Syllabus

NOTE: Where it is feasible, a syllabus (headnote) will be released, as is being done in connection with this case, at the time the opinion is issued. The syllabus constitutes no part of the opinion of the Court but has been prepared by the Reporter of Decisions for the convenience of the reader. See *United States* v. *Detroit Timber & Lumber Co.*, 200 U. S. 321, 337.

SUPREME COURT OF THE UNITED STATES

Syllabus

BROWN, GOVERNOR OF CALIFORNIA, ET AL. *v.* ENTERTAINMENT MERCHANTS ASSOCIATION ET AL.

CERTIORARI TO THE UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS FOR THE NINTH CIRCUIT

No. 08–1448.   Argued November 2, 2010—Decided June 27, 2011

Respondents, representing the video-game and software industries, filed a preenforcement challenge to a California law that restricts the sale or rental of violent video games to minors. The Federal District Court concluded that the Act violated the First Amendment and permanently enjoined its enforcement. The Ninth Circuit affirmed.

Held: The Act does not comport with the First Amendment. Pp. 2–18.

   (a) Video games qualify for First Amendment protection. Like protected books, plays, and movies, they communicate ideas through familiar literary devices and features distinctive to the medium. And "the basic principles of freedom of speech . . . do not vary" with a new and different communication medium. *Joseph Burstyn, Inc.* v. *Wilson,* 343 U. S. 495, 503. The most basic principle—that government lacks the power to restrict expression because of its message, ideas, subject matter, or content, *Ashcroft* v. *American Civil Liberties Union,* 535 U. S. 564, 573—is subject to a few limited exceptions for historically unprotected speech, such as obscenity, incitement, and fighting words. But a legislature cannot create new categories of unprotected speech simply by weighing the value of a particular category against its social costs and then punishing it if it fails the test. See *United States* v. *Stevens,* 559 U. S. ___, ___. Unlike the New York law upheld in *Ginsberg* v. *New York,* 390 U. S. 629, California's Act does not adjust the boundaries of an existing category of unprotected speech to ensure that a definition designed for adults is not uncritically applied to children. Instead, the State wishes to create a wholly new category of content-based regulation that is permissible only for speech directed at children. That is unprecedented and

APPENDIX B: IRB EXEMPTION APPROVAL LETTER

University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board
Office of Research & Commercialization
12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501
Orlando, Florida 32826-3246
Telephone: 407-823-2901 or 407-882-2276
www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html

Approval of Exempt Human Research

From: **UCF Institutional Review Board #1**
FWA00000351, IRB00001138

To: **Rachael Marie Root**

Date: **July 13, 2015**

Dear Researcher:

On 07/13/2015, the IRB approved the following activity as human participant research that is exempt from regulation:

Type of Review:	Exempt Determination
Project Title:	Ethnographic Research of Player Conflict Negotiation in World of Warcraft Player Versus Player Events and Contexts.
Investigator:	Rachael Marie Root
IRB Number:	SBE-15-11361
Funding Agency:	
Grant Title:	
Research ID:	n/a

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please contact the IRB. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request in iRIS so that IRB records will be accurate.

In the conduct of this research, you are responsible to follow the requirements of the Investigator Manual.

On behalf of Sophia Dziegielewski, Ph.D., L.C.S.W., UCF IRB Chair, this letter is signed by:

Kanielle Chan

IRB Coordinator

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APPENDIX C: IRB INTERVIEW EXEMPTION APPROVAL LETTER

Approval of Exempt Human Research

From: **UCF Institutional Review Board #1**
          FWA00000351, IRB00001138

To: **Rachael Marie Root**

Date: **November 19, 2015**

Dear Researcher:

On 11/19/2015, the IRB approved the following activity as human participant research that is exempt from regulation:

Type of Review:	Exempt Determination
Modification Type:	Interview questions were uploaded and approved for use.
Project Title:	Ethnographic Research of Player Conflict Negotiation in World of Warcraft Player Versus Player Events and Contexts.
Investigator:	Rachael Marie Root
IRB Number:	SBE-15-11361
Funding Agency:	
Grant Title:	
Research ID:	n/a

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please contact the IRB. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request in iRIS so that IRB records will be accurate.

In the conduct of this research, you are responsible to follow the requirements of the Investigator Manual.

