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# Mediated Personhood and World of Warcraft: An Ethnographic and Linguistic Analysis

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# Mediated Personhood and World of Warcraft: An Ethnographic and Linguistic Analysis

## **Abstract**

Every day millions of video gamers flip a switch and disappear into a virtual world, striving to exchange the reality of everyday life for the fulfillment of computer generated dreams. World of Warcraft, a Massive Multi-Player Online Role Playing Game, is the most popular internet outlet for this gamer crowd, allowing players to create and inhabit a character in an extensive, realistic environment. The world created by this game not only invokes social patterns that parallel non-virtual culture, the game itself creates a unique mass-mediated form of culture among its players. The connection between the World of Warcraft participants is more than a bond between players; participation in the game results in 'sediments of personhood,' internalizable emblems of self that are created by the game and become available as portable emblems of personhood to players. The specialized lexicon used by the players and their extensive self-abstraction - they discard all major real-world characteristics to participate in the Warcraft world - infiltrate their own sense of identity and as well as the identities of the millions of other players. These internalized traits thus become shared forms of self-identification through which the players establish a group solidarity. The players of World of Warcraft embody a "public" that is both self-creating and self-organized within a "social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse" (Warner, 2002: 62), and whose mode of social existence takes both virtual and real-world forms in ways discussed in this paper.

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Mediated Personhood and World of Warcraft:  
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by: Elizabeth Marie ErkenBrack

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Dr. Asif Agha  
Supervisor of Thesis

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## Dedication

This Masters of the Arts thesis is dedicated to Marsha and Alesia, two of the strongest women I have ever been privileged to know.

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This thesis, first and foremost, exists as a result of the tireless energy of Dr. Asif Agha. I am grateful for such insightful guidance and his insistence on my very best work. I am similarly indebted to Dr. John Jackson. In addition to helping me find my own voice as a scholar, Dr. Jackson ensured that the more elusive elements of kindness and humor were intact throughout my academic process.

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Finally, I am nothing without those who hold my heart and sanity in their hands. I would not have written a single word without the patience, love and faith of my parents, Sarah, Liz, Kabe and Daniel.

## I. Introduction

The apartment living room is strewn with Mountain Dew bottles, Xbox cartridges, books, couch cushions, and magazines reflective of the four roommates' recreational preferences. The four 23-year-olds don't have an interest in keeping their house spotlessly organized. However, the large table dominating a half of the spacious room is impeccably clean, only holding six computers with relevant accessories and an occasional cup or plate. The four roommates and two visiting friends sit around the table, peering at their respective computer screens, each showing the same scene of an enormous animated hall and a collection of animated humanoids standing in the arched doorway of the hall. Each screen shows a slightly different perspective, as each player sees the perspective from their respective avatar, or animated character that allows them to move with this world. They begin a brief discussion regarding the imminent fight, a discussion which includes the players present as well as four other individuals located around the world whose voices come over the speakers and whose avatars are also poised and ready in the on-screen doorway. Suddenly a troll moves, an orc shifts, and a giant cat bounds into the hall. The fight has begun. And ten friends from across the globe focus their energies on their avatars within the virtual world of World of Warcraft, trying to collectively overpower the animated wizard standing in the middle of the hall.

World of Warcraft, or WoW, is a Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG) that boasts over 11 million players, a widely influential economy

(Castronova 2001/2006), and a virtual world<sup>1</sup> entitled Azeroth, making it both the largest MMORPG ever created and an excellent nexus of social and discursive information. Azeroth is a persistent<sup>2</sup> game world and is structured to enable a player to interact with dozens or hundreds of other players – through their avatars gesturing, talking, or fighting the same enemy – in real time. The average player spends 22.7 hours per week engaged in the game<sup>3</sup> through his or her avatar<sup>4</sup>, and most players spend several additional hours on the discussion boards and forums related to the game. Beyond these engagements, fan art, fan videos, and endless WoW blogs, wikis and websites abound, all created and maintained by WoW players. These are often used simultaneously, with players checking wikis or blogs for tips and secrets while engaged in the game, in addition to the constant out-of-game communication between players through by Ventrillo or Skype. This simultaneous engagement within the game along with other frames of participation highlights a player's ability to co-exist and orient to a variety of participation frameworks (Goffman: 1981) throughout the game play.

When considering ethnographic and discursive research of online communities, it is first essential to understand the structure of the interrelationships between participants within this digitized space. World of Warcraft (WoW) offers an illuminating example of the intricate social behavior and patterns at work in online communities. WoW players regularly engage in systematized patterns of behavior, while playing the game or while

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<sup>1</sup> Virtual worlds are defined as computer-simulated interactive spaces that present perceptual stimuli to the user, who in turn can manipulate elements of the modeled world. They often have 'rules' like gravity.

<sup>2</sup> A marker of an MMORPG: persistence indicates that the world continues to develop regardless of a player's presence within it. Rather than "freezing time" upon logout, WoW game time continues with or without player engagement.

<sup>3</sup> The Daedulus Project, by Nick Yee. <http://www.nickyee.com/daedulus/>

<sup>4</sup> A computerized character or representation that can move through a particular virtual space.



interacting with other WoW players. Their social structures oriented to their interactions with and through avatars create a culturally significant arena of laminated and multi-modal communication patterns. The goal of this paper is to analyze MMORPGs as a particular type of mediatized activity with connective tacit social structures, using WoW players as a specific example. Through this approach I am able to not only alter and clarify appropriate methodological approaches for mediatized interaction, but also tease out a greater understanding the social work that is occurring within these spaces. I will be looking at how the relative positionality between players is both created and represented and the multiple commitments of players evidenced in their speech. Throughout, I will be utilizing the discursive and ethnographic data to challenge the assumed discrete separation between the online and the offline worlds. These digital cultural spaces, where new enactments of linguistic ideologies and social structures converse with the foundational theoretical perspectives of the social science, provide salient examples of the understandings – and misunderstandings – we harbor regarding online mediated interactivity. This Masters thesis will work to clarify the relationship between the various frameworks within which World of Warcraft players are situated and the social realities the players are co-constructing through their discourse, as well as explore the specific discursive dynamics of player relationships.

Before we address these particular issues, however, a better understanding of MMORPGs, and WoW in particular, will prove useful. An MMORPG is a unique type of technological media: computer role-playing games where substantial numbers of individuals take control of their avatar and interact with each other within a persistent

digital world. *World of Warcraft* is an MMORPG born out of the earlier game *Warcraft* by Blizzard, WoW's parent company, and has become the most successful MMORPG ever, both economically and by numbers of users (ESA: 2008). Within the game, a player designs an avatar along particular guidelines<sup>5</sup> and interacts with both the environment of Azeroth and with other players through this character. One of the central activities of the avatar/player is completing specific quests, which include both discovering different areas of the game and killing enemies in order to collect money and equipment. A quest is the activity our 10 players previously mentioned were engaged in as they tried to kill the wizard. While a player must spend a significant amount of time on individual non-quest activities such as leatherworking or herbalism, boosting their respective skill sets and creating helpful gear – such as armor or potions – to be a useful participant in a guild<sup>6</sup>, the majority of play time is spent on these quests. As a player gets into more advanced levels, (s)he joins group quests where a player must work with other players – through their avatars of course – to kill powerful bosses. Again, this is what our 10 players were doing in fighting the wizard. Teamwork and completing one's individual role become absolutely essential in these types of quests. For example, if a healer's player decides that they would rather their avatar attack and not heal, the other members of the group will not be able to survive attacks and will die almost immediately. A player must know their job and stay focused on it. Much of the high-level game is spent either *raiding* – playing multi-player quests with a consistent set of companions – or *PvPing* – dueling other players – for gear, gold and prestige multiple times a week. Beyond this in-game

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<sup>5</sup> When designing a character, the player first chooses Hoard or Alliance realm, then race, gender, profession and appearance, in that order. These are all required, inflexible categories.

<sup>6</sup> Guilds are understood by players to be in-game association of [player characters](#). Guilds are formed to make [grouping](#) and [raiding](#) easier and more rewarding, as well as to form a social atmosphere in which to enjoy the game. (<http://www.wowwiki.com/Guild>)

interaction, both of these types of players (raiders and PvPers) participate in the discussion boards and forums, as well as create social groupings of friends based on their relationships within the game. The social relationships between players as they participate in the game, as well as the friendships outside of the game, become an intriguing point of cultural analysis which I will address, focused on the transience of orientations and positionality made possible by the technology.

## II. Theoretical Position and Engagement

Players engaged social interaction within World of Warcraft are oriented to multiple participation frameworks (Goffman 1981) and negotiate the meanings of these interactions through semiotic choices guided by their alignments to certain images of personhood (Agha, 2005). Thus, to analyze these interactions meaningfully, precise language use in analysis of these virtual spaces as participation frameworks is absolutely vital. The dichotomy between “real” and “virtual” (Turkle: 2005, 1995; Aneesh 2006; Jordan, 1999, etc) implies a discreteness to these frameworks of interaction that is patently false. It is also dangerous to refer to either online or offline environments as “worlds,” virtual or otherwise, as each involve participation frameworks that are tacitly and explicitly linked to each other. This is seen through the fact that an avatar’s movements and actions are only possible through the keystrokes and mouseclicks of the player. This can also be seen in the linguistic marking of the performative role of *player* or *gamer* which links the person in a non-digital participation framework to the wider digital participation framework of the MMORPG. The real-time interaction of the avatars, made possible through the indexical connections of keystrokes and mouseclicks,

thus enable a real-time interaction of the players themselves because the avatars and players are inextricably linked. Throughout my work, I refer to WoW as an MMORPG, not a virtual world, and make no attempt to linguistically distinguish between the online and offline environments, since they motivate and inform each other. I will also be using *in-game* and *out-of-game* as descriptors of interactive spaces in hopes of clarifying frameworks, although we have already seen that this is a potentially problematic distinction. I will entirely avoid making any distinction between ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ (Dibbell: 1998, Bartle: 1996/2006) or ‘synthetic’ (Castronova: 2005) environments with regard to these spaces, and argue that these descriptors hinder research of positionality and mutually oriented behaviors in digital environments. While the distinction might be helpful for answering research questions focused particularly the economics of online games which Dibbell (2006) and Castronova (2001/2006) both explore extensively, when considering questions of personhood, communication, and social behavioral patterns, drawing false distinctions between the two is a hindrance.

An MMORPG is a type interactive social media. Ethnographic treatment of this type of media deserves balanced consideration to ensure that it is recognized as *both* cultural artifact as well as an actual site of culture and cultural formation (Hine: 2000, 2005) with intertextual semiotic structures (Gee: 2003/2007). Rather than treating the internet as simply another example of material culture (Miller & Slater: 2002) or as a site of ethnographic research in and of itself without the necessity of considering the players behind the avatars (Boellstorff: 2008), I argue that understanding the wider social work occurring within these technologies necessitates a more nuanced understanding of the interactive possibilities at hand.

For answering questions as to the social impact of internet technology between and among multiple participation frameworks, Agha's register analysis (2007), Silverstein's (1995[1976]) description and approach to metaindexicality, and Inoue's (2006) indexical linking between media and gender ideology in Japan all utilize the semiotics of language to illuminate cultural influences on patterns and possibilities of behavior. They also provide theoretical groundwork for analyzing indexical links between frameworks of participation. These theoretical arguments are foundational to the concept of a public and the significance of the interactions analyzed here. Deconstructing the patterns of discourse allows us to focus on the underlying structures that create and perpetuate concepts of self and subjectivity<sup>7</sup>. Through coalescing the various aspects of these theoretical perspectives as viable and useful for exploring the interactive phenomena in MMORPGs, a precise approach to explanations of interaction within the digital space is made possible.

