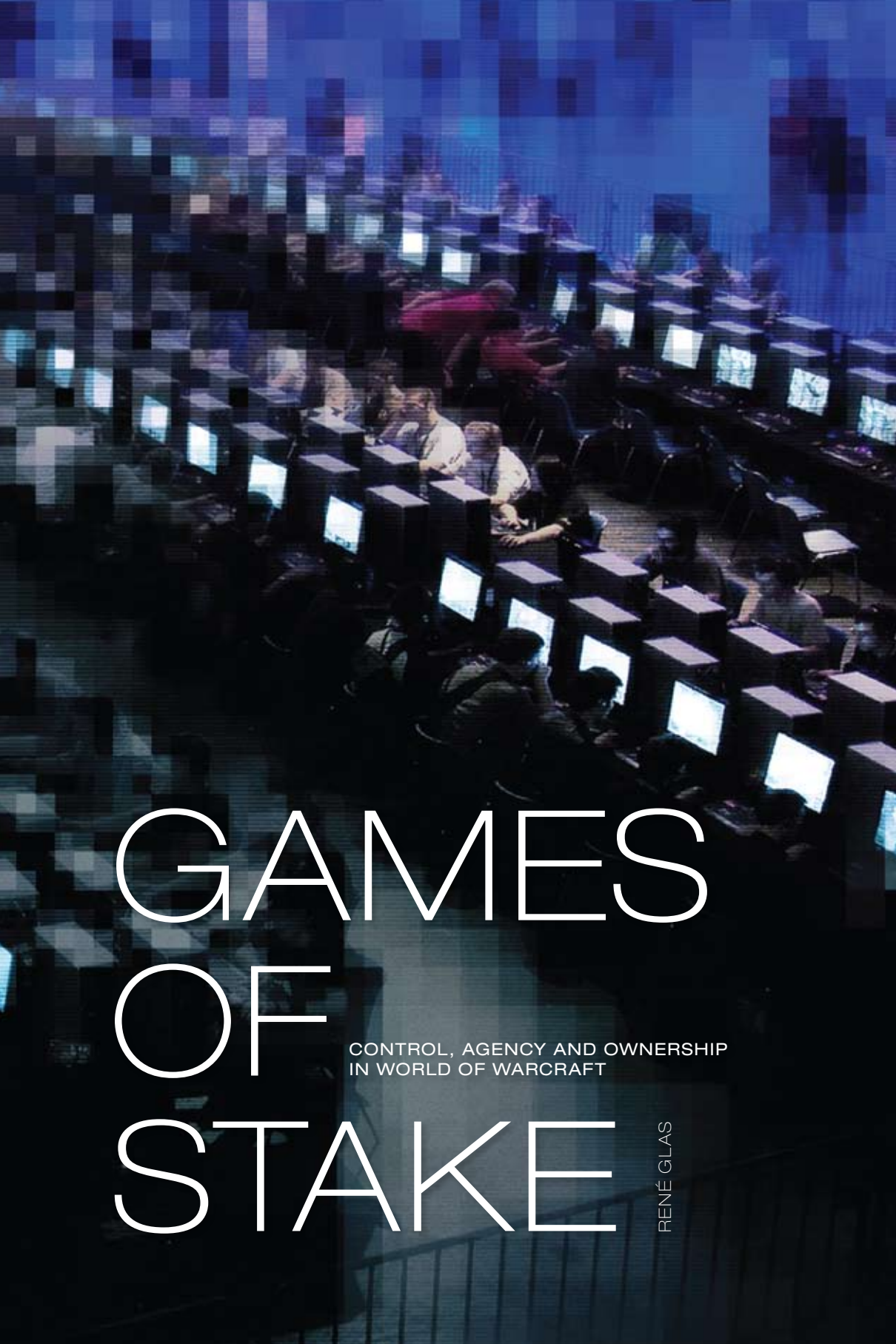

GAMES OF STAKE

CONTROL, AGENCY AND OWNERSHIP IN WORLD OF WARCRAFT

RENÉ GLAS

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TO NYNKE, MADELIEF & HENTE

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I can still remember the day I first logged in into *World of Warcraft* in early 2005. I had just started my PhD research project on the social dimensions of massively multiplayer online role-playing games (or MMORPGs). However, while I had been playing online for close to ten years, I had never tried one of these games before. Initially, it turned out to be an overwhelming, even somewhat frustrating experience. It took me hours to understand finally how to train new spells for my human warlock, and I got lost repeatedly in the immense virtual world this game offers its players. Studying this game, I thought, was going to be challenge.

Soon, however, I was drawn in – not just by the game but also by its players and the culture they built around the game. *World of Warcraft* is a game that is not just played, but that is shaped by the community-driven practices of millions of players from across the world. Its influence on the way games are produced and played is felt throughout the gaming industry and beyond. Challenging or not, I am very thankful that I have been able to witness and study this phenomenon over the past years.

The study you have in front of you would not have been possible without support from the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO), which funded "Tranformations in Perception and Participation: Digital Games", the research project it is part of. My supervisors, José van Dijck and Jan Simons, have also been indispensable during the research. José's emphasis on structure and argumentation and her inspiring enthusiasm helped tremendously in shaping my work. Together with Jan's sharp observations on complex topics, their supervision proved invaluable throughout the writing process.

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Finally, I would like to thank all my other friends and family for their warmth and support, and for putting up with my endless banter about *World of Warcraft* –now you can finally read what it was all about. Last but not least, I wish to express my dedication to Nynke and our daughters Madelief en Hente for being the shining lights in my life. More than anyone, they accompanied and guided me through all the ups and downs during the years it took to write this work. I dedicate this dissertation to them.

René Glas
Amsterdam, August 2010

INTRODUCTION

World of Warcraft is considered the pinnacle of massively multiplayer online role-playing games or MMORPGs, a genre of computer games which offers fictional universes where thousands of individuals play with or against each other or simply hang out to socialize. *World of Warcraft*, developed by Blizzard Entertainment based in Irvine, California, facilitates a wide range of play styles and preferences, ranging from casual role-playing to pursuing hardcore cooperative challenges. The game is considered easy to learn but hard to master, and is surrounded by a huge, player-driven culture offering everything from information wiki's to fan fiction, from user-interface modifications to guides telling you how best to level up and even how to learn a profession or how to earn virtual gold through the in-game auction house.[1]

Since its release in November 2004, *World of Warcraft* has seen the number of players expand to an impressive twelve million at the time this study was completed in 2010.[2] With its success, the game has become a poster child of the progressively collaborative relationship between consumers and producers observed in the larger media landscape. As media theorist Henry Jenkins notes, 'game designers acknowledge that their craft has less to do with prestructured stories than with creating the preconditions for spontaneous community activities' (2006 159). According to EDGE magazine, one of several game industry sources which crowned *World of Warcraft* the "game of the decade", *WoW* is exemplary for the larger change in how we consume media 'not as individual packages picked from the shelf, but as services, always evolving to meet the needs of their growing audience' (2010 68). To obtain this service, however, players need to pay a monthly subscription fee in addition to buying the game itself. These subscription fees provide Blizzard with the financial means to constantly update the game. A game like *World of Warcraft* is not a stable object but an object in flux; it is continuously transformed through patches and expansion packs which express what Blizzard thinks the player community wants next, which, in turn, gives players the idea that their wishes are being met.

The increasingly collaborative relationship between consumers and producers found in modern media is, however, not free of conflict. As Jenkins points out, companies see participation as something they can 'start and stop, channel and reroute, commodify and market', while consumers on the other hand assert 'the right to participate in the culture, on their own terms, when

[1] Henceforth, *World of Warcraft* will occasionally be referred to as *WoW*.
[2] *World of Warcraft* was released for the Windows and Macintosh platforms in November 2004 in the US, Australia and New Zealand. The South-Korean and European releases followed in early 2005, with China and other Asian countries following suit in late 2005.

and where they wish' (2006 169). As a result, conflict can arise between producers and consumers, but also between consumers themselves, when they are confronted with diverging interests in the very media object in which they participate. In these moments of conflict, the game itself – what it is (or should become) and how it should be played – is at stake.

This study situates itself within such conflicts of interest which, for *World of Warcraft*, started even before the game was officially launched in late 2004. The following announcement surfaced and spread across the hacker community in January 2004, many months before the official launch:

> Open-source proponents, crackers, and anarchists alike rejoice as an alpha version of *World of Warcraft* has allegedly been secured and is now supposedly making its way around warez circles. This news comes from Skull's Hack Site who says WarForge (infamous for their work in battle.net emulation for the War3 and TFT betas) is already working on server software for the *WoW* leak.[3]

This incident occurred when the game was still at a closed alpha testing phase, a period in which sparse publicity material, such as carefully chosen screenshots and videos, was available to players. In order to control potential damage, a Blizzard employee was quick to react with a post on Blizzard's official forums:

> In order to accelerate the testing process, we recently allowed a small group of external testers to play the game. During this process, a collection of files was leaked to the Internet. While these files contain alpha content from the game, they are not fully playable and therefore do not convey the experience that *World of Warcraft* will provide when it is released.
>
> We are currently investigating this matter and will take serious action against those involved.
>
> As always, we appreciate the interest and enthusiasm that players around the world have for *World of Warcraft*, and we look forward to delivering a massively multiplayer game unlike any you have ever experienced. Until then, we ask that you refrain from sharing any

[3] The writer and exact origin of this text remain unknown. Who or what caused the leak has also remained unclear. Information retrieved from the *WoW*Dev EmuHistory (http://*WoW*dev.org/wiki/index.php/EmuHistory, accessed June 13, 2008).

> content that doesn't come directly from Blizzard Entertainment (posted by "Katricia" on the battle.net forums, January 7, 2004).

Undoubtedly to the chagrin of Blizzard, the leaked *WoW* code nevertheless spread through the hacker community via peer-to-peer software like *BitTorrent*. While it remained largely unplayable – the code was far from finished, and no servers were up supporting the code – *World of Warcraft* was suddenly pulled out of Blizzard's control sphere and thrust into the players' domain. The result was a proliferation of devious coding groups with mysterious names like WarForge, Team Phyton and *WoW*Daemon trying to emulate the game by, for instance, reverse engineering client software in order to set up private, rather than Blizzard-controlled servers.