On behalf of Sophia Dziegielewski, Ph.D., L.C.S.W., UCF IRB Chair, this letter is signed by:

Kanielle Chap

IRB Coordinator

APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How long have you played *World of Warcraft?*
   a. How long have you PvPed?
   b. Do you have a favorite type of PvP? What is it?
   c. Do you have a favorite race or class? Why?
   d. Overall, are you satisfied with class balance in PvP?

2. What role do you prefer to play in:
   a. Arena groups?
   b. Battlegrounds?
   c. Zones like Ashran?
   d. World PvP?

3. Do you play for ranking?
   a. Why or why not?
   b. If so, how often and in what venue?

4. How do you prefer to group for PvP?
   a. Do you use any add-ons or out-of-game sites to find groups?
   b. If no friends are online, what do you do?
   c. Do you lead PvP? Why or why not?
      i. If so, how?
      ii. If so, do you prefer to target call?
   d. Do you prefer to organize your own groups? Why?

5. Do you have preferred strategies for PvP?
   a. What do you do if people in your group disagree?
   b. What do you do if people in your group don't follow the strategy?

6. What types of conflict do you see in PvP?
   a. Have you ever had to utilize a GM to resolve a conflict?
   b. How would you define conflict in PvP?

7. What if any modifications have you made to your User Interface and why?
   a. Are any of them specifically for PvP?
   b. What are some of the advantages and disadvantages of these modifications?
   c. Do you use macros or other add-ons specifically to enhance your in-combat abilities?

8. How do you support your PvP?
    a. Garrisons?
    b. Resources?
    c. Professions?

9. How much emphasis do you place on PvP gear?
    a. How do you typically acquire the gear?
    b. How do you manage honor and conquest points?
    c. What do you do with excess points?

10. Let's say you are going to start a new character for PvP. Walk me through your process.
    a. <follow up questions>
    b. Do you have any frustrations with this process?

11. In general, what do you think about the upcoming expansion, *Legion*?
    a. Do you like the changes they're intending for PvP?
        i. Separate PvP and PvE talent system?
        ii. No more separate PvP and PvE gear?
        iii. Cosmetic rewards?

12. Do you PvP in other MMOGs?
    a. If so, which ones?
    b. Do they require subscription fees?
    c. Why play other games?

APPENDIX E: RESEARCH TOONS & PVP EVENTS

Name: Xochiquetzal

Server: PvE-Anvilmar

Faction: Alliance

Race: Night Elf

Class: Druid

Specs: Balance, Restoration

Level: 100

Guild: FeralTron

Item Level: 713

Status: Main

Figure 10: Xochiquetzal

I created FeralTron at the behest of, and with the assistance of, in-game friends. FeralTron was an end-game progression raiding guild, and for several years I was both Guild Master and Raid Leader. I stepped down at the beginning of my thesis research, passing Guild Leadership to M-A (who I have interviewed for this project). Interviewees also include guild members O-A and E-A. R-A, K-U and L-L were previously members. Since then, the guild has stopped raiding. I continue to be part of the guild for sentimental reasons, especially due to the guild name, which has special meaning.

Name: Amaranthus	
Server: PvE-Anvilmar	
Faction: Horde	
Race: Blood Elf	
Class: Priest	
Specs: Discipline, Shadow	
Level: 100	
Guild: See Below	
Item Level: 702	
Status: Alt	

Figure 11: Amaranthus

For the majority of my research, Amaranthus was not associated with a guild. I eventually elected to join Demonic Prophecies so that a) I would stop getting guild invites and b) because Demonic Prophecies was the first guild to invite me that had a name I would not be embarrassed to be seen with.

Skirmashes & Arenas: 2v2, 3v3, or 5v5

Blade's Edge, Dalaran Sewers, Nagrand, Ruins of Lordaeron, Tiger's Peak, Tol'Viron

Battlegrounds:

10v10:

Battle for Gilneas: control locations to acquire resources (3 locations)

Twin Peaks & Warsong Gulch: steal enemy flag and carry back to base, capture-the-flag

Temple of Kotmogu: hold orbs of power to accumulate victory points

15v15:

Arathi Basin: control locations to acquire resources (5 locations)

Deepwind Gorge: control locations to acquire resources and capture enemy gold cache (3 locations)

Eye of the Storm: control locations to acquire resources and capture-the-flag (4 locations)

Silvershard Mines: escort mine carts to terminal points to acquire resources (3 carts)