Warner's concept of a *public* (2005) can also serve as a theoretical foil for deconstructing the wider relationships between players of WoW. In order to do so, distinctions between the public he describes and the structures of a WoW public must be drawn. While I will focus on explaining the nuances of the distinctions, I invoke the majority of Warner's meaning in my use of his term. A public is defined by Warner as embodying 7 fundamental characteristics, the most broadly informative being that it is a "self-

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<sup>7</sup> The number of theorists who link language and subjectivity, like those who explore power and discourse, are too numerous to be mentioned exhaustively here. However, Alexander's (2005) analysis of linguistic constructions of a heteronormative state, Hall's (1993[1974]) encoding/decoding of ideologies and the subjective agency of interpretation, Latours (2007) proposal that technology acts as an active discursive subject, and Ang (1996)'s look at the intersubjectivity of mediated texts giving an increase in power to the audience all begin to tease out the relationships between language use, technology, and personal subjectivity.

organized” (2005: 67) “social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse” (90).<sup>8</sup> Warner’s public is created through an audience’s engagement with a book/verbal address/newspaper/etc and actively orienting themselves collectively to this media. While active engagement is necessary to create a public, this can manifest in various ways, on a spectrum from merely listening, to creating entire speech chains and communities oriented around the media. Thus, there are two spheres of semiotic activity necessary for phenomenon of a public: A.) the reading of the newspaper or listening to the address and B.) the active uptake: listening or talking about the material read or heard with others who have read or heard it<sup>9</sup>. This two-part process is important for understanding the first major distinction between Warner’s media and MMORPG publics. For Warner’s publics, only B – the interpersonal discussion – involves real-time social interaction, and in fact A often implies the absence of any. In fact, circulation of the media in his definition of public has a punctual historicity to it (2002: 95) that is absent in MMORPGS by design. For MMORPGs, both A and B necessarily involve real-time social interaction. Therefore, WoW publics, although also created by the reflexive discourse, differ in their interpersonal orientations to the temporal structure of circulation, a point we will return to.

In addition to these variant orientations to time, the different roles and degree of influence of the public in the media to which it is oriented differ between WoW and

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<sup>8</sup> A Public is: 1. self organized 2. a relation among strangers 3. both personal and impersonal in address 4. constituted through mere attention 5. created by the reflexive circulation of discourse 6. act historically according to the temporality of their circulation and 7. is poetic world-making.

<sup>9</sup> These two are thus linked through B’s presupposition of A, although A does not presuppose B; talking about material implies that one has read it, but being exposed to it does not inherently imply actively engaging with it or any future discussion.

Warner's public. Publics oriented to the MMORPGs are similar to Warner's, but the media to which they're oriented are often actually influenced or created by real-time action by the audience. Interpersonal relationships abound, but even extremely structured in-game action can reveal underlying agency beyond just development of personal relationships. As with any digital environments, activity within MMORPGs is subject to the implicit control of code. Since they are coded spaces, the underlying structures limit and orient possible patterns of behavior (Lessig: 1999) from the outset. Since computers now operate at such a high level, with most users interacting only with the interface, behavior that is not written into the code of a program is absolutely impossible. As a very basic example, one cannot write a paper in Spider Solitaire. Or chat with friends in the calculator. Behavior is limited to what the program has coded as its functional possibilities. Coding is one of the clearest structures of involuntary positionality and framing within the game of WoW. Since the players must interact with the environment in certain predictable ways – the characters can't fly, touch each other in any reactive way, climb trees, or be androgynous, this often renders avatars similar to Foucault's docile bodies (Foucault: 1995). The structures for behavior are naturalized and internalized to the extent that the players only consider avatar behavior within these presented realms of possibility. While an avatar is mobilized through the keystrokes of their player, the player's possible keystrokes are predetermined by the coding of the space. Interestingly, this predeterminacy is not absolute even with something as foundational as code. Direct confrontation to the coded structure is not possible, but unpredictable and agentic behavior – with widespread in-game interactive effects – is possible. Such in-game action occurring without designer or coder intent is evidenced in

the 2005 Corrupted Blood epidemic<sup>10</sup>. Briefly, what occurred was a high-level enemy would infect avatars trying to attack him with a contagious disease called Corrupted Blood, and the disease would spread among the 40 attacking party members. The disease would causing a fair amount of damage to an upper-level character and persist for a minute or until the boss was killed by the group. However, when designing this disease the designers were unaware of the common practice among high-level players to *hearth*, or return their avatars immediately to their home-base city, if an attack was going badly. Thus, in Corrupted Blood the players hearthed their infected avatars, bringing the contagious disease to their large cities and immediately spreading this powerful Corrupted Blood disease. Players figured this out almost immediately and, once the realm of possible behavior expanded, they were no longer predictable docile bodies, but rather they set out to see how much widespread damage they could cause with their avatars. While the damage done by this disease was irritating but non-fatal for the high-level avatars, it wiped out the lower level characters within seconds. Entire cities, and soon entire servers, were landscapes of skeletons of characters. Ultimately, the company had to reset every server back 48 hours, an almost unprecedented action. Not only is this an example of how players can behave in ways that the designers do not anticipate or structure even within this strictly structured space, but it also served to broaden the WoW public considerably. Because of the unprecedented action by Blizzard reacting to the unusually unpredictable avatar behavior, this epidemic led to dozens of mainstream media articles, in addition to being a prominent focus of WoW and technology blogs. The nested levels of communication – and the fact that the WoW players who caused the epidemic were the audience (among others) to their own mediated activity – highlight

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<sup>10</sup> <http://news.filefront.com/scientists-call-wow-corrupted-blood-epidemic-a-disease-model/>



precisely how the WoW public is itself unique. Even within a coded environment, the players' creative manipulation of their avatars creates and informs both the discursive publics oriented to this media activity and the media activity itself.

Understanding that even within the determining structures of codes, individuals can act agentively and unpredictably allows us to understand how players can become agents within the media to which their public is oriented. To produce media, one does not need to be a journalist, or even a public speaker: individuals can make significant impacts on these digital environments just as players. More importantly, the WoW media (the game) itself is completely dependent on the real-time interaction on the part of the player, and the communities created through it. This is an important distinguishing factor between the WoW publics, and Warner's public: the historicity of circulation, which is punctual in Warner's public (2005: 95) is for WoW, like other highly mediated form of circulation, "increasingly organized as continuous rather than punctual" (2005: 97). Azeroth is never turned off, by definition of being an MMORPG environment. In addition to the media's perpetual availability, the directionality of addressivity in the game is more reflexive. In a *public*, the point-to-mass unidirectional communication is the accepted frame of address, and mutual orientation among addressees is the basis of the relationship. However, for MMORPGs, the communication can be simultaneously point-to-point (between two players), point-to-mass (Blizzard to players), reciprocal communication (among groups and guilds), and massively parallel (among all players within the game at any given time). This multitude of directional and temporal possibilities of address lays the foundation for complex interpersonal relationships oriented within the media itself as well as discursive framing within the public that is creative rather than merely receptive.

Moving from examples of agentic behavior, the discursive frames and engagement obvious in discussion boards and forums for the game are one of many examples of the collective orientation. The overlapping participation frameworks between on and offline environments are also clearly evidenced in interpersonal relationships. The relationship development among players is dual directional: there are players who know each other outside the game and start playing together and there are players who meet through their avatars online and then develop this into relationships beyond the world of Azeroth as well. Of course, the vast majority of interactions online are with other avatars whose players will never meet in person, but this is standard of any participation framework: within workplaces or schools the majority of individuals interact only in those spaces. And, like these more traditional examples of social frameworks, there can be frequent overlap between them. This is clear if we look at the discussion boards and public forums for WoW.<sup>11</sup> First and foremost, there is a discursive distinction between Blizzard and the players, particularly in the use of *us* versus *them* by the players (See Appendix 2) and the use of *you* by Blizzard employees (See Appendix 1). The next prominent distinction is between a raider and a PvPer<sup>12</sup>, although this is often implicit in the discussion boards since the discussion boards are more frequented by PvP players. Raiding is most often done by guilds, which have their own private discussion boards to coordinate and discuss and offer advice. These two approaches to World of Warcraft – PvPing versus raiding – alter the type of game that is played. For raiders, WoW is a game of group activity and

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<sup>11</sup> <http://forums.worldofwarcraft.com/index.html?sid=1>

<sup>12</sup> PvP is player-versus-player and raiding is end-game multiplayer coordinated attacks on instances with specific chain-patterns of bosses. In PvP players fight other players, in raiding, they band together and fight computer generated enemies. Author interviews 5/4/2009, 9/7/09

collaboration, while for PvPers, WoW is a game of competition between characters. This then directly affects the frequency of interaction with the discussion forum and thus the structure of a WoW public. Since raiders work in groups and need private forums for large-scale coordination, to achieve their distinct goals in the game, they usually do not use the public forums. However, PvPers usually work on their own within WoW and thus use the public forums to ask and answer questions without the assumed group alignment. The very use-patterns of the discussion boards help us to see how the different alignments to the game can change the experience of the game itself.

Since the WoW media of the game is created through the real-time circulation of discourse, the public is then oriented to this discourse itself. The public forums through the official WoW website help us see how very different these PvP versus raiding experiences are despite the fact that they are interacting with the exact same environment. Their social engagement within World of Warcraft – how and why they play it – is the defining factor of how the WoW media actually manifests: what type of game and how it is played. Not only is the WoW public itself based on this reflexive circulation of discourse oriented to the media, like Warner's public, but for MMORPGs this discursive circulation on the part of the players can actually define the same media to be different games. So then the players, whose public is made manifest through these discussion boards, are engaged in different media experiences. A PvPer and a raider could play in the same area of Azeroth and then enter into the same forum and the same thread within that forum and still be completely unaligned. The reasons for playing and interpersonal

alignment then become as important to the structure of the publics as the actual media itself.

Within a public, “the discourse is a linguistic form from which the *social conditions of its own possibility* are in large part derived” (2005: 105, emphasis added), a statement which reveals the impact of Butler and Foucault on Warner’s thinking. The discursive elements of the game manifest beyond the realm of the WoW: it’s common to hear WoW players claim “pwned!” when they perform particularly well (e.g. score a goal or ace a test), call someone a *noob* for inept behavior unrelated to the game, or use WoW as a verb in general conversation. These serve as iconic identifying markers of the World of Warcraft register across participation frameworks, enabling alignment among players in out-of-game environments. The particular terminology of the game, from the names of bosses (e.g. General Vejax, Yogg-Saron, Auriaya) to particular gaming lexemes (e.g. nerf, gear, endgame) all serve as metasemiotic indices of WoW participants. The official WoW forums provide much discursive information, highlighting how the different orientations to – and patterns of engagement within – WoW create a variety of possible interpersonal alignments. There are a wide variety of public forums maintained by Blizzard, covering everything from customer service to guild relations to game suggestions and Blizzard’s responses. In this way, the forums automatically delineate the types of audiences through their various titles for these forums: if you are a beginner, there’s a forum for that. If you’re an arena player, a Hoard member, or a participant in their conference *Blizzcon*, you already have your semiotically marked forum ready for you, made obvious through the lexical identity markers. The discussion boards themselves create publics, obviously. But more importantly they illuminate for us the

distinct publics oriented to the WoW media, not just through the top-down delineations by Blizzard's labeling of the forums, but also through the players' own understandings of the game.