The hacking incident and its aftermath signals a larger phenomenon this dissertation seeks to investigate: both players and Blizzard are stakeholders in *World of Warcraft* who engage in constant negotiations concerning control, agency and ownership over the game. During such negotiations, stakeholders employ different tactics on various levels of interaction – technical, fictional, social, managerial, and so forth – in order to gain and/or keep control, agency and ownership. The main questions this study on *World of Warcraft* poses are:

> *How do negotiations between stakeholders (including both players and the game's developer) take form? In what ways do these negotiations define, challenge and alter the process of play? And how do they effect and influence the game as a cultural object?*

Key to understanding the processes of negotiation taking place in and around *World of Warcraft* – processes I call *games of stake* – is the fact that there is no such thing as a definitive, fixed version of *World of Warcraft*; the game is constantly changing through use by its players and through maintenance and upgrading by its owners, and is therefore always evolving into something different.[4]

[4] Blizzard Entertainment is a subsidiary of American game publisher Activision Blizzard Inc., one of the largest companies in the game industry, which in turn is majority-owned by French media conglomerate Vivendi SA. According to Activision Blizzard's annual report for fiscal year 2009, a 'disproportionately high perctage' of their profits come from a relatively small number of popular franchises among which *World of Warcraft*, a game that, according to the report, surpassed the one billion dollar in net revenue threshold (2010 4). As such, Activision Blizzard and Vivendi SA have major stakes in Blizzard and its game. The negotiations concerning *World of Warcraft*'s evolution on the corporate level between Activision Blizzard/Vivendi SA and Blizzard Entertainment are, however, beyond the scope of this study.

As explained, *World of Warcraft* is designed to be flexible and manipulatable, not just by Blizzard but also by players, to cater for all kinds of play styles and preferences. Why, then, would players choose to illegally appropriate *World of Warcraft* – which happened with the hacking incident? The answer is that, in practice, *World of Warcraft* is tightly controlled by Blizzard, with both technical and contractual barriers limiting the amount of freedom players have over the game. For the 'open-source proponents, crackers and anarchists' mentioned in the hacking announcement, *World of Warcraft* is the antithesis of what they are looking for in a game. For this group of stakeholders, getting access to the *WoW* code, making it run and spreading it among peers was not (just) an act of piracy, but also a way of claiming control, agency and ownership over the game. For most players, the stakes as well as the tactics used to pursue them, are not as excessive as those of the hackers. But, as I will show throughout this study, players are nevertheless heavily invested in what they consider to be "their" game, even if their particular vision of *World of Warcraft* does not entirely comply with or even opposes the vision of other stakeholders.

In the first chapter, which I call 'Framing the Game', I provide a theoretical framework through which I access the complex process of negotiations and tactics involved in playing *WoW*. This framework consists of four levels – which I call Game Design, Game Play, Game Culture, and Game Contract – each epitomizing a different approach to a game like *World of Warcraft*. In the Game Design section, I will focus on the definition of a game in general and a MMORPG in particular. Additionally, I will provide an historical overview of the MMORPG resulting in a descriptive frame for *World of Warcraft*'s design choices. In the Game Play section, I will approach play both ontologically – conceptualizing play as movement – and socially – constructing *World of Warcraft* as an environment which facilitates devious, anti-social forms of play which I call individualised group play. Game Culture discusses *WoW* in terms of subculture and participatory culture, theoretical approaches which will both be critically examined. Finally, Game Contract addresses the legal contracts and social protocols which control players through the establishment of behavioural codes of conduct. On and between these four levels, I argue, games of stake transpire.

To answer the question of how stakeholders involved in making and playing *World of Warcraft* interact, *playing the game as a researcher*, I argue, is not optional but rather a requirement. The second chapter, entitled 'Studying the Game', investigates the methodological issues concerning participatory ethnographic observation, my chosen approach to studying play. The chapter concerns the question of critical distance when play becomes a method, as well

as the inevitability of subjectivity which results from the unavoidability of experiencing only a fragment of *World of Warcraft* as a whole.

The third chapter, titled 'Controlling the Game', presents an in-depth analysis of *World of Warcraft* in which I pursue the questions of how Blizzard exerts control over the player's behaviour, and how this control influenced the experience of the game as a whole. In this chapter, I investigate *World of Warcraft* on three levels of game design: the technological and configurational support structures which enable play, the rules of the game in terms of goals and dominant tactics to accomplish them, and the fictional world in which the player's characters exist during play. In terms of Game Design and Game Contract, Blizzard has implemented guidance and control mechanisms on all three levels. These mechanisms present players with dominant play strategies, which in turn convey an intended use of the game. Deviation from this intended use, I argue, is a core element of games of stake between players, and between players and Blizzard.

Tactics of deviance are the main subject of the fourth chapter, called 'Gaming the Game'. Here, three case studies are presented in which players purposely go against or beyond the rules and boundaries of play. The questions asked here are if and how deviant play strategies contribute to a transformative game experience, and if deviance leads to increased agency and/or alternative, player-created forms of control. The three cases are based on individual play, individualised group play and dedicated group play practices, each showcasing deviance from another angle. All three case studies, however, show players engaging in practices in which they exercise external means originating from *World of Warcraft*'s surrounding participatory culture – including the use of strategy guides and user-interface modifications – to stray from or transgress the intended use of the game.

The fifth and final chapter, named 'Claiming the Game', showcases three case studies in which stakeholders accidentally and/or wilfully engage in games of stake in which the transgression of the boundaries of play is brought to a point where conflict erupts. The question here is, do Blizzard and players provide and construct forms of (self-)management to deal with these conflicts? The case studies presented in this chapter are very different in form and content. One case involves my own experiences as a victim of virtual crime and the subsequent negotiations taking place between Blizzard and myself, and discusses who is primarily involved in enforcing virtual law. The second case investigates the participatory practice of machinima filmmaking. Here, *WoW*'s game engine is used to create films, some of which present controversial content, which are then distributed among the player community. The final case study details a particular event during *World of Warcraft*'s evolution, the release of a content patch which caused severe community fragmentation and

harassment between players. In all three cases, the Game Contract perspective plays a key role, as tensions between players and Blizzard are resolved through potential and actual exclusion from the game.

Each of these chapters adds a new layer of inquiry, which ultimately shows what it means to design, to play but also to study a game in which millions of users invest a large share of their leisure time, an investment which ultimately leads to the ongoing evolution of the game itself. Games of stake, I argue, are at the core of these processes, which began well before *World of Warcraft* was released and which still continue at the time this study was finalised in 2010. The term games of stake refers to the fact that many of the negotiations taking place within and around *World of Warcraft* are playful in nature rather than "serious", even though I will show throughout this study that the boundary between play as a fun distraction and play as a serious matter is sometimes rendered very thin indeed. What I intend to show, however, is that *World of Warcraft*, as a whole, is also quite literally a game of stake, an object which results from perpetual negotiations between stakeholders. This implies that games of stake is a term applicable to many other games and media objects which display similar collaborative tendencies between producers and consumers – an assertion I will revisit in the conclusion. Ultimately, this study does not aim to produce a conclusive, all-encompassing analysis of *World of Warcraft*, but, by focusing on games of stake, presents a way to expose the forces underlying control, agency and ownership in a game subject to perpetual metamorphosis.

CHAPTER 1: FRAMING THE GAME

1.1 Introduction

My aim in this opening chapter is to provide a theoretical framework to accomodate my research into MMORPGs as complex socio-cultural phenomena, where the rules of play are under constant negotiation among numerous stakeholders on social, technological, and managerial levels. Several key issues can be distinguished here: *World of Warcraft* as a game under negotiation, a game that both exists and is experienced on a social and cultural level, a game in which people or parties have certain stakes which are worth defending. What follows is an investigation into the discourses surrounding these issues. Four main perspectives have been distinguished, which I have called Game Design, Game Play, Game Culture and Game Contract, each representing different theoretical approaches to the phenomenon. As I will show, one needs all four perspectives to fully grasp *World of Warcraft* as a battlefield of negotiation, to understand the stakes of this game and to identify the different levels at which stakeholders, including both players and the game's creators, operate.

In the first section of this chapter, *World of Warcraft* is discussed it terms of game design. While this dissertation will continue to refer to *World of Warcraft* as a game for practical reasons, depending on the definition one uses, it does not meet all the requirements to be called a game. This section will therefore focus on definition issues surrounding the concept of games in general and MMORPGs in particular. Furthermore, this section will trace the historical roots of the MMORPG, showing the reasons MMORPGs are more than "just" games and, at the same time, should not be seen as purely social worlds.

The second section investigates *World of Warcraft* from the perspective of Game Play. As I will show, there are many different forms of play present in *World of Warcraft*, ranging from freeform to highly instrumental, and from invididualistic to group-based playing modes. Together, all these forms of play define what a MMORPG is. Play is furthermore presented as the driving force behind social interaction. This is not to say that *World of Warcraft* is thoroughly social; through what I will call individualised group play, we can see that *World of Warcraft* supports many options for antisocial behaviour. Moreover, thousands of players with different tastes in play styles and preferences exist, essentially playing their own game within the same game environment, creating a broad selection of potential conflicting situations.

The third section discusses *World of Warcraft* in terms of culture or, to be more specific, a subculture. After briefly introducing the elemenents defining it as such, it will continue to focus on one of this subculture's most prominent characteristics: its participatory nature both in terms of the creation of new content and concerning play itself. Through different degrees of participation,

players try to exert power over what they feel is their game, while Blizzard tries to prevent players from achieving too much agency, which might endanger the future of the commercial product. Here, a critical stance is taken in relation to the notion of particpatory and especially convergence culture; both herald the active user as co-creator of the object of desire.

The fourth section examines *World of Warcraft* in terms of game contract. Through this perspective it is shown how both players and Blizzard negotiate the different degrees of agency resulting from play and participation. Players among themselves devise social rules in the form of protocol, while Blizzard has different license agreements at its disposal. Both forms of contract are seen as control mechanisms, endeavouring to create boundaries of play.

In the final section of this chapter, the four perspectives are brought together in a discussion of what I call games of stake. Here, I will show how the different perspectives and the negotiations taking place within and between them, offer us insight into the complexity of *World of Warcraft* as a constituted whole.

1.2 Game Design

MMORPGs like *World of Warcraft* typically defy easy definition. Media scholars Eric Hayot and Edward Wesp edited an issue of the *Game Studies* journal which addressed the 10th anniversariy of the MMORPG *Everquest* (Verant Interactive 1999-). In the introduction they ask themselves the question:

> What *are* massively multiplayer online role-playing games? Games? Virtual or synthetic worlds? Interactive novels? Simulations? Economic systems? Civic spaces, like cities? Classrooms or laboratories? Social spaces? Pieces of theatre? Wastes of time? Ideological state apparatuses? Forms of industry or modern-day nodes of productive? Networks? (2009, emphasis in original)

While many of the possible answers mentioned by Hayot and Wesp will feature in this dissertation in some way or form, the first two – 'games' and 'virtual or synthetic worlds' – will feature most prominently in this section. When I talk about game design here, I talk about both rules and structures allowing for goal-oriented play, and the way a fictional world and/or some form of narrative is represented. Addressing the way *World of Warcraft* is designed in both respects, I will analyse *World of Warcraft* as a cultural artefact with a history grounded both in games and in virtual worlds, the result of which makes it infinately more than "just" a game.