Strand of the Ancients: use siege equipment to break through four gates to acquire the artifact

40v40:

Alterac Valley: capture towers and graveyards to reduce enemy NPC forces; kill enemy leader

Isle of Conquest: use siege machines to conquer enemy fortresses by killing enemy leader

APPENDIX F: ASHRAN PVP ZONE

The Ashran PvP Zone is a complex place and is unique in the current *Warlords of Draenor* expansion. Since Ashran incorporates aspects of both PvP and PvE, it is a unique event to study PvP type social interactions and potential sources of conflict on a larger scale. For this reason, in Chapter 6 I utilize an in-depth analysis of an Ashran event to illustrate the multi-faceted and quilted nature of PvP encounters. In order to provide background information and context to this and other discussions utilizing Ashran encounters, I have gathered basic information of relevance to this paper. I will discuss the geography, objectives, notable NPCs, artifacts, and game mechanisms (the batting; see Chapter 5's *Quilting WoW in PvP*). All screen captures were taken by Rachael Root; all copyrights belong to Blizzard Entertainment.

Ashran is a geographic location in Draenor, the alien world where *Warlords of Draenor* is set (*Azeroth* is the home world of most playable toons and the starting world of all toons).

Figure 12: The Three Worlds of World of Warcraft.

Figure 13: The Continent of Draenor.

Ashran is the island on the right side of the above map, and narratively is a contested zone; both Horde and Alliance factions struggle for military control. The Horde controls the northern tip, a place called Warspear, while the Alliance controls the southern tip, called Stormshield. These two bases of operation contain banks, auction houses, profession trainers, gear vendors, inn keepers, portals to all the major cities of the faction, and entrances to the Ashran PvP zone. Unlike other PvP events, players must physically enter the Ashran zone to queue for the event. Once queued, players are ejected from Ashran to wait for their turn, and most players wait in Warspear or Stormshield. As a result, these locations are bustling hubs of social and economic activates. Unlike almost all other PvP (except for World PvP), Ashran is an unending battle. Players cycle in and out of the zone, but the struggle never ends. Players entering an event can stay in the event for hours or even days (theoretically; I do not know of anyone who has done this, but it should be technically possible).

Figure 14: Map of Ashran Locations

In Ashran, the Horde leader is High Warlord Volrath (called Vol), and is located in a large

building in the Horde fortress (the red circle above). The Alliance leader is Grand Marshal

Tremblade (called Trem), and is located in a large building in the Alliance fortress (the blue circle).

The squares are the established footholds of each faction (Warspear and Stormshield), while the

circles are their fortresses within the Ashran PvP zone. The gold oval is the Road of Glory, which

has five strategic locations (factions plant their flag to denote control, and these locations are called

F1, F2, F4, F5). Crossroads (called XR, green box) is the third strategic location, located just above

my position, indicated by the small white arrow. It is especially valuable since it grants easy access to

the contested graveyard (green circle) and marks the boundary of the Horde-dominated sections of the Road of Glory (in the red triangle) and the Alliance-dominated sections (in the blue triangle). Control of these flags reduces enemy NPC resources in advance of an assault on the enemy fortress.

Crossed swords indicate the five events. The number 1 in the yellow circle indicates a quest objective. In this case the Ashran Excavation event is active. Dots are the locations of friendly players, with each color representing a specific class. When it comes to strategies, I will briefly state that successful groups are able to balance competing demands for specific objectives with acquiring resources that grant combat advantages.

Objectives:

A. **Quests:** these are objectives that are assigned to the player upon entry into Ashran. Of relevance are two main quests.

    1) *Slay Them All!* requires players to kill 200 players of the opposing faction, awards conquest points, and can only be completed once per week.

    2) *Ashran Dominance* requires players to kill the enemy faction leader and win four events, awarding 750 conquest points and a Champion's Strongbox which contains random items. Ashran Dominance is repeatable, although only the first completion awards the strongbox.

    3) All strongboxes awarded to players have a chance to randomly contain gold, honor, conquest, or gear. The type of box determines the value of the reward.

B. **Events:** five different events count towards *Ashran Dominance* completion. Each event gives the losing faction a 5% buff to damage and healing, stacking up to 50%. Each time the buffed faction wins an event, 5% is removed from this bonus. Killing the enemy faction

leader counts for this purpose. PvP combat tends to be most intense during these events, which are randomly selected by the software. Each victory grants a reward box.