A raider will disregard the advice from a PvPer for most situations since the focus and rules of the game are entirely different. This is also true experienced players versus new players, another prominent distinction between players on the forums. This distinction based on level of experience is made clear through the discourse deployed in discussions and the unhidden mocking that can result. For example, when a forum participant asks about freedom of speech in the forums (See Appendix A), the responses include both serious answers and mocking use of WoW lexicon. The responses "you're in Blizzard's house" and "Blizzard isn't the government?" both have a slight mocking edge to them and the presupposed knowledge of Blizzard, but they metapragmatically answer the question. This is a common treatment of newbs: teasing but informative. Conversely, "too obvious" and "I like speaches and cream" (a mocking referral to the misspelling in forum title) only serve to mock without answering the question. The "/points at terms of use" answer is particularly interesting since it assumes an understanding what a slash command is<sup>13</sup>. Depending on the register competence of the original author, this can either work in a similar way to the teasing but informative, or be a sharp mockery for a lack of in-game discursive ability laminated onto the inability to answer their own

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<sup>13</sup> Slash commands are used to make your character do something. Thus, a /wave will make the avatar wave. /chicken will make them cluck, usually at another avatar. And /dance will cause them to break into dance. They can either be interactive or not.

questions. The distinction between *1337*<sup>14</sup> - or elite – and newb players laminates on the distinctions between PvPers and raiders. While *elite* and *newb* are distinctions of skill that inform social interactivity between players, the PvP and raiding distinction is one of type of game played. And both inform the game in fundamental ways, making it different depending on which classifications a player aligns with. Azeroth, while coded and structured identically for all players, is fundamentally different depending on the alignments of the players. A WoW public, then, is also dependent on a mutual understanding of the game among the audience, most easily seen between PvP and raiding motivations. And this understanding is strongly dependent on the relationships between players.

In order to help tease out my theoretical understanding of this relationship, let us now look at the interpersonal relationships between players. The concept of self and identity in MMORPGs or other online spaces is a determiner of the relationship between social motivations in-game and out-of-game. These relationships develop in one of two directions: either the players know each other beforehand and play WoW together, or they play WoW together, mediated through their avatars and become friends<sup>15</sup>. The links between the participation frames both in and out of the game are evidenced in this dual-directionality of relationship creation and maintenance. Friends play WoW together in order to “stay in touch” or “do something fun together” or “because we both like the

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<sup>14</sup> 1337 is pronounced “leet” for elite. It’s etymology is based in hacker speech, where numbers and symbols are used instead of letters so that hackers can communicate online without detection or the ability to be widely understood.

<sup>15</sup> Meeting isn’t necessary for WoW player to consider each other friends, and the loyalty and affection that raiders feel toward their guildmates exists regardless of any face-to-face interaction. (interview 8/15/08)

game”<sup>16</sup>. While certainly interesting, this motivation for social interaction is not unique in any way to the environment. People have been staying in touch and doing things they both enjoy for millennia. But MMORPGs, like other digital social spaces made possible through the internet, have expanded the possibility of establishing relationships with individuals, despite a lack of face-to-face contact. And while penpals, etc, mimic this behavior, the internet allows these distant social interactions to happen in real time and with multiple individuals co-present. Geographic location has no structural meaning to the possibilities of online interaction, beyond the server suggestion<sup>17</sup>. Acquiring gradual personal knowledge of offline players can both affect the online interactions as well as create relationships entirely external to the game itself. Friendships arise, parties occur, and face-to-face interaction comes to fruition, all oriented to WoW. The online relationships can also affect other offline relationships before players even meet face-to-face. Relationships between players of a romantic nature can cause distress and divorce in co-habiting couples. More optimistically, players can fall in love while playing the game together and sustain long-term, serious romantic relationships.<sup>18</sup> Guild members will fly each other across the country for guild parties and reunions<sup>19</sup> and drive extended distances for funerals and support in times of crisis (Rheingold, 2000). Beyond developments of loyalty and time/money/emotional investment between players simply through their engagement with each other in this environment, the behavior within the game itself changes based on understandings of the out-of-game person behind the avatar. For example, if a player is behaving incorrectly (e.g. attracting attention when

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<sup>16</sup> All from interviews by the author with WoW players 6/5/08 and 8/15/08

<sup>17</sup> Immediately upon setting up a WoW account, the player chooses a server, which is initial set up based on continent and time-zone, but this is completely malleable.

<sup>18</sup> Author’s fieldnotes 5/5/06, *Second Skin Documentary* (2008)

<sup>19</sup> Author’s fieldnotes 5/2/09.

they are supposed to be healing, or failing to cause enough damage if they are supposed to be attacking), the behavior will frustrate the other players in the group. Often, within casual groups of players who do not know each other outside of the game, the faulty player will be labeled a noob, a newb, or a n00b<sup>20</sup>. However, when the group knows the badly-behaving individual and has knowledge of previous of behavior as a comparative base, they give him/her the benefit of the doubt rather than scorn. Even if the player is new and incompetent, a great deal of teasing effort will go into training them and improving their play ability. This serves as a very brief example of how the relationships within the game thus not only create and inform relationships external to it, but they also change the experience of playing the game through the mutual understandings and orientations of the players.

In analysis of WoW interactivity, Warner's publics are also manifest in the counterpublics that arise. These counterpublics, "are defined by their tension with a larger public. Their participants are marked off from persons or citizens in general" (Warner: 2005, 56). Within the WoW public, there is a vocal queer counterpublic oriented to the gendered and sexualized spaces within WoW. While physical relationships of any kind are impossible between the avatars, and paired relationships are not the focal point of any aspect of WoW gameplay<sup>21</sup>, gender is inescapable. Upon selecting a character, a player is required to choose a gender, and the disparate appearances between male and female

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<sup>20</sup> Interview between author and 4 WoWers, 8/17/08. A noob is a vaguely untalented player who should know better, a newb is just new to the game and thus doesn't behave correctly, and a n00b has the worst connotations of a player who has been told repeatedly what to do and either intentionally or unintentionally continues to behave badly.

<sup>21</sup> WoW is based on social solidarity on large and small scales, but not paired individuals. Unlike Second Life, and other MMOs, which have the programming for avatar interaction and structures oriented to relationships, the romantic possibilities of WoW are peripheral. Although characters are able to flirt discursively.



characters are stereotypical and startling. This mirrors Butler's (2004) critique of the discursive structuring of gender possibilities, particularly the social imposition of a gender as necessary, and the resulting implications relating to interpersonal positionality and performativity. Similarly, the forced choice of a character's gender is highly influential to in-game social behavior. The variation in treatment of my two characters is startling: my smaller, voluptuous, female troll named Raymi routinely receives gifts, money and help, for nothing in return. However, my large, muscular, nose-pierced tauren (cow) male hunter named Riti has never been offered any assistance in the many months of play. Despite the fact that both characters are controlled by the same 28-year-old with the same degree of skill and understanding (or lack thereof), the avatars are treated entirely different by the other players who don't know the player behind the avatar. My friends and informants treat both my avatars equally nicely, with open offers for help and advice. Based on this clear gendered treatment – evidenced in the example of my two gendered characters and the different treatment they receive from other players for nothing other than an aesthetic distinction – a small but vocal queer counterpublic argues that such structures are only perpetuating the archaic ideas of possibilities of personhood. Even within a fantasy game, the gender binary remains.

This focus on sexuality and gender is intriguing because within the game there is not capability for physical intimacy between avatars beyond co-presence. Issues of intimacy are one of the fundamental foci for several foundational theorists in the social sciences because of sexuality's structuring influences on society (see Habermas (1991); Foucault (1990[1978])); or Butler (2004) for contrastive perspectives regarding sexuality and subjectivity). These discourses surrounding a prevalent ideology within the social

sciences manifest interestingly within WoW social structures and the resulting WoW public(s). The issues of sexuality WoW game media should be moot since sexuality is based in possibilities of intimacy which are impossible in the digital environment. This serves as a very clear reminder that the participation frameworks of in-game and out-of-game interaction overlap and mutually inform each other. Despite the lack of intimate sexualized possibility in-game, the wider out-of-game social ideologies and sexualized possibilities of gender and sex are made manifest through interactions in the game. Clearly, although there has been a “transformation in the cultural forms of intimacy...related to the modern discourse of sexuality as a fundamental human capacity” (Warner: 2005, 199), the structures of gendered intimacy remain consistent. With heteronormativity as both a “fundamental motor of social organization in the United States (Warner: 2005, 205), and inescapable within WoW, the presence of sexuality and its effect on the public is clear. The characters, with their stereotypically cartoon depictions of ideal body types - my impossibly svelte and well-endowed troll, for example – reinforce many of the prevalent and tacit assumptions about possibilities of embodiment. These link to other tacit understandings of intimacy based on embodiment rather than performativity, given the impossibility of performative intimacy. Within WoW, gender distinction is an inescapable, socially informative infusion of social meaning across frameworks.

Beginning research of digital environments and MMORPGS with the understanding of mutual alignment and links across the participation frameworks clumsily marked ‘virtual’ and ‘real’, allows social science to bring the social phenomena in these spaces into the theoretical conversation. Exploring the broad social implications of digital environments

is essential as this mediatized activity unveils persistent ideologies, (e.g. positionality, performance, and binary gender distinctions) as well as new social structures, (e.g. massively parallel communication among interactive participants). Understanding the false binaries applied to these spaces, and instead approaching the environments as mutually informative participation frameworks, enables an understanding of the social work they are doing both within their own coded walls and far into the other frameworks of their 11 million participants. Using the concept of a public and counterpublic to understand the individuals oriented to WoW, allows us to see that there are mutually aligned populations oriented to the game through the reflexive circulation of discourse. While the distinctions between Warner's public and an MMORPG public are necessary in order to precisely understand what is occurring, the similarities in discursive structuring and broad audience alignment allow us to highlight the patterns within social behaviors. Whether reacting against the gender structure or deploying the marked WoW register in out-of-game contexts or flying across the country to meet an Orc Warlock friend, the players create a public poetry of their world through their alignment to the game and each other.

### III. Discourse analysis and Player Engagement

#### **Introduction**

As discussed above, the assumed distinction between in-game and out-of-game behavior is untrue and analytically problematic: player and avatar are indexically linked. Avatar movement is made possible through the player action, and the motivation behind the player keystrokes is often informed by on-line – not necessarily in-game – details such as blog entries or advice from discussion boards. For example, how a player decides to

engage their avatar in battle is often based on advice from the blog and wiki sources. In addition, a great deal of behavior is certainly motivated by in-game interaction and voice or instant-message discussions between players. Analyzing these supposed boundaries reveals a nuanced understanding of relationships between WoW players and the game media, as well as the social work these discursive relationships are doing.

The focus of this section is to explore MMORPGs as a particular type of mediatized discursive activity with connective tacit social structures, using WoW player discourse as an example. Through applying traditional sociolinguistic analysis to this particular type of online technology, we are able to not only alter and clarify appropriate methodological approaches for mediatized interaction, but also tease out a greater understanding the social work that is occurring within these spaces. These digital cultural spaces reveal how new enactments of linguistic ideologies and social structures provide salient examples of the understandings – and misunderstandings – widely harbored regarding online mediated interactivity.