1.2.1 The definition game

It certainly is not difficult to procure a copy of *World of Warcraft*. Since its release in late 2004 in the US and early 2005 in Europe, it has remained a top-seller for the PC platform. As I was concluding this dissertation in 2010, *World of Warcraft* and its expansion packs, as well as strategy guides, action figures and other merchandise, where still prominently displayed in the game sections of most multimedia stores. It clearly *sells* like a game, but whether it actually *is* one depends on the definition. Before we look at what MMORPGs are, we must first consider some efforts to arrive at a solid definition of what constitutes a game.

Harking back to classic definitions by the likes of Johan Huizinga (1955) and Roger Caillois (1961), game designers Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman offer a broad definition of the term game, stating that a game is 'a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome' (2004 80). Working from an even wider array of scholarly and design-oriented definitions, Juul distills a more refined definition that he calls the classic game model:

> A rule-based system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels emotionally attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are negotiatable (2005 36).

Such definitions of a game work well for most games but present difficulties when applied to role-playing games. What is missing from these types of games, ranging from tabletop games like *Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax and Arneson 1974) to MMORPGs, are definite quantifiable outcomes. As Salen and Zimmerman point out, role-playing games are 'structured like serial narratives that grow and evolve from session to session. Sometimes they end; sometimes they do not' (2004 81).

Juul specifically recognizes MMORPGs as exceptions to the rule of what constitutes a game. Due to the open-ended nature of MMORPGs, 'the player never reaches a final outcome but only a temporal one when logging out of the game' (2003 43). For this reason, Juul does not provide a place for a MMORPG within the classic definition of a game, suggesting it is a type of game that tries to break with the standard model of games (2003 43). Salen and Zimmerman are more lenient towards MMORPGs. They argue that quantifiable outcomes are still present in MMORPGs because of the quests that can be accomplished, levels that can be reached and goals attained, that players set for themselves. In this way, a MMORPG is 'a larger system that facilitates game play within it,

giving rise to a series of outcomes that build on each other over time' (2004 82).

World of Warcraft's status as game then is at least partly self-defined by players who may (or may not) choose to set their own quantifiable outcomes, choices which, when combined, will define their game experience. As I will show in later chapters, for some players it is "just" a game. For others, it is a site for playful social interaction. For most, it is something in between. It all depends on the kind of playing styles players prefer, something I will return to in the section on game play.

The amount of freedom players exercise in selecting their own quantifiable outcomes is one of the genre's defining features. I should add though that this freedom is nevertheless relative, as in the case of *World of Warcraft*, this is because the game's design team has implemented a variety of mechanisms which control and guide players through the game in such a way that most players will ultimately enjoy a similar (rather than a wildly different) game experience. These game design mechanisms are part of the main focus of chapter 3. The remainder of this section, however, will focus on historical developments within MMORPG design, which, among other things, shows that *World of Warcraft*'s fantasy setting is not unique within the genre's history. Looking at the roots of the MMORPG provide the analyses and case studies throughout this dissertation with historical foundations, which foregrounds the fact that many game design choices made in *World of Warcraft*'s many forerunners are still experienced and negotiated today.

1.2.2 A history of the MMORPG

To convey the historical underpinnings of *World of Warcraft*, I will focus on several key junctures in the evolution of the MMORPG genre. A commercial MMORPG like *World of Warcraft* differs greatly from social sand-box environments like *Second Life* (Linden Lab); the former is constructed to be a game first and foremost, with built-in challenges and goals, while the latter is primarily a social meeting place where users are left to their own creativity. They nevertheless share common ancestries in terms of game design. First, I will look at the birth of the role-playing game which rose out of the so-called "wargaming" scene. Secondly, I address the arrival of online multiplayer options made possible by the early computer network technology. Thirdly, we see an evolutionary birth of more socially oriented worlds emerging from the mostly game-oriented virtual worlds.

A historical link between wargaming and role-playing games is not directly obvious. In traditional wargames, players do not control individual characters but control entire armies on large table-top battlefields, essentially simulating war time scenarios. Contemporary wargames have been (and still

are) used for military strategy training since the late 18th century (Fine 1983 8). In the realm of computer-based entertainment they are usually thought of as the predecessors of the strategy game genre, including the first three Warcraft computer games, not automatically the role-playing game genre. Wargames nevertheless formed the genre's basis.

According to anthropologist Gary Alan Fine, who studied early role-playing inventors and communities, several factors caused players to transform wargames into role-playing games in the early 1970s. There was the strong emphasis on historical realism limiting the imagination, the constraints of structured rules preventing players from '[moving] their pieces off the board, mutiny, or commit[ing] suicide', and a lack of identification with the characters they controlled – faceless armies instead of single, personalized units (1983 9-10). They started to introduce fantasy elements (like the use of magic), recognizable single units (like heroes) and a Dungeon Master (a referee-like player responsible for initiating an adventure and guiding the other players, or rather their characters, through it). These activities led to the creation of the first *Dungeons & Dragons* rule set (Gygax and Arneson 1974) and, through this rule set, the role-playing game genre. However, *Dungeons & Dragons* 'was designed as an adventure game, pitting good against evil, and was not designed as a sociological simulation' (Fine 1983 18). Soon thereafter, alternative role-playing games sprung up in which less competitive, goal-oriented social interaction, both between the players and the characters they represented in the fictional fantasy world, was not optional but rather the whole point of the game.

Table-top role-playing games like *Dungeons & Dragons* offer a free-flowing mix of storytelling and acting (usually relying heavily on fantasy culture for characters, events and fictional settings), supported by wargaming's instrumental rules and structures (like attributes describing a unit's range, stamina, health, etc., or the element of chance during combat through dice).This combination between fantasy-based fictional worlds and narratives, in conjunction with wargaming's game structure is still present within MMORPGs like *World of Warcraft*. A major difference is the fact that MMORPG creators have, to a large degree, taken over the storytelling part from the players, while the calculations during combat and the maintenance of the physical state of all unit attributes are now automated computer processes. At *World of Warcraft*'s game design core, many of wargaming's rules and structures still apply, some of which will be considered more deeply in chapter two.

At roughly the same time, when the role-playing game's popularity dramatically increased, developments in computer technology allowed game designers to introduce networked multiplayer game environments. Game designers Roy Trubshaw and Richard Bartle were not the first to make use of

the possibilities of networked multiplayer environments through the early Internet. Their network-based *MUD* or *MUD1* as it is more commonly referred (1978) to fused *Dungeons & Dragons*-like multiplayer gameplay with text based computer mediated adventure gaming, first introduced by games like *Colossal Cave Adventure* (also known as ADVENT, Crowther 1976) and *Zork* (Anderson et al. 1977). *MUD1*, standing for Multi-User Dungeon, was a persistent text-based virtual world in which a multitude of participants could play and interact with each other and their surroundings.[5]

The arrival of online networked multiplayer environments like *MUD1* represents the second key juncture in the history of MMORPGs that I will explore. In *MUD1* and similar adventure-based games, we see the small, tight player groups of the table-top role-playing game replaced by a player group whose size is only limited by technological constraints like network capacity. While the idea of playing with small, tight groups of players is still present in MUD and MMORPG design today in the form of guilds and less formal group play possibilities; to play and enjoy a MUD or MMORPG does not *require* other players and thus social interaction. Without downplaying the importance of social interaction and community building for MUDs and MMORPGs alike, we could argue that they are optional and not essential in order to play.

MUD1 became the model of a genre of text-based virtual worlds, with the genre also taking on the MUD name.[6] Early MUDs remained strongly linked to fantasy based adventure gaming, similar to their table-top forerunner. MUDs eventually broadened their scope, spawning a much more varied genre of multiuser virtual worlds. As sociologist Elizabeth Reid points out, many MUDs continued their fantasy heritage, creating the subgenre of MUDs its users began calling the ´adventure´ MUD, but a new category, the ´social´ MUD, started to appear (1999 109).[7] Trying to build a text based virtual world without a set theme, therefore breaking with the MUD's fantasy tradition, James Aspnes released *TinyMUD* (1989-1990).

The release of *TinyMUD* marks the third juncture I wish to discuss here. *TinyMUD* quickly became the preferred virtual world for those fed up with

[5] In the original *MUD1*, the 'D' stood for dungeon, as it was based on a derivative of *ADVENT* called *DUNGEN* which Trubshaw and Bartle played often (Koster, 2001). The game was called *DUNGEN* rather than DUNGEoN because of the limitations early computers had for filenames. At the time of this writing, a version of *MUD1* was still playable at http://www.british-legends.com/.

[6] The term MUD now stands for either multi-user dungeon, domain or dimension, describing a very diverse variety of virtual worlds that are possible through the online, text-based format. In order to do away with references to the MUD's fantasy roots, some academics have started calling the genre MU* (Bruckman; Mann & Stewart).

[7] As Reid points out, it is sometimes hard to differentiate between the two if they contain both a fantasy setting and strong social structure. That is because categorizing MUDs depends on the styles of interaction that they encourage, and not the way they are designed and programmed (1999 109).

hacking and slashing monsters. It offered world building and socializing, not fantasy themed action. *TinyMUD* and its peers (like *TinyMUCK*, *TinyMUSH*, both 1990) formed precursors to the MOO. This new form of virtual world – MOO stands for 'MUD object oriented' – gave its user the ultimate freedom to extend and adjust almost everything about the world, the most famous of which was *LambdaMOO* (White and Curtis 1990). Virtual worlds have continued along the paths of game-oriented and social-oriented interaction or, as game researcher Lisbeth Klastrup puts it, 'gameworlds' and 'social worlds' (forthcoming). MMORPGs like *World of Warcraft* represent the graphical upgrades from adventure MUDs, while the legacy of social MUDs and MOOs is still visible in the form of social worlds, of which *Second Life* (Linden Lab 2003-) has become one of the most prominent.

The reason for elucidating the evolutionary junctions between gameworlds and social worlds is to emphasise that, in terms of game design, gameworlds like *World of Warcraft* are not necessarily built to provide only social interaction. Gameworlds are designed to offer a broad range of interaction and communication forms, most of which are tied to certain play practices, including individualistic and antisocial actions. In the next section on game play, the range of potential playing practices in *World of Warcraft* is investigated, showing that not just the game's design but also the way it is played are key to understanding how this MMORPG functions.