1) Amphitheater of Annihilation (AoA): in the upper left corner, this event is a racing game where players stack in their faction's circle to boost the speed of their elephant.

2) Brute's Rise (BR): in the upper right corner, this event requires players to control bonfires that grant points. The first faction to reach 1,500 wins.

3) Ashmaul Burial Grounds (ABG): in the bottom left corner, the objective is to capture Risen Spirits, ghostly NPCs, using a channeled spell.

4) Molten Quarry (MQ): in the bottom right corner, the objective is to collect and turn in 20 pieces of empowered ore before the enemy faction.

5) Ashran Excavation (mines): in the center with an entrance near both faction bases, the first faction to collect and turn in 20 marks wins.

C. **Nemesis Quests**: if players have built a Level 2 Gladiator's Sanctum in their garrison, they are able to choose an enemy race to burn in effigy. This results in a Nemesis quest that requires killing 500 enemy players of that race. It can only be completed in Ashran PvP and is cumulative. Upon completion, players receive achievements, a race-specific title, and the opportunity to choose another race to hunt until all enemy races have been chosen.

D. **Broken Bones:** these are acquired when an enemy player is killed. If players have a Level 1 Gladiator's Sanctum in their garrison, they can turn these bones in for PvP resources such as honor, conquest, and green (uncommon) or blue (rare) gear, awarded randomly. This is especially useful for toons who just began to PvP and need to get a lot of gear quickly.

E. **Artifact Fragments:** these can be looted from enemy players, NPCs, or caches and can be turned in for faction resources such as portals, teleportation gates, and powerful NPCs that

attack enemy fortifications. They can also be used to purchase individual items such as grenades, potions, and rare toys. Turning in these fragments for faction resources grants honor, which is used to purchase blue (rare) PvP gear and crafting materials.

F. **Ancient Artifact (AA):** this item spawns at random places in Ashran and can be picked up by any player in the zone. Acquiring it grants a powerful buff that increases that player's damage and healing done by 200%. The player can drop the AA for another player to pick up. Killing the player also drops the AA. It is usually given to a well-geared ranged dps.

G. **Ring of Conquest (RoC):** this is in the center left of the map, and is the location of rare NPCs that drop items that grant buffs of limited duration to players and groups, such as scrolls that increase groups' movement speed or books that grant class-specific abilities.

H. **Achievements:** there are several achievements exclusive to the Ashran zone that can be acquired either solo or in group. Some of these tasks including killing all the rare NPCs, looting a body part from each of the enemy faction races, looting thousands of fragments, killing 5,000 players not in the Road of Glory, or completing each event once.

I. **Module Farming:** some players prefer to repeatedly kill rare NPCs, which have a RNG chance to drop one of a selection of modules that, when combined, enable players to create auction house access from their garrison. These modules sell for thousands of gold and so are a relatively easy way to make a lot of gold quickly. This is usually a solo activity.

APPENDIX G: FORUM DISCUSSION OF SOCIAL INTERACTION

Legion and WoW's problems

ADD A REPLY

Vagash ∨

63 Undead Warrior
675 🛡

#1
07/08/2015
+8

Hello,

I'll try to keep this short.

A lot of people find the direction WoW is going the last years quite troublesome (the Raid problems, the lack of social interactions and the completely broken 1-90 leveling experience).

I didn't watch the livestream but is Legion going to make some changes to these core gameplay things that cata changed?

Or is it just going to be more content (good or bad) for people to burn through in a couple of weeks?

Greetings and salutations

#2

Annaconda ∨

100 Blood Elf Monk
TeamWork
12980 🛡

#2
07/08/2015
+7

they showed some trailers and some "funny guy" held a long speech (addressed to 12 year olds) that the legion is evil and players must rise up and defeat them

---

Aurecante ∨

100 Human Paladin
Sanity Optional
22910 🛡

#3
07/08/2015

I'm looking for more social interactions too...

They talked about Class Order Halls, where maybe classes will be able to meet and interact.
But beside that, no idea.