As a brief reminder: precise language use in analysis of these virtual spaces is absolutely vital. The dichotomy between “real” and “virtual” (Turkle: 2005, 1995; Rheingold, 2000; Jordan, 1999) or labeling online spaces “worlds,” virtual or otherwise, implies a discreteness to these frameworks of interaction that is methodologically misleading. This is seen through the fact that an avatar’s movements and actions are only possible through the keystrokes and mouseclicks of the player, or the lexical marking of the performative role of *player* or *gamer* which links the person in a non-digital participation framework to

the wider digital participation framework of the MMORPG. The real-time interaction of the avatars, made possible through the indexical connections of keystrokes and mouseclicks, thus enables a real-time interaction of the players themselves because the avatars and players are inextricably linked. For questions of the social and linguistic work in creating and maintaining personhood, community, identity and communication, it these dichotomies are not useful as a theoretical foundation.

Since language use in analysis of MMORPG phenomena is so important, in this section I will refer to WoW as an MMORPG, not a virtual world, and make no attempt to linguistically distinguish between the online and offline environments, since they motivate and inform each other. To help highlight the interrelationships between these frameworks, my analysis will be based within the theoretical scope of semiotic registers (Agha 2007) and discursive footing (Goffman, 1981).

### **Registers, Enregisterment and Discursive Footing**

For this chapter we are interested in what social work the discourse oriented to World of Warcraft is actually doing. To this end, I will be invoking Agha's (2007, 2005; see also Duranti 2001) concept of registers as "reflexive models of language use that are disseminated along identifiable trajectories in social space through communicative processes" (Agha 2005; 38). As a reflexive model of language use, registers consist of both linguistic and non-linguistic signs that are associated with a particular social type of person. A rather simplistic, but effective, example can be seen in an individual dressed in scrubs with a stethoscope around his/her neck perhaps saying "50 CCs" or "endocardiogram" or "it seems to be acute sinusitis." The linguistic signs work with the

non-linguistic signs to position this particular individual as a doctor or other medical professional. Many individuals can recognize this without needing to be told the person's profession because of our social ability to recognize embodiment of registers. Register analysis allows us to see the dynamic process of language through time and among users since language is itself a particular model of personhood. Thus, encounters with registers are "encounters with characterological figures stereotypically linked to speech repertoires (and associated signs) by a population of users," (Agha, 2005: 45). Importantly, registers illuminate performed personhood far beyond professional positions like the doctor. Often the way one speaks will cause others to make assumptions about, perhaps, education level, area of origin, and economic status, just to name a few. In other words, the reflexive models of language use – which we understand registers to be – serve to dynamically create and perpetuate structures of personhood within particular populations. As we will see, the transcribed discourse presented in this paper is not only indicative of the social positions that the individuals are inhabiting within the situation, but also reveals the consistent negotiation of this footing (Goffman: 1981). The muted materiality of this discursive process becomes apparent through the lens of a semiotic register analysis. And through this analysis we are able to see various aspects of how the discourse itself is revelatory of the emergent social relationships that are themselves constructed through language use.

MMORPGs are necessarily multi-faceted discursive engagements since they involve multiple social environments. Registers are a way of beginning to understand what the language use is actually doing in terms of social reality. In World of Warcraft (WoW),

the many different layers of discourse include but are not limited to the “WoW register.” The resultant text, as represented in this paper through the transcript, has both denotational and interactional coherence (Silverstein & Urban: 1996). That is, in order for this communication to have been successful<sup>22</sup>, the individuals need to actually understand what is being said (denotational coherence of discursive reference) and to recognize their socially organized regularity (interactional coherence) within the exchange. Within the game, individuals need to understand particular vocabulary and grammar unique to World of Warcraft as well as the relationships to each other as players and as avatars. These various elements are all apparent within the excerpts of text presented later, as they are in any successful socially discursive exchange. In addition to the necessary coherence, the use of voice (Bahktin 1981, 1984) indexes particular types of personae. Speech forms are then semiotic expressions that can materially link the speaker to typifiable images of personhood. Not only is successful discourse denotationally and interactionally coherent, but it is also doing social work among the participants by linking speakers to particular inhabitable images of personhood through the voicing of registers.

Understanding voicing allows us to look at the process of role alignment, or “patterns of relative behavior...focus[ing] on the expression of voices and figures in the behaviors” (Agha 2005a: 53). Footing (Goffman 1981) is then a particular type of role alignment that focuses on participation in “coordinated task activity” (1981:144). World of Warcraft play is a fascinating example of this since the technology enables such a task activity in real time without the necessity of face-to-face interaction. Role alignment, evidenced through the voicing, which is itself implicitly enregistered, allows us to make more

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<sup>22</sup> For discussions on successful and correct reference see: Donnellan, K. 1990 [1966].

transparent the social negotiations at work through interactive use of discourse. Both Hanks (1996a, 1996b) and Irvine (1996) also show us that the complexity of role distinctions within a particular discursive context are highly varied and intrinsically connected to the communicative nuances in the event. To be able to analyze discourse then necessitates access to the cues within the event understandable only through contextualization. As a result, studying discourse necessitates an understanding of the context in which the language is being used and the social work that is being done in addition to any linguistic data.

### **Discourse Context**

In order to provide a “plausible, minimally rich account of the meaning and effectiveness of discursive interaction that has some predictive power” (Silverstein 1998: 272) the context to a discursive event must be presented. In the particular excerpts below, the transcription covers a group of WoW players as they prepare and implement an attack on a boss in World of Warcraft. There are a total of 12 speech participants, although not all are represented in these excerpts, and importantly not all geographically co-present. In the room with me, the researcher, were 5 individuals: four WoW players on their computers – represented as K, M, Jo and S – and a friend who plays WoW but is not playing in this instance, represented as R. All five have logged hundreds or thousands of hours on the game and have fought this particular boss multiple times. I (L) am videotaping, audio taping, observing the play and participating in the conversation as a researcher and a less experienced player of WoW. In addition to the 6 of us in the room, there are 6 additional players – represented as A, Cr, J, Je, Ma, and C – who are not in the



room but whose avatars are co-participating and whose voices are heard over Teamspeak<sup>23</sup>. While these six are geographically situated in Florida, New York and Paris, they are audibly present through Teamspeak and visually co-present through their avatars. The 10 players are able to speak to each other through Teamspeak and type to each other in the game in instant-message fashion. I captured recordings of all the discourse both in the room and over Teamspeak as well as video-captured the discourse on-screen. Both myself and R, the other non-player, were only able to participate in the in-room discourse. Thus, the transcript reflects three different levels of communication: the in-room – but not Teamspeak – linguistic and non-linguistic communication, the Teamspeak discourse, and the in-game typed discourse. Adding to the complication of this already layered exchange is the fact that the game itself produces some of the typed, im-esque discourse in the game, voiced by the computerized characters the players encounter.

To summarize, within the transcript there are four laminated types of discourse within this particular event. In the continued interest of clear language choices in my analysis, I will be using a. on-screen (OS), b. in-room (IR) and c. Teamspeak (TS) as descriptors of these different frames of discourse, with the fourth being onscreen typed discourse. Recall that these are only to clarify different frameworks of social participation and not meant to devalue the interrelatedness and blurred lines among these frames. For example, discourse by the four players in the room can simultaneously be Teamspeak and in-room, the difference being the size of the intended audience. The transcript itself indicates three

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<sup>23</sup> Teamspeak is a scalable software that enables people to speak over the internet. Similar to a conference call, one must also have the correct sign-in to a server and channel information in order to gain access to the discussion. The technology is designed especially for gamers of MMORPGs

different frames for the four types of discourse, collapsing the on-screen discourse of the players and the computerized characters since they appear the same within the game and inform behavior in similar ways. With this context in mind, we can begin to explore how interpersonal relationships are negotiated, polycentric commitments of players are made apparent, and the influence that the discourse has on behavior is various frames.

### **Interpersonal Alignment**

In the excerpt that follows, we see both the ongoing negotiation among players within the game and the presupposed knowledge evident in word choice and assumed behavior. The enregistered voices (Agha: 2005), or voices tied to a register, link social character to an individual's discourse. As with every social interaction, the players present selves that are figures constructed and projected through narratives oriented to past encounters (Haviland 2005). This relationship between the self and the narratives informs interactions between the players and formulate the interpersonal footing at work. The dynamically constructed relationships are then inherently linked to previously encounters. In World of Warcraft, previous experience within WoW provides an understanding of the terminology, requisite behavior, and necessary group dynamics for all the participants. In this example we will look at emergent forms of expert and novice positionality. For example, in WoW, expertise is based on a combination of time commitment, previous experience in any given encounter, and the ability to appropriately utilize an avatar's abilities. In any given situation where multiple individuals are playing together trying to beat a boss, the roles of expert and novice will come into clear relief. In this excerpt, while all of the participants have logged hundreds of hours in the game, A has never fought this particular boss before. Jo and M, in contrast, have both played against this

boss many times and also play avatars which are well known within the game as being two of the most elite. As we will see, Jo and M are both oriented to the preparation of A for the upcoming fight as well as constantly negotiating their mutual expertise.

\*In all transcripts, initials of players and names of avatars have been altered. The names of computer-generated characters (e.g. Shade of Aran) have not. As a reminder, in-room is notated as IR, on-screen as OS, and Teamspeak as TS\*

Jo<sub>TS</sub>: Other thing! Elementals. He will summon a bunch of water elementals

S<sub>IR</sub>: Assuming we get that far

Jo<sub>IR</sub>: Right, assuming we get that far <gestures toward S>

M<sub>IR</sub>: Shh! Positive thinking <points at S>

Jo<sub>TS</sub>: When he does that, you need to banish one and fear one. And that's the game.

A<sub>TS</sub>: I'll get by

Within this brief excerpt, the presuppositions and entailments (Silverstein: 1998) are at work in order to achieve interactional coherence. In other words, certain types of knowledge are assumed to be present and other knowledge that will be necessary to beat the boss later is presented. The presupposed knowledge of the game is found in the unexplained understanding of what an elemental is, especially a water elemental, as well as what the actions of banish and fear mean. This is interesting because it presupposes A's familiarity with the game while also acknowledging her unfamiliarity with the particular situation and how her avatar should fight these elementals. The entire group is focused on the interactional coherence both in the explanation process – indicated through their silence over Teamspeak throughout the explanatory process – as well as the recognition of this explanation's vital role in successful coherence once the fight starts.

At this time, M's expertise doesn't confront Jo's expertise in the explanatory process, but he does begin to implicitly contribute his own voice and claim his own positionality through his imperative statement.