1.3 Game Play

Traditionally, game play is a narrow category of play describing those activities applying only to games. Game play therefore would exclude playful activities without the fixed rules and structures of a game (Salen and Zimmerman 2004 303). Without a definite answer to the question whether a MMORPG like *World of Warcraft* is a "true" game, game play too must be re-evaluated. This section investigates the basic relations between the terms "game" and "play" and furthermore looks into the fact that game play in *World of Warcraft* is experienced both individually and in groups. As I will show, *World of Warcraft* is a highly elusive game when it comes to game play. Players can constantly switch between a wide range of play practices enabled through the game's design. This freedom both liberates players and brings with it player negotiations about whether some play forms are "better" or more socially accepted than others.

1.3.1 Play as movement

Before further discussing play, we must acknowledge that there is no inherent hierarchy between the terms play and game. One way to look at play is to see it as just one of the many possible ways of understanding a game. Games are not

just about play, but also about the way they look, or the stories they might tell. As Salen and Zimmerman put it, 'the experience of play is but one of many ways of looking at and understanding games' (2004 72). They call this approach – where play is a subset of game – conceptual, as it situates play and game within the field of game design (2004 72-73). The concept of game being more than play only, can also be extended beyond game design. Soccer fans for example do not play the game while watching their favourite teams in action, but they are nonetheless an important part of the soccer game. In relation to *World of Warcraft*, we could say that being active on community forums, or building modifications, is "part of the game" as well. This extended concept of play as a subset of the game will be addressed thoroughly in the section on Game Culture.

We could also consider game as a subset of play rather than the other way around. Salen and Zimmerman call this a typological approach, defining play and games according to the forms they take in the world (2004 72). Children having fun with a ball are playing. Add some rules and it turns into a game, such as soccer. Like soccer, *World of Warcraft* is very much a game with recognizable goal-oriented rules and structures, but unlike soccer, *World of Warcraft* can be thoroughly enjoyed by ignoring a large part of its rules and structures. A player could for example spend his or her time socializing with other players or exploring the virtual world without defeating foes in combat, gaining levels or any other form of instrumental progress. In other words, *World of Warcraft* is a game but at the same time it does not have to be. To understand this contradiction, we must further define play.

Looking at play ontologically, philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer defines play as a movement which has no goal that, when reached, brings it to an end. Play, instead, has a structure of oscillation, a constant to-and-fro movement, which keeps play active by constantly renewing itself (1985 93). For Gadamer, this is the essence of play and it is through this movement that games can be defined. The rules and structures through which the to-and-fro movement are controlled describe the particular nature of a game (1985 96). Here we can see that play on a very basic level needs at least some structuring to become a game. Literary theorist Wolfgang Iser has further elaborated on Gadamer's ideas of play as a to-and-fro movement. Iser calls play in games that have a particular goal 'instrumental play'. Here, play ends when the preset goals are achieved (1993 237). On the other side of the spectrum lies 'free play', the form of play that is without endings and keeps play in motion (1993 ibid.). Iser looks at *ilinx*, Roger Caillois' category of games which is all about inducing vertigo (Caillois 1961 24), for 'free play at its most expansive' (Iser 1993 262). These games like bungee-jumping, if you would call them games at all, are all about subverting fixed positions like structures and rules (Caillois 1961 24).

The paradox that Iser recognizes in this opposition is that both instrumental and free play cannot exist in a pure form. Literary theorist Paul B. Armstrong describes this paradox as follow:

> On the one hand, no game can be purely instrumental without ceasing to be playful and becoming merely a means to an end. On the other hand, there is an instrumental quality to free play itself to the extent that each move back-and-forth is an attempt to establish meaning and decide the outcome (2000 216).

This way, actual play situations are located somewhere along the continuum between instrumental and free play, never quite reaching either end.

While Gadamer and Iser's approach is theoretical, in *World of Warcraft* the constant movement between free and instrumental play is real. *World of Warcraft* offers both an environment where players can play freely, unbound by any goal-oriented rules, and a highly instrumental goal-driven structure of quest and other objectives which engage players. The game however will not end when the goals of instrumental play are achieved – there is no quantifiable "game over" scenario. Rather, a player moves back to either free play or other instrumental goals selected from a wide range of options that the game provides.

It is through the movement of play between free and instrumental that *World of Warcraft*'s status as a clearly defined game is challenged. Referring to Derrida's work on play and structure (1978), Goggin sees play as circulating 'through systems of relatively more stable rules, where it becomes perceptible as the *va-et-vient* that sets the game in motion, as a configuration of rules and hierarchies of value' (1997). She furthermore adds that 'what may appear to be stable, sedentary structure is rather constantly shifting and in a state of flux' due to play's constant movement (ibid.). These configurational qualities of play are not present in prevailing definitions of what constitutes a game, as destabilizing game structures through play makes it even harder to define them. The definition of a MMORPG like *World of Warcraft* however, shifts with the constant oscillations between free and instrumental play practices.

If free and instrumental play form one opposition between which players move, individual and group play is another. Some games are designed for solo play, others require player groups of various sizes in order to function. *World of Warcraft* offers options for both, with players constantly shifting between individual and group play situations. A shared environment by definition, playing entirely solo is difficult if not impossible to achieve, as other players' characters are always near, but it is nevertheless still possible to enjoy most of the game's content without ever having to communicate or work

together with other players. Put these two oppositions, individual and group play as well as free and instrumental play, on imaginary axes and you get a basic framework of four possible forms of play, with free and instrumental forms of individual play as well as free and instrumental forms of group play. To give the reader a basic grasp of what these forms of play constitute, both in general and specifically in *World of Warcraft*, I will briefly introduce each of them.

Within the area of free individual play we find play practices enjoyed individually and not bound by any particular goal directed structures or rules. The example of a child playing with a ball can again be of use here. Without any rules and goals attached, playing individually with a ball is just that: free individual play. This form of play can also be endless; it stops when the player decides to stop, not when a 'game' tells him to do so. In *World of Warcraft*, an example of free individual play would be the exploration of the vast and detailed fictional world without any other goal than just wanting to see "what's out there". There is much to discover, like hidden villages, beautiful vistas or rare monsters roaming the landscape, but none of the game's rules or goals force a player to do so.[8]

Within the area of free group play we find group play activities that are not bound by or directed towards any goals but do require more than one player. A good example of free group play would be role-playing, whether it takes the form of children playing cowboys and indians or adults acting out fantasy characters during LARP (Live-Action Role-Playing) sessions.[9] In *World of Warcraft*, we can see players inventing a large variety of role-playing practices, often having nothing to do with the goals and challenges *World of Warcraft* as a game offers. Many of these role-playing activities force role-players to work around the limitations of the game's design, which is not always setup for their role-playing needs (Copier 2007 ; MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler 2008).

The third area, instrumental individual play, contains play forms that players experience individually and are structured towards closure through specific goals. Here we can actually recognize games like the card game *Patience*, or any single-player computer game like *Tomb Raider* or *Tetris*. A

[8] *World of Warcraft*'s expansion packs did eventually include rewards in the form of "achievements" for world exploration. These "achievements" however have no real value within the game play, they only provide players with bragging rights about their exploration endeavors.

[9] It must be noted here that as soon as a LAPR session turns into competition based combat, this form of play turns into instrumental play, governed by rule systems. Often referees are on site to see to it that participants play according to these rules. Similarly, acting in film or theatre is also thoroughly rule-based. As Iser points out, actors must follow towards closure ("the end"). Iser sees this form of role-playing as a process in which 'the component of free play is laid to rest […] by that of instrumental play' (Iser 1993 262). Cut loose from theatrical acting, role-playing as a form of play is free, unbound by set scenarios or closure.

large portion of the quests *World of Warcraft* offers are also geared towards instrumental individual play, for example rewarding players for gathering certain items or killing particular monsters. While one could create groups to do these quests, they are designed to be conducted individually without the need of others.

Traditionally, most games can be found in the fourth area within the framework, instrumental group play. Here we can locate sports like soccer or basketball, board games like chess or *Monopoly*, card games like poker or blackjack. Simply stated, as soon as play takes the form of a goal driven game which is played by more than one person, we can say it fits in the area of instrumental group play. Caillois' competition-oriented *Agon* is often used to describe such play forms (1961 14), but it should be noted that in the case of digital games, instrumental group play can also be cooperative rather than just competitive.[10] In *World of Warcraft* for instance, players can team up to fight each other in dedicated areas but they can also form a group to cooperatively try to explore a dungeon or slay a monster.

I previously discussed role-playing in terms of free group play, but before moving on to the social dimensions of play in *World of Warcraft*, I wish to return to the notion of role-playing. As a game genre, the role-playing game can however have a somewhat different meaning. Here, "role-playing" is far more instrumental in nature, having less to do with acting and more to do with playing/managing certain functions of characters. In some RPGs such as the popular *Final Fantasy* series, players even control several characters at once, managing their strengths and weaknesses in such a way that a goal (like defeating an enemy) is achieved. This type of instrumental play is what can be called *ludic* role-playing, while the acting-variety can be referred to as *representational* role-playing. The cooperative forms of instrumental group play mentioned above are good examples of ludic role-playing, as each player in such a group controls a character with a certain function – they each have an instrumental role to play within their team in order to defeat the monsters opposing them. Most of *World of Warcraft*'s most challenging content is geared towards these forms of tightly organised ludic role-playing.

For some, the difference between ludic and representational role-playing is not recognized or seen as problematic. In his study of *World of Warcraft*, sociologist William Sims Bainbridge states that 'because *World of*

[10] Iser finds *Alea*, Caillois' fourth and final category describing games of chance, like many gambling games, problematic because of its unforeseeable nature. Games of chance create a situation where 'free play triumphs over instrumental play' (Iser 1993 261). But, 'no matter how drastically the former rejects the latter, instrumental play will still be a necessary foil in order to prepare for the unexpected' (ibid.). This way, games of chance like dice games can still be found within the areas of instrumental individual and instrumental group play.

Warcraft is a role-playing game, it seemed appropriate to use role-playing in the research' (16), hereby referring to role-playing practices I would call representational in nature. In a study of the MMORPG *Everquest II*, Williams, Kennedy and Moore point out that representational role-players form a small community 'playing their own game, largely independent from the other players and the larger world they populate' (Williams, Kennedy and Moore forthcoming). In *World of Warcraft*, this larger world seems primarily interested in ludic role-playing, making a representational approach not necessarily as appropriate as Bainbridge suggests. Even on the dedicated (representational) role-playing servers I was active on, representational role-playing was relatively rare. As such, throughout this dissertation the emphasis is on role-playing of the ludic kind. An in-depth analysis of the possibilities and limitations for both ludic and representational role-playing in *World of Warcraft*'s game design will be provided in chapter three.