There was nothing about professions nor about other new mechanisms. (something new could be, for example: consortiums of guilds to have "alliance of guilds", real and optional housing in cities or abilities for players to create custom vanity quests and share them with others)

Edited by Aurecante on 07/08/2015 08:49 BST
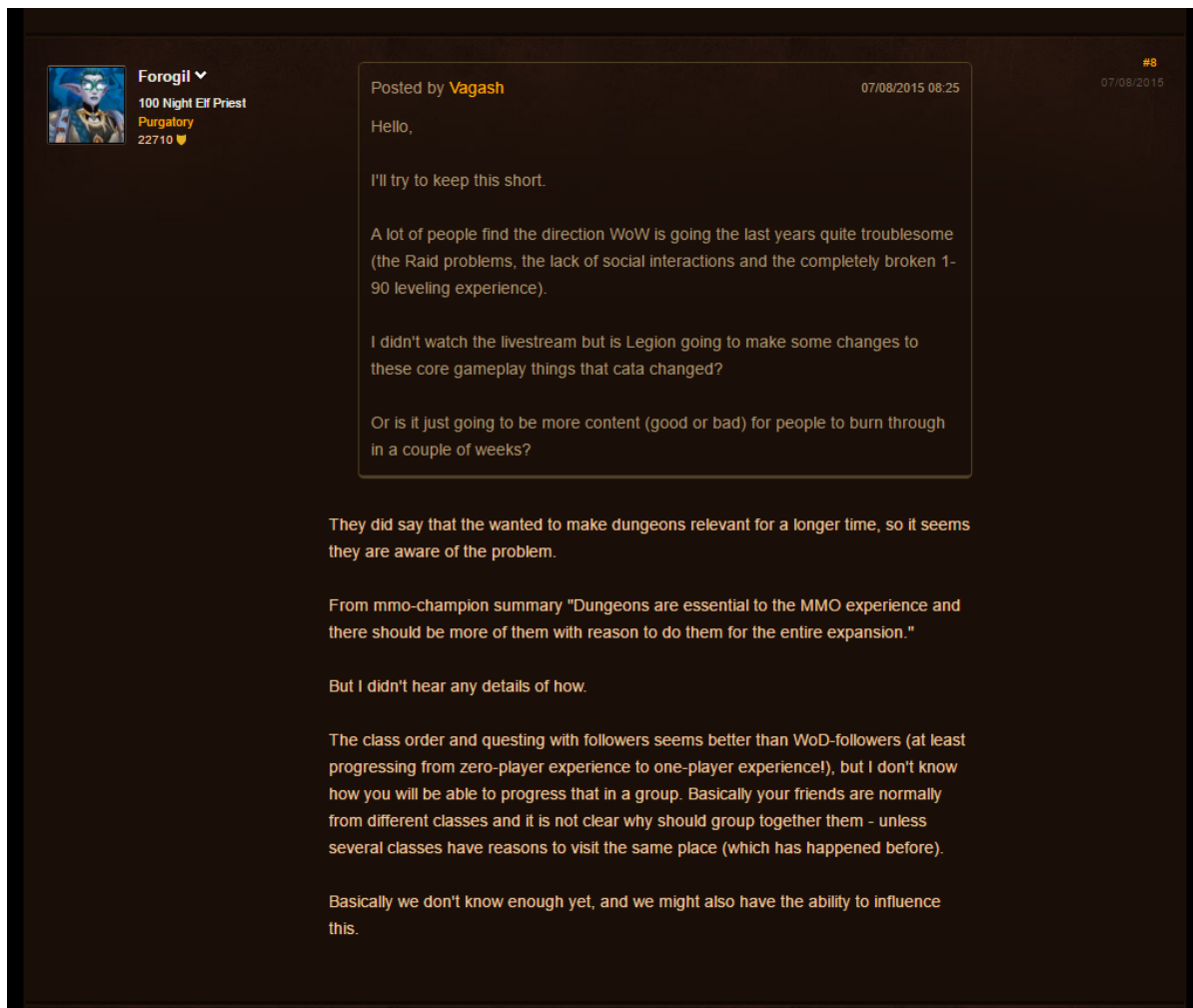
In these posts, players speculate about Order Halls, the new feature in upcoming expansion *Legion*.

They speculate (here and elsewhere) about the reasons for discarding the garrison model in favor of

a more social Order Hall, despite the fact that Order Halls will possibly be accessible only to certain

classes, restricting access to player's friends who play toons of a different class.

This series of posts can be found at http://eu.battle.net/wow/en/forum/topic/15161250482.See

also this Warcraft Reddit thread:

https://www.reddit.com/r/wow/comments/3x0izf/order_hall_resources/

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