The in-room speech is particularly interesting from two perspectives: the first being that the three participants are all also players so they are signed into Teamspeak but choose specifically to keep their exchange in-room. While S is articulating a doubt in the group's potential success, and perhaps does not want to share the concern with the entire group, particularly A, there is an alternate explanation based on social cohesion. This being that S does not want to confront Jo's domination of the Teamspeak channel. No other players have been on Teamspeak aside from Jo at this time, behavior that is based upon presupposed knowledge of pre-fight coordination within the game. When a group is preparing to attack a boss, the leader(s) or expert(s) within the group dominate the voicechat channel in order to quickly coordinate everyone. If someone at this point has a comment or concern, they are expected to keep it off of the voice chat and communicate it either by IM or in-room communication. While this rule is quite logistical – having 10 voices speaking at once would be cacophony – it also has social structuring implications regarding the relative positionality of players based on their access to this voicechat. Importantly, S does not occupy a purely acquiescent role. In fact, she directly challenges Jo's assumption of the group's success and Jo himself acknowledges the validity of her concern both linguistically and gesturally. Thus S is simultaneously maintaining the wider social assumptions of access to voicechat during preparation time, but still negotiating her own positionality by revealing a nuanced understanding of the game and

the possibilities for why the group might not be successful. M, another widely recognized expert within the game and the group, challenges both S's comment and Jo's acknowledgement. His deictic gesture of pointing seems to indicate that S is the addressee of his order to have positive thinking, but Jo is implicitly addressed as well through Jo's own alignment with S regarding the pessimism of reaching the elementals. However, M refrains from a public challenge to either S or Jo, despite his expert positionality and resultant ability to access Teamspeak. At this point, his use of humor is not meant to be an order from an expert as much as it is encouragement and emotional preparation against S's concern. Once Jo continues with the explanation over Teamspeak, A, the addressee of the Teamspeak instruction, simply acknowledges recognition of herself as both addressee and as novice as well as providing reassurance that she understands the instructions and her role.

As we can see, the understood relationships between the players are continually negotiated in the various frames and are built on understandings of role alignments and interactive behavior appropriate within the context. Displays of assumed knowledge, goals of the discourse, and audience size are all informative to the models of personhood that they inhabit and the resultant interactive positioning. As Agha articulates regarding the interactive implications of register use, "any use of a register performatively models specific footings and relations between speaker and coparticipants" (Agha, 2005b: 2). In understanding this process of relationship development between individuals through their various uses of language, it's essential to remember that role alignment occurs not between the persons themselves but between the figures performed through the speech.

Jo's presence in Teamspeak and skilled deployment of the WoW register model his role as expert, while A's acknowledgement marks her relative role as novice. S models an experienced player in her understanding of the game and the group dynamics, and her assumption of failure. M is not modeling ignorance in his confrontation to her pessimism, but rather understands his WoW reputation as an expert and is able to use it to challenge and encourage S's pessimistic opinion and Jo's subsequent alignment with S. The voices and behavior displayed created models, or figures, through which the individuals align. And these behaviors, discursive or otherwise, are contextually based. So, while an individual might be discursively and socially constructed as a novice in this discourse, it is the alignment between the role of novice and the role of expert, rather than the alignment between the individuals inhabiting these roles, that are of social significance. The group is oriented to the task at hand, so Jo's modeling of expert and A's novice positionality are based within this context, and doing significant social work therein.

### **Polycentricity**

Relationships between models of personhood are not the only commitments that a speaker maintains throughout a discursive exchange. For example, Blommaert's (2007) concept of polycentricity in which various patterns in speech are indexically linked to different frameworks is also evident in this discourse. While his argument focused especially on multilingualism and the various patterns of authority that multilingual individuals orient to, his concept of various personal commitments throughout a communicative process remains informative in this instance. For example, as we can see in the excerpt below, the players remain oriented to both on-screen behavior and to in-room behaviors and interactions.

R<sub>IR</sub>: Do we have no melee DPS?

S<sub>TS</sub>: Nope

M<sub>TS</sub>: Shh! We have kitties <looks at R>

C<sub>TS</sub>: We have some fearing and Lisara VJing

R<sub>IR</sub>: Like, melee DPS is what destroys them

M<sub>TS</sub>: Could someone...it sounds like there's a steamer engine going on there in the background <general laughs>

M<sub>IR</sub>: Do do do do do <pumps fists>

J<sub>OTS</sub>: I had to steal wireless from the train station because here in my apartment

M<sub>IR</sub>: Shh! Shh! Shh! Pump it! <all listen>

K<sub>IR</sub>: My new garden <in time with music, glances at camera>

J<sub>OTS</sub>: Are we good to go?

Throughout the excerpt, the players are oriented to the game, to each other, and to me. Within the different frames, there are different levels of authority among the players that are clearly being negotiated. R, the WoW player who is not playing at the moment, reinvigorates S's prior concern over whether or not the party will be successful, asking about melee DPS. As is evident throughout, the assumption of understanding the WoW register is assumed. Not only is it assumed that the group knows what melee DPS is (it's a type of inflicted damage), but the implications of not having melee DPS are understood. After S confirms the lack of melee DPS, M responds to both over Teamspeak, continuing his ongoing quest of encouragement, shushing again and reassuring that there are kitties. M clearly positions himself as both a positive reassurance within the context and an expert, offering the solution of a hunter's pet in response to a lack of a different type damage. He is so confident in his response that he expands the conversation to include

the non-present participants over Teamspeak. C at this point joins, offering additional options for how the group can compensate for a lack of melee DPS. S doesn't respond, but R does, despite his lack of in-game involvement, reasserting that melee DPS is what is needed to win. As the interpersonal alignments are being negotiated regarding who best understands what is needed to win, the tacit polycentric orientations of the players come to the forefront, made most clear when Ma asks for the music to be turned down.

Ma's clear reference to an out-of-game variable that is affecting the communication and, as a result, the interaction of the team, leads to a particularly salient stretch of discourse. After everyone laughs at the joke within which the request is embedded, M starts echoing the music even while it gets turned down and even tries to silence Jo's explanation of the noise. K joins M's echoing of the music, acting on in-room interactive orientation as well as physically recognizing the camera through her shift in eye-gaze. Jo, however, does not engage in the music, reorienting the discourse and regaining his position as both expert and leader when he asks if everyone is good to go. M entirely avoided the response to R's continued concern regarding melee DPS and it does not get re-addressed, which is reflective of R's non-involvement in the immediate game, while not negating his knowledge of the game and situation. Throughout the conversation, both M and Jo navigate between their orientation to the game and the group (either in arguing for substitutes to melee DPS or to re-orient the entire group to the online attack), but also to their orientation as residents of the apartment in which the 6 co-present individuals are situated. The players clearly switch their use of discourse as they shift their social focus, such as discontinuing use of the WoW register when not discussing the game. These



particular points of discourse act as data of social life, which themselves “point to lived moments that lie beyond them” (Agha, 2005b: 1). In order for the meaning in this discourse to remain coherent, understanding the context and the multiple frames is important, but equally necessary is the understanding that there are multiple commitments on the part of the speakers to these various frames. Behavior on-screen is not always motivated by the same interactional goals as behavior between players not oriented to in-game processes. But, importantly, players can be simultaneously committed to both of these goals and switch between them as we see.

These players are oriented to polycentric centers of interaction based on the different frameworks of interaction. Since language is linked to the cultural models and behavioral patterns, use of multiple discourses allows us to see the multiple positional commitments on the part of the speakers. The shifts in and out of the WoW register as well as the implicit interactive goals of the discourse illuminate how these WoW players are themselves shifting in their social commitments. The laminated frameworks enable shifting between them from one turn to the next, so that the coherence of communication doesn't falter despite the implicit shifts in social goals.

### **On-Screen and In-Room Discursive Effects**

Clearly, while constructing MMORPGs as discrete ‘worlds,’ separate from the out-of-game environment lays theoretical and foundational stumbling blocks, they are two participation frameworks with different social goals on the part of their participants. In looking at the two frameworks, we find that they mutually affect both discursive and behavioral patterns. Discourse on screen will affect in-room behavior, and vice versa, as

evidenced below. This situational analysis allows us to see how different discursive frames can interact with each other, as well as reiterating the mutual influence between the on-screen and in-room frames. This short excerpt illuminates how the computerized discourse of the in-game character has influences on in-room discourse and behavior which then manifests into on-screen behavior as well.

Shade of Aran<sub>OS</sub> yells: I'll show you this beaten dog still has some teeth!

Jo<sub>TS</sub>: Flame wreath

M<sub>TS</sub>: Flame wreath, oh God!

Jo<sub>TS</sub>: Flame wreath, nobody move.

M<sub>TS</sub>: Do not move. Do. Not. Move.

((All avatars stop moving))

At this point in the discourse the fight between the 10 characters being controlled by the players and the computer generated boss named Shade of Aran has definitely begun. By looking at the present shifters (Silverstein: 1976), as well as the behavioral influences, we are able to see how the frames of in-game and in-room are separate but mutually informative. Shifters are lexical items that change referential meaning entirely depending on the situation, an example being the pronoun "I" which changes its meaning every time a speaker changes. The use of shifters in this example manages to interestingly collapse the two participation frames. The implicit 2<sup>nd</sup> person object of the imperative sentences, in the case the "you all" who are being told not to move, supposedly refers to the characters but implicitly refers to the players who control the characters' movements. Thus, the "do not move" followed by the stilling of the avatars indexes the simultaneous stilling of the player's left hand so that the avatar doesn't move. The shifting object of

this imperative statement in fact equates the avatar and player behavior, highlighting the indexical link between the two.

Further, the behavioral influences between on-screen and in-room discourse further help us see that the two frames are quite mutually influential on behavior of both the players and the avatars. This is most clearly seen in the reaction to Shade of Aran's yell. This statement has two immediate effects. On screen, a series of flame wreaths appear around many of the characters on screen. Interpersonally, Jo immediately recognizes the in-game implications of the Shade's statement, articulates what that behavior will look like and further instructs the other players should all play their avatars as a result. Each of Jo's three reactions is a behavioral reaction to the in-game discourse. In other words, while a 'virtual world' and the 'real world' are frequently framed as discrete areas or locations, for social and discursive work they are quite simply two interwoven frames of participation without any unique discreteness.

Within this cross-frame discourse, there are many levels of discursive expertise embodied. While every English speaker likely understands the meaning of the statement "do not move," the players must also understand that this means that their character should be stilled. However, they also need to understand that they are expected to continue playing the game in other ways (e.g. characters shooting spells, healing, etc). The denotational congruence of understanding both what a flame wreath is, and what "do not move" means in terms of a character's behavior are both implicitly understood by users of the WoW register. Further, we return to the interactional congruence of every

character stopping in place yet continuing to heal and attack while unmoving, thus preventing the group from dying. These linguistic and non-linguistic behaviors are all interdiscursively linked, creating continuity between the frameworks and drawing on understanding this type of discourse through presupposition of prior experience. Understanding how to navigate the multiple frameworks necessitates previous experience in the navigation process. Players begin learning to do this in the game gradually, starting with two avatars playing together to beat a boss they can't beat individually, followed five avatars bosses, then fighting bosses that require ten individuals. This cross-framework communication is progressively learned through time and experience. The very ability of the players to easily orient to the multiple frames, and orient themselves to various goals among these frames, itself marks their expertise in the game. As we can see throughout the various excerpts presented, the high level players are able to align to different frameworks, shift these alignments quickly, maintain understandable communication, and navigate the cross-frame discursive influences.

While each of these examples is evocative of the interactive work, the polycentric orientations or the multiple frameworks informing behavior, all three of these types of social work co-occur within every instance of discourse, as made very clear in our final excerpt.

### **Interpersonal, Polycentric and On-Screen/In-room**

JO<sub>TS</sub>: Blizzard. <pause>

Shade of Aran<sub>OS</sub> yells: I'll freeze you all!

JO<sub>TS</sub>: Water elementals are up! Banish, fear, etc. Everyone...

Shade of Aran<sub>OS</sub> says: I'm not finished yet. No, I have a few more tricks up me sleeve...

M<sub>TS</sub>: Just pick whichever one you want and banish it

K<sub>IR</sub>: Are we zerting them, or...

Jo<sub>IR</sub>: You've got enough fears to

K<sub>IR</sub>: I used my two, but...