To conclude, the creators of *World of Warcraft* offer options for free play as well a game with clear instrumental goals through its design, sometimes requiring groups of players while at other times play can be enjoyed individually. From the perspective of Game Play, *World of Warcraft* allows, even encourages players to constantly move between free/instrumental and individual/group modes of play. All these forms of play exist within a shared, persistent game world, leading to situations of constant social negotiation. This results in play practices which might be considered as unwanted by others, which is the topic of the second part of this section on Game Play.

1.3.2 Play and the Social

Previously, I limited myself to describing play forms which were either individual or group-based. Here, I would like to add another form of play which I will call individualised group play. This form of play, where players play alongside each other, rather than with or against other players within the same game, can only exist in games where players are free to move between individual and group play at will. Individualised group play brings forward the fact that, even though *World of Warcraft* is a thoroughly social experience, it does not imply that "social" always indicates positive interaction and communication between players.

Contrary to what outsiders might potentially expect from a multiplayer game like *World of Warcraft*, individual and individualised group play (rather than group play) amount to a large part of the overall game play experience. Results from large-scale data-mining carried out by games research collective Nicolas Ducheneaut, Eric Nickell, Robert Moore and Nick Yee for example show that grouping is seen as an inefficient way to get through the game. Many players choose only to begin grouping when they reach the higher levels with

their characters, ignoring grouping possibilities until this moment (2006 4).[11] Such an example of individual play is part of what Ducheneaut et all. call playing 'alone together': being '*surrounded by* others instead of *playing with* them' (2006 4, emphasis in original). They do not necessarily consider players who prefer to play individually as antisocial players:

> While many of WoW's subscribers play alone, we believe that they prefer playing a MMORPG to playing a comparable single-player game because of a different kind of "social factor." Indeed, the other players have important roles beyond providing direct support and camaraderie in the context of quest groups: they also provide an *audience,* a sense of *social presence,* and a *spectacle* (2006 7, emphasis in original).

In other words, gazing at other players, showing of your newly created gear or just reading the endless banter on the game's many chat channels, provides much pleasure for non-socialisers. The 'direct support and camaraderie' of group play situations should however not be overestimated as social play. Even when players decide to group up, not all play is socially oriented. The classes available for play in *World of Warcraft* are not equally equipped for solo play. This means individual players need to form groups for particular goals with the sole intention to use each other's character abilities. Group play then becomes a result of game design, forcing players to do so, not the result of players actually desiring to play with others. It is not uncommon that, when grouping up with strangers, communication is limited to an austere minimum. While players who group up temporally to accomplish a particular quest might technically be playing with each other, they do so in a "every man for himself" manner. In this way, they too are playing alone together.

Individualised group play also exists in the form of antisocial behaviour. Ganking for instance, the practice of randomly killing another player's character and then waiting for him to re-appear or 'respawn' with the intention to kill him again, is condemned by most of the player community, but players can do it if they want to. These are forms of what games researcher Torill Mortensen calls 'destructive deviance'– 'that which ruins the progress of others' (2008 208) – and can seriously reduce the enjoyment of those involved as victims. As the option for ganking is however part of the game's design – nothing in the game's rules prevents them from doing it – gankers usually do not see their actions as transgressions of the rules. There is however a

[11] An extensive case study on ignoring group play in order to speed up progress is introduced in chapter five.

difference between what the game allows and what the player community deems appropriate.[12]

The inclusion of individualised group play, both in free play form (like ganking, which serves no other goal than personal enjoyment for the ganker) and in instrumental form (playing 'alone together'), help to clarify two things about game play in *World of Warcraft*. First, individual play is always embedded in a social environment, making true individual play as seen in single-player games impossible. Second, we should not think of, or at least should not overestimate, *World of Warcraft* as a purely social environment in terms of game play. This is a gameworld, not a social world. As Ducheneaut, et al. observe, 'the prevalence and extent of social activities in MMOGs might have been previously over-estimated,' adding that 'gaming communities face important challenges affecting their cohesion and eventual longevity' (2006 1). Many such challenges will feature throughout this dissertation.

The large range of possible play practices, all embedded in a socially negotiated environment, cause players to approach games like *World of Warcraft* in various ways. Virtual worlds designer Richard Bartle famously proposed four main player types – 'Achievers', 'Explorers', 'Killers' and 'Socializers' – each representing a different approach to game play (1996, 2004). Achievers see virtual worlds as games, Socializers see them as social entertainment, Explorers view them as pastimes and Killers see them as a sport (2004 136, 37). Players are not limited to one type: as they become accustomed to the game over time, players move from Killer to Explorer to Achiever to, ultimately, Socializer in what Bartle calls the main sequence of player type drift (2004 165). While there certainly is some truth in these descriptions, Bartle's approach to player types suggests that players are always in an either/or-situation at a given time. Rather, players are constantly moving between different play practices and therefore play types, even during one single play session. Psychologist Nick Yee, who has conducted extensive research into player motivations, comes to a similar conclusion, pointing out that Bartle's types force players to have primary motivations which might exclude other motivations (Yee 2005b, 2005c). Another issue with Bartle's types is highlighted by game designer and early MMORPG commentator Raph Koster. He thinks it is strange that (representational) role-players are not among Bartle's types even though they have a strong presence in these games: 'under this system, they are merely a variant of socializers, and the line between in fiction chatting and out of character chatting is blurred' (1998). While I do not wish to enter into a discussion about the different types Bartle could or should have included, Koster's remark is interesting for the distinction he makes

[12] This topic will be investigated in the Game Contract section.

between in-fiction and out-of-character chatting. It reminds us that players are not just playing differently but also move in and out of different frames of engrossment.

Using Erving Goffman's method of frame analysis, Fine distinguishes three frame levels of engrossment in the similarly complex play forms of the table-top role-playing games that he studied: the real world in which all activities are grounded, the game context in which players deal with the rules and structures of the game, and the fictional world within the game in which they are present as characters. Each of these frames create other levels of awareness, meaning and immersion for the user, resulting in different forms of interaction with both the game and other players (Fine 1983 183-86). Bartle describes similar levels of immersion which are analogous to Fine's frames. These levels – player, avatar, character, persona – are seen as 'conceptual or emotional barriers' between which players must pass to become more deeply immersed in the game (Bartle 2004 154-55). Not all players however want to fully immerse or engross themselves in a game's fictional world, instead choosing to enjoy themselves on the game level. There is of course nothing incorrect in that, yet it might lead players to a different understanding of what they are doing.

Bartle points out that, ideally, choices and changes made in a game's design by the developer should lead to some kind of equilibrium between his different player types, resulting in healthy, player communities (2004 133-37). As one might imagine, trying to create an equilibrium between players with different levels of engrossment and immersion, is an even more daunting task. As with player types, players should not be seen as "stuck" on one level of engrossment or immersion but rather as constantly moving between levels depending on the play situation they encounter.

Therefore, when talking about *World of Warcraft* on the level of game play I mean to approach play as a practice constantly shifting between different play forms (between free, instrumental, individual group play and everything in between) as well as through different frames of engagement (on the level of the fictional world, the game's rules, and the real world). This approach posits play as a key factor in the struggles addressed throughout this dissertation, as different play preferences can constitute very different outlooks on what the game is or should be.

Nevertheless, engaging in *World of Warcraft* is not limited to the practices of play. In the following section I will discuss another perspective on *World of Warcraft*, game culture, which shows that the negotiations taking place about what the game is, and/or how it should be played, extends the boundaries of the gameworld itself.

1.4 Game Culture

This dissertation is not limited to only what happens within the game world, additionally it also looks at what is happening at the game's periphery. A MMORPG like *World of Warcraft* is embedded in a network of a thousand satellite websites, web forums and other web applications. Game researchers Kurt Squire and Constance Steinkuehler have noticed that, while there is a growing body of research on virtual worlds, there appears 'a paucity of research on [MMORPGs] as bona fide cultures [...] – sites constituted through language and practice both within the game (e.g., virtual social interaction and joint activity) and beyond (e.g., discussion of game-related issues on player-driven web sites)' (178-79). *World of Warcraft* is not just a game, it constitutes a culture in which meaning is developed and negotiated between players, as well as between players and the developers. By investigating this culture in relation to the game, the negotiations about its boundaries offer in a broader perspective.

1.4.1 The makings of a subculture

In the classical anthropological sense, culture is 'that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society' (Tyler 1994 1). Since this is a very broad notion of what culture is, many more sub-definitions exist, each having its own perspective based on this main idea, be it behavioural, structural, topical and so forth (Kroeber and Kluckholn 1963). Anthropologist Fine places role-playing game communities in the realm of subcultures, a move some game researchers hesitate to agree with. According to games researcher Mia Consalvo, the concept of subculture generally cannot work satisfactory to explain gamers and gameplay (2007 4). 'Although individual games or genres may spawn such subcultures', she notes, 'games as a whole are too varied to paint their players with such a broad brush' (2007 3). She has a valid point, however as I limit my research to one such game (or genre, if you will), using the concept of subculture to describe *World of Warcraft* is still productive as it allows for a more specific approach of its cultural components.

Fine recognizes five main criteria a community must adhere to in order to be defined as a subculture. First, the collection of individuals which makes up the subculture must share common activities to achieve segmental importance. Second, common cultural elements must characterize this segment. Furthermore, networks of communication should be in place through which information is transmitted, allowing interaction between members. Additionaly, these members must recognize themselves as being a group.

Lastly, the subculture must be identified as such by outsiders (Fine 1983 25-26; Fine and Kleinman 1979).

It is not hard to pinpoint the primary common activities and shared cultural elements of *World of Warcraft* players. All members play the same game and participate in the extensive network of websites and other media dedicated to the game (either actively or as a 'lurker'). While they might disagree, they share a basic understanding of the rules of play both instrumentally and socially. They use a particular type of language including all sorts of expressions and insider jokes, as well as more elaborate abbreviations and emoticons.[13] All these and many more cultural elements and activities define subcultural membership.

Several networks of communication, or 'channels of cultural dissemination' as Fine calls them (1983 31), further define and enable *World of Warcraft* to function as a dedicated subculture, each of them playing their own role in the negotiations process. Players have multiple group memberships, both simultaneously and sequentially (1983 ibid.). In-game guilds are good examples, as is the fact that players often know real life friends with which they share their MMORPG hobby (Yee 2003, 2005d).[14] Acquaintanceships and similarly weak ties between players form a second communication network and are especially powerful for a rapid diffusion of information (Fine 1983 31). Players are not only constantly surrounded by hundreds of players in-game, many of them communicating through public chat channels, they also have access to the thousands of satellite websites with hundreds of thousands of 'strangers' they can interact with (or, as a lurker, just observe). Blizzard Entertainment plays a structural role, the third form of communication networking in the subculture. Blizzard informs the community of news about the game, it reacts to player concerns through the official forums, and it takes an active role in circulating fan culture production.[15] Guilds as well as player created media outlets (community portals, forums, information databases) play structural roles too, providing players with a steady stream of news, gossip, screenshots, videos and game modifications. The final form of communication

[13] The abbreviations and emoticons *World of Warcraft* players use are part of computer-mediated paralanguage. Much of *World of Warcraft*'s paralanguage overlaps with those used in other games, both digital and not, as well as fantasy culture. Still, outsiders will find it hard to fully understand the often arcane expressions and elaborate and intricate discussions of game-related issues.

[14] As we will see in the final chapter, simultaneous and sequential grouping might be a good way to allow players to find the right people for the particular desired forms of play, it can also heighten the anonymous nature of play, opening up ways to deceive, harass or in other ways misbehave, under the guise of a newly created, easily disposable persona.

[15] According to a company report in 2008, Blizzard Entertainment at that time consisted of around 200 developers (coders, artists, writers, etc.) located in Irvine, California, as well as roughly 2000 customer service employees (including game masters, community managers, technical and billing department employees, etc.) spread around the world (Activision Blizzard 2008).

through which information about the subculture is dispersed amongst its members is mass media, including, again, the many websites dedicated to the game, gaming magazines, television programs and Blizzard's own books, comics and other *World of Warcraft*-related media.[16]

Finally, we need to look at the perception of *World of Warcraft* as being a subculture both from within (the players) as well as from the outside. As Fine observes: 'one needs to show that gamers identify themselves as a group and as sharing a subculture', while outsider recognition 'increases the perception of common interests of the group members and increases solidarity' (Fine 1983 26). During my time playing the game and participating in its community, I have found players to exhibit a strong subcultural identity. This shared identity was usually most strongly felt when other MMORPGs were launched in the marketplace, especially when these MMORPGs were being framed as robust competitors or "*WoW* killers".[17] The "threat" of a new MMORPG swooping in and 'stealing' players away from *World of Warcraft* often resulted in passionate "us" against "them" discussions on forums, clearly defining *World of Warcraft*'s community as a virtual world version of nationalism.[18] As for the outsider view about whether *World of Warcraft* players constitute a subculture, one can look at mainstream media and the way it dealt with addiction-related issues. While most players are familiar with examples of excessive use among their in-game (and sometimes real life) friends, in my experience they often feel stigmatized by negative news reporting, strengthening feelings of solidarity and community within the subculture.

In summary, *World of Warcraft*'s many play styles and preferences together form the core cultural activities, and the game itself is the core cultural element, around which participants in this subculture orbit. Both game and play are furthermore embedded in an extensive network of communication networks through which these cultural practices and elements as well as subcultural identities are constantly negotiated and strengthened.

As tempting as it is to call *World of Warcraft* a subculture, we must nonetheless remain careful in using the term. Like the role-playing table-top

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[16] Players can easily venture outside of Warcraft's computer games without leaving Warcraft's fictional universe. Throughout the years, Blizzard Entertainment has published a series of novels and comics set in Warcraft's fictional universe as well as board, tabletop and card games. A big-budget Warcraft movie is in the works.

[17] During my field work, among the MMORPG's most directly competing with *World of Warcraft* - and therefore perceived as a possible threat – were *Guild Wars* (ArenaNet 2005-), *Lord of the Rings Online: Shadow of Angmar* (Turbine Entertainment 2007-), *Age of Conan: Hyborian Adventures* (Funcom 2008-), *Warhammer Online: Age of Reckoning* (Mythic Entertainment 2008-) and *Aion* (NCsoft Korea 2009-). While each reached hundreds of thousands of subscribers, including many *WoW* "defectors", none managed to surpass *World of Warcraft* as a market leader.

[18] Such clear 'state' boundaries are more fictional than actual, as many *World of Warcraft* players have tried out competing games without being rejected reentry in *World of Warcraft*'s community.

games Fine studied, *World of Warcraft* is not a typical subculture. Traditionally, subcultures are seen as centering around economic and/or social issues and actively position themselves as alternatives to the dominant culture (Hebdige 1979). What we find in role-playing game communities is 'an aggregate of individuals that is without political motivation and significance and is likely to remain so' (Fine 1983 237). In this case, Fine talks about a '*leisure* subculture' (1983 237, emphasis in original). Another way to describe leisure-based subcultures related to media is fan culture. Fan culture studies, and especially the study of participatory media consumption within fan culture, is the subject of the following section.

1.4.2 Play and/as participation

A considerable amount of research has been conducted on the active media consumer, especially in fan culture studies. One of the most prominent terms to frame the active media consumer has been participatory culture, the view that consumers do not simply consume but participate as producers too. In participatory cultures, fans of cultural objects (like *Harry Potter* or *Star Trek*) not only engage in creative productions, they do so in a environment where creating and sharing these creative productions is seen as defining social connections (Jenkins 1992 ; Hills 2002 ; Lewis 1992 ; Gray and Sandvoss 2007 ; Jenkins et al. 2005). As one would expect, these creative productions are not always in line with the main narrative or ideology of the core text. While fans might not be able to change the core text, by producing their own material they can give a voice to their own interpretation of the work (alternative endings, short stories, drawings, videos, etc.) or create an expanded universe of interaction for the object (fan sites, forums, wiki's, etc.).

As games require active participation from the player in the form of play – without play games remain inert – the notion of participatory culture in relation to games needs some additional consideration. As new media scholar Sal Humphreys points out: 'Fan cultures represent the small percentage of audience members who actively seek to create communities around their interest in a particular text or series. MMOG's require *every* player to be engaged in community' (2005 71, emphasis by author). Many others have pointed out that playing a game adds user functions like exploration, modification and construction to the more interpretative user function of "passive" media like film, books and television. These additional user functions enable players not just to interpret the content of a game but to explore, reconfigure and, depending on the amount of freedom given, add to it also (Aarseth 1997; Ryan 2001; Salen and Zimmerman; Raessens; Galloway 2006). Play does not simply require participation, we could argue that it *is* participation.

World of Warcraft is fully designed with exploration, reconfiguration and, to a degree, modification in mind, resulting in profoundly different play practices and outcomes, some of which Blizzard and/or other players may view with disdain. In the same way that players' play preferences and/or levels of engrossment might differ, players do not all share similar levels of participatory activity, or even necessarily a social orientation towards participation. Different forms of play and therefore participation do not always serve common goals. Divergent, transformative and even anti-social play forms constantly challenge the core game experience as intended by the designers, as well as the boundaries of what is considered acceptable participation by other players.

On the many communication platforms outside of the game itself, participation is more on par with fan cultures of traditional media. Where the practice of play makes everything within the game participatory, on the websites surrounding the game few are responsible for most of the creative cultural production. To describe this situation in online social networks and communities, web usability researcher Nielsen has put forward a '90-10-1 rule' of user participation, where 90% of all users are lurkers, 10% contribute from time to time and only 1% accounts for most creative contributions (Nielsen). Large-scale quantitative research has shown that *World of Warcraft* players however tend to be more active on web forums, with only 30% of players indicating that they never post on forums and well over 30% of players saying they do so once or several times a day, usually on guild-related forums (Yee 2006c). The differences between levels of participation then are less drastic than the 90-10-1 rule would suggest.

Combining both in-game and external participatory activities, I would propose a sliding scale of participation, showing what can be called the *long tail of participation*, which illustrates ever decreasing levels of participation. A relatively small portion of all players are accountable for the vast majority of contributions from participation. Due to play's participatory characteristics, players will, however, never reach a point where they do not participate at all.[19] The differences between active and relatively passive participation in *World of Warcraft*'s subculture might be substantial, each player nonetheless contributes his or her part through play. As Humphreys explains:

> While we can identify the hardcore, who go and make the websites that surround the game and produce much of the material that is useful to playing, we can also identify that every single member of the MMOG

[19] It must be noted that not all members of *World of Warcraft*'s subculture are also active players. There is a considerable amount of ex-players who still follow developments of the game and its players, as well as people with a general interest in fantasy, MMORPGs, the *Warcraft*-series and so on. Depending on their participation level, most of them will be at the lower or tail end.

> 'audience' is productive of material that can be used by other players and the publisher (2005 71).

The addition of the publisher in the final sentence of the quote signals that the participatory activity of *World of Warcraft* is not just beneficial to participants themselves. It ultimately serves its creator which can harness participation in order to use it as a force of co-production. Even if participation is limited to individual play practices, the actions within the game can be data-mined to see what players like the most, or where they get stuck and stop playing as a result. In this way, all forms of player participation become co-productive force for future versions of the game.

The result of *World of Warcraft*'s participatory culture is a disintegration of the traditional distinction between consumer and producer. Players become 'prosumers', active participants in the process of *World of Warcraft*'s creation and evolution (Toffler). In Henry Jenkins' seminal book *Converge Culture*, new media users are positioned as being active, emancipated, creative and community-oriented while new media companies (among which game companies) are 'collaborationists' in the process, 'experimenting with new approaches that see fans as important collaborators in the production of content and as a grassroots intermediaries helping to promote the franchise' (2006 134). These collaborationists sharply contrast with old media companies (film, tv, music) who deny users the ability to tinker with their products. These he calls 'prohibitionists' – and even they are slowly turning to collaboration (ibid.).

Without question, participatory contributions from active players are key to the success of the overall community and subculture and therefore the success of the game. Frank Pearce, Blizzard's senior vice-president, recognizes this fact:

> It's not just a bullet point for the back of the box: I really view the Blizzard community for each specific game to be a huge feature that adds value to the product. So it's important for us to nurture that community and ensure it has a long lifespan (EDGE 2004 80).

Active players literally add value to the 'product' in the form of content and/or function as structural roles within the subculture's networks of communication, dispersing information to less active players – and they do it all for free. One could even say players have moved beyond prosumerism to what new media scholar Axel Bruns calls 'produsage', the collaborative and continuous building and extending of existing content in pursuit of further improvement that we for instance see on newly emerging sites, Wikipedia and blogs (2005, 2008).