R<sub>IR</sub>: This music does this flame scene amazing

Jollad<sub>OS</sub> has died

M<sub>IR</sub>: It's hilarious

Shade of Aran<sub>OS</sub> yells: Torment me no more!

K<sub>TS</sub>: Down

Jo<sub>IR</sub>: Is that fire? Is he doing fire?

M<sub>IR</sub>: Arcane missiles

This last excerpt of discourse helps us to see how the three aspects of discursive behavior that we examined – the dynamic interpersonal relationships, the polycentricity and the on-screen/in-room informativity – are all co-present. The more complex the interaction, the more we see the skill with which all of these participants navigate the laminated frame and multiple social goals.

Let us start with an examination of some of the shifters, again looking at an imperative statement. When M states “Just pick whichever one you want and banish it” the understood addressee seems to be the character that A is playing. This is clear to everyone present because A is playing the only Warlock, thus her character is the only

one which can banish creatures. Thus, it can't apply to anyone else, which everyone understands. Interestingly, however, the referent of *you* changes within this single sentence. The "you want" clearly references the player A, since a character cannot actually want. However, the implied you in "[you] banish" clearly references the character since people cannot banish. Within this single utterance, looking at the tacit addressee reveals the close lamination of these different social frames. The player A will decide what she wants to attack and her implicit indexical link to her character negates the discursive necessity of singling the actor for the resultant banishing. This close discursive link also highlights the importance of research including both player and avatar in order to illuminate the nuanced social work being done.

Work of interpersonal expertise is also being done quite explicitly here. Throughout the conversation and this analysis, Jo and M have been navigating their dual expertise within the group and within the general game of WoW. Here, they are the only two to speak on Teamspeak throughout the attack until K's avatar dies and she announces it. Both Jo and M announce upcoming attacks and how to fight them to the rest of the group, with Jo announcing the upcoming attack first and M reiterating. However, this dynamic changes toward the end of the excerpt when Jo knows that the Shade of Aran's speech is warning him a specific attack is coming but Jo can't remember which specific attack it will be. He presents his guess M, who corrects him, and then Jo proceeds to inform the rest of the group (discourse not included in this excerpt). Throughout, Jo and M continue to act in different frames as well, from M validating the music choice for the scene to Jo answering K's question as to how she can attack. The structures of authority shift

between frameworks, and shift throughout the exchange, but the enregistered voices of Jo and M serve to position them as experts throughout this exchange.

The polycentric commitments of the players are on prominent display in this excerpt, especially in M's discourse. This is clearly seen in the seeming insensitive or nonsensical reaction of M when Jollad dies. Jollad is the avatar played by K, and M's immediate statement after the on-screen announcement that Jollad was killed is "it's hilarious." We have already seen that the players are continually aware of the on-screen discourse in addition to the verbal discourse, since it directly informs their behavior. Thus M is surely aware of the announcement of Jollad's death. Since he has been encouraging throughout, and explicitly trying to get others to think positively, this statement directly contradicts his previous discursive modeling, unless he is currently focused on an interactional goal in a completely different frame. Indeed, we can see that his statement is more likely responding to R's statement regarding the music playing as another fire wreath attack is about to occur. Although M's earlier statement in this excerpt directs in-game behavior over Teamspeak in order to achieve success in the attack, he shifts his center of focus to the in-room discourse in his ongoing attempts at encouragement to ease the interactive process. Over Teamspeak, he is committed to helping everyone act appropriately to beat the boss. In the room he is including R in the interactive process and continuing the positive reinforcement and encouragement. Through understanding the polycentric orientations of his discourse we see that the model of personhood he inhabits throughout remain consistent, his discourse is simply oriented to interaction across multiple frames.

Throughout these various excerpts of discourse from a group of individuals oriented to World of Warcraft, we are able to see the provocative and interesting work that can be done in these digital realms. It is apparent that participation in the higher levels of the game requires the ability to at least understand the WoW register. In addition, individuals are able to position themselves according to their presupposed and recognized abilities in conjunction with their effective and consistent use of this register. These positions, while structured, are also constantly negotiated as we have seen. This vibrant locale of interactive possibility pulls into sharp clarity how these positionalities can be enacted even at the intersection of different types of communication. In looking at the mutual influence between the various frames of participation at work, analyzing the discourse allows us to see how the various participation frames “leak” (Irvine 1996) into each other. Not only can we begin to understand the various commitments of the players, but we can also see how they move between these frames of communication. The interaction here is important for seeing how the on-screen and in-room communication affect each other, but arguably more intriguing is the theoretical implications of this understanding. The clarification afforded through approaching MMORPGs and other online games as sites of important social interactivity, but not discretely separable ‘worlds,’ is made abundantly clear here. To label them incorrectly imposes a predetermined restriction on the social and discursive possibilities of these spaces.

### **Conclusion of Discourse Analysis**

Throughout this section, evidence of the interactive realities, the multiple orientations of players, and the inter-frame effects of the online MMORPG World of Warcraft have been



explored. In doing so, we can see how role alignment is manifest and managed, how successful interaction is achieved and how discursive coherence is made possible even when the communication occurs through various types of technology. This technology enables a coalescence of co-present speech and behavior, internet voicechat, and typed messaging. Moreover, these are all tied to register use, providing a dynamic tool through which to model oneself in relationship to others. In order to carefully dissect these questions, the implicit link between avatar and player – and the mutual informativity of this relationship – must be considered. To ignore either player or avatar is to miss much of the social and discursive information at work. As within any social setting, the commitments of the speakers shift easily and often without explicit comment, and any interactional (non)congruence can be attributed both to the footing and dynamic understanding of all present participants. As we continue to expand this exciting field and the interactive possibilities that the internet affords, we begin to be able to see how the discursive engagement of participants reveals the dynamic social work made possible through these technologies.

## **IV. Ethnographic analysis of player-avatar relationship**

### **Introduction**

As an MMORPG, WoW provides a unique opportunity to explore social frameworks and patterns of coordinated activity. The focus of this section is the relationship between player and avatar, exploring the various influences that each has on the other, and how these relationships construct social spaces in and of themselves as well as trying to

explain how different theorists have approached and presented these virtual spaces in their research. While the majority of analysis is focused on these constructions of relationships and interpersonal developments, I also explore the process of learning within the game, particularly how a new player learns to participate within these multi-modal frameworks, and how learning these patterns of participation is affected by the understanding of inter-player relationships as revelatory of the porosity of the real/virtual divide on the part of the player(s). The various explorations in the paper will address theoretical perspectives foundational to the fields of virtual world study and anthropology.

This project builds on the seminal works in virtual worlds by Boellstorff (2008), Dibble (1998), Bartle (1996/2006) Rheingold (2000) Castronova (2001/2005/2006) Williams (2006) Malliet & de Meyer (2005) Stevens, Satwicz & McCarthy (2008) provide a strong theoretical foundation for analysis of these particular social spaces and the multitude of foci possible within these worlds. Specifically, the works by Castronova and Dibble were foundational in establishing the tangible and concrete consequences of online gaming communities. Castronova's revelation of the influence of economic systems within the game on the official or nationalist economic systems, while Dibble highlights both the social realities and professional possibilities within these virtual worlds. These are two foundational literatures for understanding the interactivity between the virtual gaming worlds and the other communities in which they are situated via the players. Lastly, works such as Gee (2003) and Lessig (1999) highlight links between the implicit structures of the game and behavioral effects of players, which also provide an initial

grounding for my research. Lessig's exploration of the often unconscious influence of coding on in-game behavior altered conceptions should inform conceptions of these spaces as simply synonymous to off-line interactive spaces. Gee's projective identity also explores implicit effects of these social spaces, arguing for a tripartite conceptualization of the self in the game and the self offline, and the self as a projective identity as mutually informative but necessarily distinct. The idea of a projective identity is that there is a sense of self-identity unique from either the 'real' or 'virtual' identity, but rather an identity based on the uniqueness of the creation of an avatar as a project. In his example, the ideas of successful or unsuccessful behavior for a projective identity is different from appropriate play on the part of the player (e.g. not breaking any rules of play) as well as successful play of the avatar (e.g. not doing something their character is unable to do) but rather an action that is both within the rules of the game and within the limitations of the avatar that is still detrimental to the developmental project of avatar creation. For WoW, this could be selling an item that will later be necessary or ignoring a skill that will later be useful. Both of these are well within the acceptable behavior of the player and don't violate any rules for avatar behavior, but are extremely detrimental to the ultimate goal of successful interactive play with other players, raiding, or accessing the more complex areas of the game.

For this section, I will look at three theoretical schools of thought focused on mediatized phenomena, both virtual worlds and not, and compare how these schools of thought apply to the MMORPG of World of Warcraft. I will revisit Warner's "public" (2000) as originally translatable in compelling and informative ways to virtual worlds. Conversely,

although Boellstorff's (2008) argument for the "homo cyber" is an innovative presupposition for virtual world research, it does not carry cleanly into MMORPGs. Lastly, Gee's "projective identities" (2003) provide an intriguing way of looking at self-perception among gamers as well as constructive social categories for the relationships that develop between gamers external to the game, between avatars within the game, and between the players and their avatars.

### **Theoretical Engagement**

Warner's concept of a public as a "self-creating and self-organized...social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse" (Warner, 2005) revolutionized the idea of an audience of mass media as a discrete entity despite the disparate identities and geographic locales of the participants. As previously mentioned, his concept was based on the audience of books or magazines or newspapers, arguing for a two step semiotic process of communications which creates a unique and important social space completely dependent on this duality of discursive dissemination. This concept is important to World of Warcraft players, since identifying each other outside of the game and discussing instances of play while not signed into to the game occurs frequently and is socially informative. Not only are groups of players coordinated through the in-game discursive practices, but guilds often have their own websites complete with discussion boards and chat capability, and players regularly contribute to the WoW wiki and the multitude of WoW blogs. These are all instances of discourse oriented to and explicitly discussing the game with necessitating simultaneous engagement with the game. The vast frameworks of discourse oriented to WoW, while not connected in any official way to the game,

create the social space of WoW participants created by this circulation of discourse: the very definition of Warner's public.

Boellstorff (2008) is the first to write a full-length ethnography focused exclusively on virtual worlds, and, as such, is perhaps deserving of the respect it has garnered, not least because an ethnographic analysis of a social setting implicitly marks the setting as not only socially interesting, but scholastically relevant. Within the realm of academia, particularly anthropology, a full-length ethnography requires multiple years of study – in Boellstorff's case more than 2 – and then additional years to publish the book-length project. The final product is not just reflective of the energies of the author, but of the understanding of the social significance of the arena evidenced by the economic investment necessary to support the lengthy research and writing process requisite in producing the nuanced and qualitative perspectives that ethnography gives us. The study contributes many important thoughts to the ethnography of virtual spaces, including a comprehensive description of the virtual experience, a breakdown of the economics at play, an assertion regarding the importance of consistent terminology, and the fascinating idea that “human craft can – for the first time – create new worlds for human sociality” (237). However, the differences between Second Life and World of Warcraft create some tensions in the methodologies developed and the lines drawn between virtual and actual interactive parameters as evidenced later in this section.

As mentioned above, Gee's concept of projective identities provides a new way of looking at how people perceive their relationship between themselves and their avatar in these areas, how a third sense of identity is present and influential, and how this affects

players' understandings of their own participation and, consequently, each other. A player's ability to not only recognize this tripartite relationship that they themselves embody, but also the fact that the other players identify as human selves, avatar selves, and a self invested in the optimal in-world participation informs behavioral and learning patterns in the game. This then both informs their play as they are constantly working on optimal participation as well as informing their perceptions of other players based on their abilities to use their avatar correctly.