The situation of mutual benefit between consumer and producer should however be approached with caution; *World of Warcraft* is not at all the kind of "Web 2.0" open source system in which Bruns' produser thrives. The concept of 'convergence culture' is in danger of overstating the eagerness of producers to allow full collaboration of users in creative processes. While the roots of participatory culture in online social networks like virtual worlds can be traced back to grassroots and "DIY" counterculture, participation is now embedded in and entangled with corporately owned control spheres (Lessig 2006 ; Turner 2006 ; Galloway 2004 ; Deuze 2006). Jenkins too recognizes protectionist tendencies of companies, stating that: 'allowing consumers to interact with media under controlled circumstances is one thing; allowing them to participate in the production and distribution of cultural goods – on their own terms – is something else altogether' (2006 133).[20]

Moreover, the creative cultural productions resulting from active player participation which are allowed, are actively appropriated by game developers. As Consalvo reminds us: 'clearly, commercial entities have vested interests in commodifying as many elements of gaming culture as possible, to then sell those bits back to players as the most desirable forms of capital' (2007 184). As media scholars Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Whiteford and Greig de Peuter explain, games are increasingly becoming the product of 'communities that extend beyond the workplace' with paid corporate employees forming 'only the core of a much wider circle or creativity [...] that includes a diffuse swirl of unpaid creators, test subjects, expert informants, and voluntary labour' (201).

While exposing the legal and economic implications of these shifts or transformations from consumer to co-producer is not the main aim of this dissertation, the practices of (and power struggles about) participation do affect the game itself, or at least the way it is played and perceived.[21] When studying a game as subculture within the consumption/production paradigm of participatory culture, we should be hesitant to speak only of the freedoms players have, to do whatever they want in and with the game. In the next section, which concerns Game Contract, I will show which control mechanisms are in place that ensure at least some basic degree of converging interests.

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[20] The overly optimistic views inherent in Jenkins' work on convergence culture closely mirrors less academic Web 2.0 business manifestos on the co-creative consumer which, as media scholars Van Dijck and Nieborg have pointed out, makes it unclear if Jenkins offers a cultural or business model as 'the distinction between the two is rendered entirely irrelevant because [user and creator] converge beyond distinction' (Van Dijck and Nieborg).

[21] A growing body of work on the appropriation of free labour by the game industry and related issues is forming (Postigo 2003, 2008; Nieborg; Humphreys 2005; De Peuter and Dyer-Witheford 2005; Taylor 2006a; Kücklich 2005; Prügl and Schreier ; Balkin and Noveck; Nieborg and Van der Graaf).

1.5 Game Contract

The last of the four perspectives this dissertation will address, Game Contract, is concerned with the social and legal agreements which exist amongst players themselves and between players and Blizzard. These agreements depict which play practices and other forms of participation and communication are considered acceptible in and around the game. In terms of social contract, I will discuss the social etiquette and other behavioural protocols which govern social interaction between players. In terms of legal contract, I will examine the control systems Blizzard has implemented, which gives them the ability to punish or even exclude players when they misbehave.[22] Both social and legal contracts deal with control and power issues. Social contracts however deal with defining *World of Warcraft* as a social space, while legal contracts underscore *World of Warcraft*'s status as a commercial product. In contrast to the coded rules described in the section on Game Design, these contracts present players with meta-rules – rules which are not impossible to break but rather impermissible.

1.5.1 Social rules and magic circles

A term often heared used when discussing the boundaries of games is the 'magic circle', Johan Huizinga's way of framing gameplay in time and space from his seminal work *Homo Ludens* (1955). The magic circle seperates the activity of playing a game from the outside world and therefore defines the limits of play. Cheating or other forms of unsportmanship-like behavior "breaks" the magic circle, resulting in play being momentarily or indefinately suspended by the players and/or referee. As stopping play usually diminishes the enjoyment of those involved, the presence of a magic circle ensures that in most cases players tend to obey or at least agree on the rules of play.

The presence of a magic circle thus suggests conflict prevention, as obeying or agreeing on the rules of play means play continues, while diverging from these rules might bring it to a halt. As MMORPGs are persistent, play is always continous. As long as the servers are up, the game is up, whatever the form of play practices within it take. This way, divergent play practices no longer present potential game-stoppers, suggesting that a MMORPG's magic circle cannot break. This would suggest that the magic circle itself is a problematic concept describing the boundaries of play, or that there is such a thing as an unbreakable magic circle. Both suggestions, however, are flawed.

[22] I must note here that the use of the term legal does not necessarily imply that these contracts are an accepted part of real world law. To differentiate between them and the social contract I will continue to use the term legal, but many of the laws governing virtual worlds actually exist in real world law's grey areas (Balkin and Noveck).

Game scholar Jesper Juul argues game studies have tended to use the magic circle too long to either describe the boundaries of a game in terms of 'the concrete act and psychological experience of entering a game', or to dismiss or critique the existence of such boundaries all together (2008 57-59). Instead, Juul describes different frames at which rules and structures are negotiated depending on the desires of the players, concluding that the magic circle is 'clearly not a perfect separation from the rest of the world, but an imperfect separation that players negotiate and uphold' (2008 61, 62). The outcome of such negotiations is not limited to game rules but to social behavior as well, resulting in social protocols. Defined by Galloway as 'voluntary regulation within a contingent environment' (2004 7), protocol as a form of game contract between players stands in sharp contrast to the non-negotiable coded rules of the game. Looking at the magic circle as protocol allows us to look at social negotiations instead of applying or denouncing boundaries.

Therefore, even if players decide to ignore all other players and strictly follow their own rules and pursue their own goals, they still do so within a community of players with established norms and values. Like the MMORPG itself, this community is persistent in its presence; there is no offline, individual version of *World of Warcraft* for the socially averse. Individualised group play practices like ganking might not necessarily stop play in a MMORPG, and players who wish to commit these anti-social acts could continue as they please because the game itself does not stop them from doing so, but they are breaking social rules created by the collective over years of communal play and negotiation.

The social protocols defining what kind of play practices and other behavior is deemed acceptable, does however not necessarily apply to *World of Warcraft*'s community as a whole. What players interested in hardcore instrumental group play might consider acceptable could easily differ from the desirable protocols representational role-players uphold. Different player types and preferences organize themselves both loosely and tenaciously around what Fine calls 'idiocultures':

> Systems of knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, and customs peculiar to an interacting group to which members refer and employ as the basis of further interaction. Members recognize that they share experiences and that these experiences can be referred to with the expectation that they will be understood by other members, and can be employed to construct a shared universe of discourse (1983 136).

A subculture's community thus consists of a large set of small groups with potentially unique protocols within the context of the larger subculture of

which they are all a part. As Fine explains: 'every small group can be said to be an interpreter of this larger culture' (1983 238). Sometimes these interpretations are on par with those of other groups, but differences in opinion can cause disagreements between players about their particular play or (other) behavior.

While Fine limits his observations of idiocultures to small groups interacting face-to-face in real-world locations, like the Little League baseball teams and table-top role-playing groups that he originally studied (1979, 1983); when dealing with virtual communities one could stretch the notion of idioculture to include larger, less formal groups. As *World of Warcraft*'s community is not location-based but exists in the virtual, and does not (necessarily) involve face-to-face interaction, the groups that form around specific play practices and preferences can become rather large. Guilds might consist of small, easily defined groups of players, but some of the raiding and role-playing communities encountered during my research consisted of hundreds, even thousands of participants, especially when including outside observers and/or fans of these groups who follow their cultural lead. Even with this immense size, they still showed distinct play styles, preferences and protocols. Just as players can be part of different groups with different characters, they can be part of different idiocultures sequentially and simultaneously (the latter implying a range of identity play options which will be studied in chapter four).

In terms of Game Contract, we can say that social protocols guide players' social behavior in and around the game. Social protocols define what players need to do and especially what they should not do to be an accepted part of the community, or to those parts of the community in which they wish to be included. At the same time, social protocols enable players interested in anti-social individualized group play practices to act in a manner least appreciated by other players, like ganking. Furthermore, the interactions between the different groups, each with its unique interpretations of how the game should be approached, shape both the community and the game itself, as the constant negotiations about social protocols can also be said to be negotiations about the boundaries of play.

Players are however not the only ones involved in the creation and enforcement of contracts when it comes to play. When investigating games in terms of Game Contract, one inevitably encounters the legal boundaries set by the game's developer, stating what players may and may not do with the product they have purchased. Appropriately, the business side of *World of Warcraft* is where I will look next.

1.5.2 Playing on a license

Calling *World of Warcraft* a leisure subculture does not imply that we should ignore the fact that *World of Warcraft* represents a very successful business for its proprietor. Blizzard might be open to collaboration, emphasising the importance of the community's value, however there is still a very obvious distinction between user and creator. The levels of control and thus power both have, with and within the game, differ greatly. When investigating *World of Warcraft* in terms of contractual affordances and limitations, one encounters political-economical negotiations in which power (or the lack thereof) plays an important role.

Concepts like the earlier introduced convergence culture, where creation and consumption go hand-in-hand, are prone to utopianism and ignore the strong economic and financial forces inherently embedded in (virtual) participatory cultures. Blizzard's role shifts between collaboration and protectionism, both expanding and limiting the player's range of participation, and it can do so through a range of legal documents which are positioned between the player and the game.

Players must contend with two significant game contracts when playing *World of Warcraft*: the End-User Licence Agreement or EULA, and the Terms of Use or ToS. Like many software license agreements, signing these document means clicking on the "I Accept" button when prompted to during the installation of the game software. Choosing not to accept is always an option, but this choice will simply block access to the software – to play the game, signing these documents is compulsory.

The EULA ensures that players understand that they have not in fact *bought* the game software but that Blizzard *licenses* its use. Therefore, *World of Warcraft* is not a product which is published but a service which is provided. As Internet researcher Sal Humphreys points out:

> Structurally [publication and service] are built on different mechanisms. Publication is an industry built around the notion of property. Powerful discourses circulate that construct publications as property subject to ownership and theft. Service industries on the other hand, are structured around process and relationship. They are not about the exchange of property. There is an exchange of money for service (2005 92).

How Blizzard deals with its role as a service-provider will feature more prominently in chapter four. For now, it is important to note that legally, players never actually own the game; they pay for the rights to play it through a monthly subscription.

The ToS describes additional licence limitations, meant to ensure that players do not mod, hack or in any other way exploit the game, but the ToS also features a code of conduct related to inappropriate character and guild names, chat communication and gameplay practices. This code of conduct overlaps with many of the social protocols among the player community. Whereas breaking social protocol only leads to being branded as a cheat or egotist, breaking Blizzard's code of conduct can however result in play being halted, at least for the perpetrator. By signing the EULA and ToS, players give Blizzard the right to ban them from the game temporally or, in some cases, permanently.