### **Analysis**

Throughout the past three years, I have created an account in WoW to participate in the online world of Azeroth, as well as taken field notes and conducted interviews with prominent figures in the game; in the course of this work, three central themes have arisen that deserve further development in this section. Particularly, I continue to reject the idea of a simplistic separation between the "real" and the "virtual" in terms of a social reality, as has been widely discussed (Aneesh 2006, Castronova 2006, etc). Additionally, the relationship between the human player and their avatar – and how this relationship informs their understanding of other avatars as reflective of the player's value to the game – is a constructive example of how these spaces are mutually informative and how learning processes are embedded and disseminated. Lastly, perceptions of self within this game, as related to a wider social network and the common behavior of having many alternative characters, or "alts" reflects a self perception and community that is both unique and parasitic within this world.

To begin, the idea of a clean separation between the “real” and the “virtual” is no longer a viable argument in much of video game studies, but the problem remains of both terminology and conceptualization of these different but porously influential spaces. While there are certainly distinctions between the WoW world of Azeroth and the planet Earth, arguing for a hard and fast distinction illuminates the problem that they are different kinds of social spaces, both quite real in their complexity and implications. Hine (2000) argues that the internet is both a cultural artifact and a social space in and of itself, a duality that is intriguingly informative of WoW, which must be purchased and regularly paid for but is itself a space of community and further creates communities oriented to it. The influence of personal orientation to the game, and the effect that avatar engagement has on interpersonal relationships both serve to underscore the non-delineability of the online game and the offline world. As with all social spaces, there are characteristics unique to each, but the boundaries are fuzzy at best and they meld into each other.

A player’s avatar is of the utmost importance and is reflective of far more than simply their denotative abilities within the game. The gear indexes the social skills, fighting ability, patience and teamwork necessary on the part of the player to get certain pieces of gear and these are then reflective of both the avatar ability and the player’s quality completely external to the gear (ErkenBrack, 2009). The idea of n00b behavior, as undesirable as it is to every player of WoW, is connected intrinsically to a player’s understanding of another player’s background and history of game play. As one player of a level 80 and over a dozen alts explained,

“You’ve got your two types of noob. And I think most of the, most of the internet, the forums, would agree on this. You’ve got your newb, your

newbie. Who doesn't really know the ropes yet. Um, who is, who is learning the game and so might not be that good because of that. Then you have n00b as in n-zero-zero-b. Who either intentionally fails or is just, is a jackass, or should know but doesn't, or is really just there to scream about how high he is and to run into the next pack and do horrible things to you in your group and make it less fun for everybody." (interview, JW 10/11/2008)

Not only does the understanding of which type of newb – and all the social implications thereof – change depending on a player's understanding of another player, but their interactions within the game will be inherently informed from this understanding. This was tied explicitly to a projective identity in an interview with MM (10/11/2008) which, after echoing J's definitions of the two types of noob, added a third: "And elitists will use it if your shot rotation isn't perfect or something, like 'you're a noob, why are you using that when you should be using that' and stuff." The shot rotation timing is dependent on the player's skill in timing their mouseclicks and organizing their key-presses correctly, so the avatar's slightly skewed timing could then be indicative of a bigger problem of the player not knowing how to correct rotate their spells which they should have learned much earlier. This is an excellent example of a noob projective identity, since the fault does not lie in untenable action on the part of the player, or on the avatar attempting skills foreign to it, but rather in the disconnect in skill sets necessary to successfully complete the project of game play. To argue that it is possible to study the interactive structures of an MMORPG like WoW without understanding the various participation frameworks at play among the players and the positionality of participants in relation to each other throughout these frameworks loses the complex, tacit and nuanced understandings of social interaction which help to make this MMORPG as interesting and socially rich as it is.



As the avatar serves as both a conduit and a nexus of social information in and of itself, the system of “alts,” or alternative characters, that permeates the game deserves a bit of teasing out as well. The difference between a main and an alt is both an issue of level – the ‘main’ character will always be the highest leveled character – as well as of gear quality. If the player has several characters at level 70 or 80, the main is “basically is your best geared, the character you put the most time into. You know, if your characters got into a fight, your main would win” (Interview, JW, 10/11/2008). Several upper level characters have multiple alts for a variety of purposes, from a ‘bank’ character used to store gear and gold to a precisely designed character for raiding, their motivations for creating or leveling up new characters are varied depending on the player, their guild, and individual interests of the players themselves. When asked about his motivations for creating several mid- and high-level alts, MM clarified:

“I feel like I want it at level 70, I want to be raiding with it. I want another option, I want to be more useful for something. That’s why I made a hunter. That’s why I’m starting to level up some of my healing classes because our guild is a little short on the healing classes, so I was like, ‘Well, maybe I should start leveling it up.’” (Interview MM 10/11/2008)

There is a great deal embedded within this quote: the fact that the alts are almost always begun because the players initially want to be high-level raiding with a different skill set. Additionally, this quote points to the social and projective perspectives of the entire guild as an important deciding factor in the creation of new characters. Because the guild was short on leveled healers, MM starting leveling a healing character. In this way, they can create the precise character that would be useful to the guild eventually. This is not to argue that the player’s own priorities or preferences do not inform the development of

their alts, no matter what the guild needs at the time. As MM asserted, “I mean, I have one bank character that became a bank character after I became bored after 10 levels. I was like, ‘And I’m done.’” (Interview, MM, 10/11/2008). Group purpose does not override individual goals, but the players do strive to balance their avatar preference with guild raiding needs.

The process of grinding through the levels, or repeating their various skills time and again as they level up, is an annoyance and not instrumental in skill development for high-level players. JW also supported this assertion that the leveling process is an annoyance and completely unnecessary: “The way the game is built, any class, you can, if you’re an intelligent player, you know how the game works. You have two buttons, three buttons that you are doing to fulfill your role” (Interview JW, 10/11/2008). MM agrees that

“the first time you play it[World of Warcraft], it’s like a new amazing experience where, you know, the first ten levels every time you level, it’s like, it’s fantastic right. Ding! You’re like, “whooh!” I mean, it’s fantastic, but what I’m saying is it’s like, it, like, *getting there* doesn’t seem like as much of a chore as it does when you’re an alt.” (Interview MM, 10/11/2008)

AM echoes this sentiment regarding the long-term process of leveling different skills:

“if it’s something that you’ve *done* and you sort of understand how to do mana efficiencies you don’t really want to spend 50 levels being like, “yeah, yeah, I get how to heal.” I’d rather be a 70 and have all of my spells and be healing raids and, you know, having a priest at my disposal rather than being like “Yes, I get it, this one takes more mana than the other.” (Interview, AM, 10/11/2008)

Not only is the leveling process considered by the players to be largely unnecessary to the development of technical skills on the part of the player, but the disparity between the

new players with low-level avatars and the elite players leveling their alt creates a great deal of tension on both parts as the players try to determine appropriate social interactions based on avatar behavior. The problem stems from the fact that, for a player with high-level avatars, the lower level game content “is designed for someone who is learning the game, you know, I can go into a random instance and, uh, to keep myself entertained, I need to pull two or three packs at a time. Which usually pisses off the other people who don’t have any reason to believe that I can do that” (Interview, JW, 10/11/2008). Not only do the high-level characters get irritated by noobie behavior on the part of the newer players, but they in turn irritate the new players who don’t trust the various actions of the players leveling alt avatars.

While this leveling process is considered frustrating since it involves many hundreds of hours of play, purchasing a high-level character to eliminate this step is still highly stigmatized by the players. This is a fascinating contradiction and, in and of itself, eliminates the possibility for a *homo cyber* that is independent from the human counterpart within WoW, since if the human behind the avatar was disregardable, a purchased character would have no different social value than the avatar developed through hours of energy investment on the part of the player. Additionally, this highlights one of the intriguing aspects of projective identities; that the collaborative work of successful raiding necessitates every player’s individual investment in their own project as well as investment in a group project. This investment reflects a commitment to learning how to effectively manipulate a high-level character as well as develop the needed player’s skills behind the avatar skill set in order to learn effective and expected

teamwork frameworks. The avatar is not the focus, neither is the player's skill, but rather the informative reflection of the players own project priorities as related to their group priorities then become the focus.

The relationships between players are also inform learning processes and character development choices. When I asked JC, the person I raid with the most often, how anyone learns the world without a guide to tell them when and how to do the things that are in the quest instructions, his response was "they usually have a guide. Most people get involved because they're friends with someone involved who shows them around." (interview, JC 6/15/08). The clearest example of this in my experience is JC's orientation to me, beginning with his choice of avatar when he decided to play along side me from level one. He selected a troll priest that he specialized into a shadow priest in order to do a great deal of damage in addition to healing. Because I had selected a hybrid class of shaman as my first character, and he knew that I would be newbie in the new-to-the-game sense, he selected a character that could simultaneously heal me and help me kill the things as necessary. While this was a logical and empathetic choice based on our friendship and his understanding of how much I dislike being unsuccessful, it also stunted my abilities within the game, a truth only recently uncovered. As noted in my field notes (11/24/08), I was questing on my own and was invited to join a group to quest Scarlet Monastery by someone I had quested with previously, and I accepted. However, once I started laying totems, I was immediately reprimanded for using the wrong totem. I corrected instantly and used their suggested totem combination – although it seemed to be less effective from what I could understand – which appeased them until I used my

chain lightning bolt and pulled one of the soldiers. At this point the healer called me a n00b and told me to learn when to pull and when to attack and how to behave. I was shocked, not least because I wasn't low on health so I didn't need the healer's attention, and because I had never been called a n00b before. When I talked to JC about it later, he hesitated, and then admitted that some of my totem combos were not considered the normal or optimal combinations for the quest, but that I was supposed to attack and if that meant I pulled, that was ok. This single exchange highlighted the fact that my entire learning process was guided by and deeply dependent on JC, who rarely corrected my actions, leading to n00by behavior due to lack of correction or even awareness that I was somehow not aligned to acceptable shaman displays.

The idea of the "homo cyber" as presented by Boellstorff (2008) presents some very interesting concepts, not least the idea that we have always been virtual beings, disseminated through the virtuality of culture, and thus the idea of a complete and real human existence online is not only comprehensible, but completely feasible and worthy of structured academic research. This project cannot respond directly to that argument as related to Second Life, since I have no experience with Second Life and the difference in basic structure and the very presence or required, structured activities between a virtual world such as Second Life and an MMORPG such as World of Warcraft is significant. The necessity of teamwork within WoW, the reliance on the people that you play with, and the significant impact that interpersonal knowledge between players who engage in the game regularly all undermine the idea that the avatar can be studied as a social actor within the game with no consideration given to the player.

Naturally, the avatar is able to function within the MMORPG world with no mention of the player or the projective identities also at play. There are no profiles of players, references to player name or location external to the world of Azeroth. The argument of this paper is not that the avatar's goals involve any fundamental need to unveil personal information in order to effectively interact, but rather that the projective identity – both individual and group – becomes extremely relevant to the interpersonal relationships of the players once they reach a high level and are regularly raiding together. Individual questing is centrally important in the lower levels, and questing in PuGs (Pick-up Groups) is common in low level group questing but once one gets to the high 60s onward, and certainly once they reach level 80 and start raiding routinely in the areas that are exclusively available to level 80's, inter-player knowledge becomes increasingly important.

Raids are often fought by guilds, groups of between 100-200 players, on average, who then break into groups of 25 or 40 to fight at scheduled times. Membership in a guild is all but necessary at the higher levels, and different guilds have different focuses in their play: some want to go through the raids as quickly as possible, to get as far as they possibly can as quickly as they can. There are many who try, and a few guilds that are well known for being extremely good at this. There are others that focus on exploration, or on developing perfect attack strategies. Regardless of the focus of the guild, a player can only join by invitation and there is almost always a time commitment and skill-level check from their members. Guilds have been known to kick their members out for

slacking or not committing the time necessary to be able to push ahead as they want. In this case, knowing the people behind the avatars becomes essential, because the guild leaders will be able to ascertain if the slacking is due to a bout of the flu or a new baby, or if the player is simply unreliable. Their online persona becomes closely tied to the offline player's behavior and lifestyle and ability to commit 20 or 40 hours a week to raiding with their guild, and if their lifestyle restrictions of a job with set hours or a family preclude this consistently, they won't gain membership. As JW said when discussing his restricted uses of his main, "To do anything else, basically, I would have to go back to raiding [with a guild]. Which means playing 20-plus hours a week. Which is a time commitment. Which I don't really want to do." (Interview, JW, 10/11/2008). Without raiding, there are a limited number of options for avatar development.

Interestingly, parts of the social realities that these worlds and characters embody are based on many of the social rules that apply outside of the game as well. As one of my player-informants recently blogged,

"For those who don't know or don't care, there is a new World of Warcraft expansion out. I haven't played much of it, but there's a very strong sense that if I want to keep playing WoW, I'll need to spend some very serious time with it very soon, since all our internet friends are already at level awesome and I'm still level... not. As Penny Arcade put it, "if I wait too long it'll be like going to high school with an older brother who refuses to recognize you in the hall." But maybe that's a good thing."

He was a prominent and celebrated character within the game until the new expansion came out: one of the first to reach level 70 after the Burning Crusade expansion and considered one of the best paladins in the entire game of 10 million players. However, because he had not immediately jumped on the bandwagon of the new Lich King

expansion, he is now forced to reckon the fleeting reality of celebrity, as is often evidenced in Hollywood, and more significantly, the reactions of his friends are akin to those of an older sibling in high school. In the particular social zone of home, an older brother might play and enjoy hanging out with his younger siblings, but in another social zone of his peers, these same siblings become a liability. The relationship between the siblings – and, in the case above, the WoW player – is not simply based on the two of individuals, but also their respective positionality within their shared context. In WoW, other high-level players had enjoyed playing with this elite player when the social zones of the game were not oriented to the very highest levels of 80 but with the realm that he dominated from the very day of its origin. However, with the expansion pack comes the expansion of potential experiences within the game, and the liability of interaction increases with the new possibilities of positionality.

### **Conclusion to Ethnographic Analysis of player-avatar relationship**

Most clearly, relationships between players are extremely influential on the various social structures within the game in complex and interesting ways. Not only do they often effect questing mates and patience levels, but they are also often the basis for – or result of – guild membership. In the process of learning the game, the more a new player is simply handed information, the less they learn how to effectively use their entire arsenal of options. A 7331 player tries to smooth the process, but the newb stays n00by. As usual, learning is most effective through making mistakes. In the process of raiding or developing teamwork, balancing goals and aligning respective projective identities becomes essential; Gee's contribution allows us to deconstruct the social implications of



these relationships in a nuanced way without isolating the avatar from the player, but rather linking them together. Additionally, an understanding of a player's out-of-game life commitments can lead to less criticism and more understanding of flakiness and general n00bness, as long as the flakiness is not protracted. The WoW public(s) are further created through discourse reliant on the dialectic nature of internet technology, creating an interestingly unique dynamic between players co-oriented to technology.

A player does play his/her alt characters differently, sometimes out of necessity (a tank must be more aggressive than a healer), but also based on their time investment and attachment to the character. A main character is considered one that is the highest level with the best gear, thus reflects the greatest time commitment and, as such, is often the one that the player is most emotionally invested in since he has spent the most time playing. This contrasts most starkly with a bank character, used only to store goods and money, but is also contrastive with alts leveled for the good of the group or to facilitate interaction with another individual. The way that projective identity is conceptualized (Gee: 2003) also alters based on this relationship. And all other interactions subsequently change.

This complexity of relationships among participants and their various projections of self are what actually create the discursive space and sense of reality that becomes personally true for the players themselves. The reason that these networks and frameworks are able to so effectively emanate out and reach populations far beyond those of the game itself is because of their very transience and foundation in the linguistic practices of the players. Just as players are able identify other players through their language choices having

nothing to do with the game – such as pwning, n00bs, camping, 1337, and Azeroth – their social framework as established by and oriented to the game becomes socially significant far beyond the realm of Azeroth. Different projective identities and subsequent interpersonal/inter-avatar relationships create *and* re-create the WoW public(s), both within the game and oriented to it, that creates for itself a particular discursive and communicative structure.

## V. Thesis Conclusion

The goal of this paper has been to present a nuanced understand of the interpersonal and social structures at work in virtual spaces, particularly MMORPGs. Through methodology ranging from discourse analysis to interview and ethnographic analysis to corpus analysis, I have argued that the lines between the out-on-game and in-game worlds are blurred, and that intricate social behaviors are reflective of the laminated participation frameworks necessary for successful engagement in this MMORPG. As we have seen, players' social and discursive structures – oriented to their interactions with and through avatars – create a culturally significant arena of laminated and multi-modal communication patterns. We have also seen that social assumptions and structures carry over into other media forms and affect the general perception of this game and its players.

The goal of this paper was to analyze MMORPGs as a particular type of mediatized activity with connective tacit social structures, using WoW players, WoW avatars, and media oriented to World of Warcraft as specific examples. Through this approach I was able to not only present appropriate methodological approaches for these types of

mediatized interactions, but also tease out a greater understanding the social work that is occurring within these spaces. The relative positionality between players as created and represented, as well as the multiple commitments of players was evidenced in their speech and behavior. The corpus analysis allowed us to see these same issues of positionality and commitment from a completely separate perspective of mainstream media.

One of my central arguments, supported by the discursive and ethnographic data presented, was challenging the assumed discrete separation between the online and the offline worlds. These digital cultural spaces, where new enactments of linguistic ideologies and social structures converse with the foundational theoretical perspectives of the social science, have provided salient examples of the understandings – and misunderstandings – we harbor regarding online mediated interactivity. This Masters thesis has aimed to clarify the relationship between the various frameworks within which World of Warcraft players are situated, the social realities the players are co-constructing through their discourse, and the various discursive and interpersonal dynamics of player relationships both in-game and out-of-game. World of Warcraft deserves the attention of social scientists for its rich social complexity and far-reaching cultural impact. The ability to gain insight into online and virtual interactive realities through this particular MMORPG is exciting, and we would all do well to remember the blurred lines between these interactive spaces.

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## Appendix 1: Official to Discussion Boards/Forums by Blizzard

### \*\*\*FORUM GUIDELINES\*\*\*

In addition to the Forum Code of Conduct (<http://www.worldofwarcraft.com/policy/forum-coc.html>), here are some common courtesy guidelines to follow. While these do technically fall within the bounds of the Code of Conduct, there has been some confusion regarding what is and is not allowed. These guidelines should help clear up any misconceptions.

- **The World of Warcraft General Discussion Forum is for discussion of topics directly related to World of Warcraft.** The word general can be somewhat misleading, but the General Discussion forum is for threads about the game itself. If you wish to discuss other topics whether its polling for real-life statistics or asking what one listens to while playing please post in our Off-Topic Forum. Please note that this includes comparisons with other games.
- **Do not post in all capital letters, use excessive punctuation, etc.** This practice is used to draw attention to ones post. While everyone wants their posts read, we ask that you refrain from using sensational tactics in order to bring more people to your thread. Let your post stand on its own merit.
- **Using the words Blizzard, Blue, or any community team members name in a thread topic is frowned on.** Everyone would like Blizzard to read and acknowledge his or her post, and we understand that. However, use of such words in the topic does not help that come to pass. Please make your thread title relevant to the post subject.
- **Posting IBL, IBTL, or its variants constitutes spamming.** We appreciate that our posters understand the Code of Conduct to the point where they can call whether or not a thread is in violation; however, saying in before the lock does not contribute to a constructive community and it does fall under spamming. If you wish to acknowledge a post that violates policy, please report it instead.
- **Do not bump posts.** The act of bumping ones post is considered spamming and contributes nothing constructive to the discussion. Your thread will be seen; there is no need to continually bump it to the top of the list.
- **Petition posts are frowned on.** This is a discussion forum. Petition threads do not contain much discussion instead, a petition is usually page after page of /signed. This is not constructive. If you have an issue with the game, please discuss it in a civil fashion. There are other places on the Internet to form online petitions.
- **Do not post about locked or deleted threads.** Posts that are moderated have a reason behind the moderation. We lock before we post on a locked thread to stop the violation in question as soon as possible, so if you have yet to see a comment by a member of the

community team on a locked thread, please wait for it and do not post on the subject. If you do have questions regarding forum moderation, please use the contact list below.

- **If you have a post to report or a sticky to request, use the biohazard symbol or email [wowreportedpost@blizzard.com](mailto:wowreportedpost@blizzard.com).** Please do not post linking to threads you feel should be moderated or stickied. By using the methods we have in place, we can moderate more efficiently.

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In addition, there is a cool down period we institute during times of high forum traffic. If you are violating policy during one of these times due to frustration, you will be given a three-hour cool down suspension. **This does not get logged on your record** and is simply in place to keep the forums readable and civil. Serious violations will still have the appropriate action taken against them as documented in the Code of Conduct, and we do keep track of these cool down periods separately -- if one is found to be repeatedly violating policy, appropriate action will be taken.

Question by the company for the players:

The World of Azeroth isn't a very peaceful place even with the small pockets of "understanding" between some of the factions. To that end, there are many weapons and tools of the trade available to the denizens to help them overcome their enemies.

What weapons and tools of the trade do you prefer to use the most and why?

Are you more of the axe wielding sort or do you prefer a broadsword?

Do you prefer a dagger or a staff?

Is there a particular trinket you always have with you or a spell you always have handy?

Which ones do you keep even when they've outlived their usefulness to you?

## Appendix 2: Example of a forum question by the players for the players

Title – *Freedom of Speech*

- A. Why don't **we** have it?
- B. Because **Blizzard** isn't the government? Even the government can limit speech in many ways and still be within the first amendment.
- C. Because Blizzard is a private institution and can pretty much make the rules as **they** see fit.
- D. **/points at terms use**

thats why

- E. Too obvious.
- F. If **you'd** stayed awake in government class, you'd know.

\*waits for the thread to be LEGALLY moved to OT\*

- G. This is a private forum, so **they** can censor all they want.
- H. Frankly, if you can't even spell "freedom of speech" properly... you certainly aren't first in line of most deserving to have it.
- I. Freedom of "Speech" applies to **public** areas, and only so long as it doesn't impinge on someone else's rights. The WoW forums are **not a public place**, since **they** are owned and operated by a private company.
- J. If you come into my house and say something I don't like I can kick you out.

**You're in Blizzard's house.**

- K. I love speeches and cream.
- L. The US Constitution and the Bill of Rights do not apply here.

**READ THE TOS and EULA**