One could criticize EULAs and ToSs for being excessively harsh. Humphreys, who has written extensively about EULA-related issues concerning the MMORPG *Everquest*, has summarized several of the problems she encountered. All EULAs tend to be alike, regardless of the unique features of the individual programs or services they cover. Agreeing to the EULA gives the owner the right to terminate the service at will, without user consent or consultation. They allow for the collection of privacy information and covert social surveillance (active control) and take freedom of speech lightly, giving the platform owners the right to silence voices or practices they do not condone (Humphreys 2008 23-26). More to the point, the contracts allow owners to rewrite or rephrase sections of the contract at will ad infinitum. If players do not like the terms of the contract, they can always play another game. If they violate them, they can be denied access or removed from the service without any difficulties.

Even fair-use, the right to use limited amounts of copyrighted material for your own creative productions or, as Lessig describes it: 'the right to hire a laywer to defend your right to create' (2004 187), is limited by these contracts. During a conference on law and machinima, an attorney working for a law firm which, among other clients, has represented Blizzard in several cases – argued that, in terms of legal contracts, fair-use *can* be signed away entirely.[23] If critics want to dispute any unfair or unclear elements of EULAs in court, all a judge has to do is to rule that the relevant contract terms are valid, creating, as media journalist and gold farming expert Julian Dibbell puts it, 'a sort of wet blanket thrown upon the sparks of intellectual controversy flying from the case' (2006a 139).

Together with socially negotiated protocols, the EULA and ToS form the constantly shifting boundaries of what is considered acceptable play and behaviour in and around the game. Being non-negotiable, Blizzard's contracts are nonetheless far removed from social protocol. As law professor Jack Balkin

[23] Shane M. McGee, speaking during the 'The rules of play: Copyright and fair use in Machinima' panel, *Play Machinima Law* conference, Stanford University, April 24, 2009.

reminds us, together with the coded rules, these contracts create a basic architecture and set of behavioural rules for the game. *World of Warcraft*'s code and contract (pre)condition play and to a degree dictate the limitations of social protocol: 'the players' freedom to play is a freedom to play within the rules the platform owners have created' (87).

While issues concerning the EULA and ToS certainly exist and, as I will show in chapter 4, can cause strife between Blizzard and players, they are not inherently malevolent contracts. While the degree of freedom to negotiate the terms and conditions may differ greatly, both social protocols and legal contracts are aligned by their constitution and goals: to create an enjoyable game experience with a healthy player community. For most players, the EULA and ToS are not at all problematic. They keep potentially disruptive behaviour of other players at bay. Players and designers nonetheless do not always agree on what constitutes fun play, or fun social interaction. As I will show throughout this dissertation, players often do go beyond the limits they have agreed to in the licence agreements, limits they themselves do not recognize or in fact take for granted.

Ultimately, issues concerning contractually impermissible play practices cannot be separated from the game's design (which includes the coded rules of the game), the different varieties of game play resulting from this design, and the cultural norms and values in which it all takes place. In the next section of this chapter, I will therefore show how the four perspectives – Game Design, Game Play, Game Culture and Game Contract – intertwine.

1.6 Games of Stake

The concluding section of this chapter looks at *World of Warcraft* as a battlefield of negotiation where all parties involved, both players and creators, are seen as stakeholders who each have their own stakes within *World of Warcraft*, ranging from affective to purely commercial interests. In what I call *games of stake*, various multilayered negotiations take place in and around the game about the rules of play. As games researcher T.L. Taylor puts it, 'rather than a linear, top-down process, ultimately what we find is a complex co-construction of technologies that occurs between designers, users, and the artefacts themselves´ (2006a). Above all, the four perspectives discussed play their own part in this co-construction, resulting in the game and its meaning for each stakeholder as being continually redefined.

1.6.1 The stakeholders of *WoW*

In the previous sections I have discussed *World of Warcraft* from the perspectives of Game Design, Game Play, Game Culture and Game Contract. By doing so, I have tried to convey how limiting one's observations of a MMORPG

such as *World of Warcraft* to one perspective does not do justice to its complexity, potentially limiting one's understanding of the game. Including a multi-layered perspective allows me to explain in greater detail how and why claims about what *World of Warcraft* is (or should be) are different, and how these differences influence the game's evolution. This lack of agreement is not limited only to differences between players and Blizzard, but is also evident within the player community itself, as different practices of play, in some cases supported by unique cultural norms and values, representing different approaches to the rules and boundaries of play.

Players (in all their varieties) and Blizzard are all stakeholders when it comes to *World of Warcraft* – all strive to achieve what they think is in the game's or their own best interest. Even if they pursue different values, the fact that these values in many cases need to be expressed and defended in order to arrive at their preferred version of the game, unites all of the stakeholders. These negotiations, dealing with differences of opinion and other asymmetries of power or agency over the game, take place in what I figuratively call *games of stake*. The use of 'games' in this term points to the playful setting for these negotiations (even though some players take *World of Warcraft* very seriously indeed, it remains a game embedded in a leisure subculture), while the stakes being "played" exist on the levels of design, play, culture and contract. The games of stake throughout this dissertation show *World of Warcraft* as a site for playful interaction, a social world, as a source for creative productions, as a product worth protecting from misuse, and so on, showing that *World of Warcraft* is a complex socio-cultural phenomenon embedded in a commercially controlled context.

For Blizzard, the process of ensuring that all stakeholders (including itself) are satisfied with the game, is a difficult management task. Jenkins quotes MMORPG designer Raph Koster who explains that managing an online community, whether a non-commercial MUD or commercial MMORPG, is an act of governance; 'Just like it is not a good idea for governments to make radical legal changes without the period of public comment, it is often not wise for operators of online worlds to do the same' (Koster qtd. in Jenkins 2006 160). Players, Jenkins continues to argue, must feel a sense of ownership over the virtual world if they are going to put in the time and effort needed to make it work, for themselves and for other players. 'You can't possibly mandate a fictionally involving universe with thousands of other people. The best you can hope for is a world that is vibrant enough that people act in manners consistent with the fictional tenets' (2006 160). As hope alone is not sufficient to keep players in check all the time, *World of Warcraft* remains tightly controlled by Blizzard's control mechanisms, including the coded rules and the contractual agreements each player has signed.

The keeper of both code and contract, Blizzard remains the most powerful of all stakeholders. Through design, maintenance and customer support, Blizzard has the most options to deem certain practices of play as desired, while outlawing others. More so, through interventions, adaptations, expansions and limitations brought forth by content patches and community management, they regularly adjust *World of Warcraft* as they see fit. Such changes, both on the instrumental (game rules, interface options, etc.) and fictional level (additional narratives, expanding the virtual world's geography) have nonetheless been appreciated by players, evidence of which can be seen in the constant rise rather than decline of subscribers since the game's release during and after the period of this research.

While Blizzard undoubtedly is the most powerful stakeholder within *World of Warcraft*, players usually do not feel underpowered or exploited. Through play itself, players can diverge from game design structures they feel conflict with or divergence from their wishes or needs. As long as divergent play practices or modifications are considered 'creative use of game mechanics' (as Blizzard tends to refer to activities going beyond the intended design), players are free to do as they please. Blizzard also allows players to adjust the user interface of the game to some extent with modifications created by players themselves, giving the game a more personalised look and feel during play. Again, user interface modification is allowed as long as Blizzard does not deem it inappropriate, in which case they will block the modification's functionality. Both divergent play and modification can be considered games of stake between players (through play) and Blizzard (through design).[24]

Sometimes games of stakes are more explicit, for instance when players unwittingly or actively break either code or contract and by doing so attract repercussions from Blizzard. The release of controversial new content through patches can also provoke vocal opposition from player groups. Such situations lead to direct clashes between stakeholders. A case study included in chapter five for instance discusses the players' ability to exchange virtual currency for real money and vice versa. This practice is shown to be highly controversial among players and is explicitly forbidden by Blizzard. Another case study in that chapter shows that Blizzard does not shy away from pursuing (or threatening) legal action when they encounter activities they do not condone on websites outside of their direct control sphere. Here, a video hosting site is asked to remove a player-made video which shows how to exploit game flaws.

[24] Many of these games of stake feature in chapter 4 which, among other things, addresses cheating practices.

1.6.2 The battlefields of MMORPG play

The games of stake mentioned above are all very different in form, context and severity; the processes of negotiation can however be seen as taking place within and between the various perspectives I introduced. The more perspectives that are involved, I argue, the more complex are the games of stake taking place. By aligning the four perspectives in the simple model shown below, one can visualise this complexity through the concept of overlapping circles.

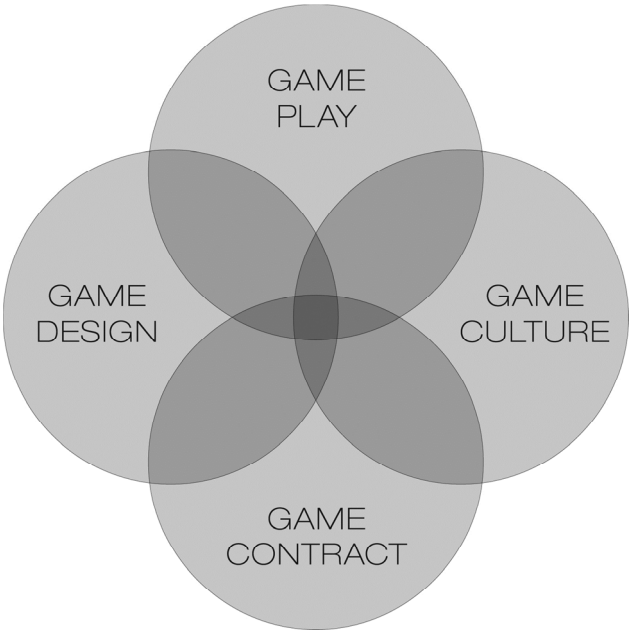

Figure 1: the battlefields of negotiation

The more overlap that exists between perspectives, which I call battlefields of negotiation, the higher the potential is for tension. For instance, what seems like harmless fun when seen only from the perspective of Game Design might be considered problematic when one includes the Game Play perspective and downright objectionable when the Game Contract perspective is added. As a result, the battlefield of negotiation found in the middle of the model contains games of stake in which issues from all four perspectives coincide. In chapter 5 for instance, I will introduce a case study in which a new content patch (Game Design) leads to a confrontation between role-players and hardcore instrumental players (Game Play, Game Culture) which was partly resolved by Blizzard banning some vocal players from the forums and game (Game Contract).

Complex games of stake do not however need to result in tension between stakeholders. Some of the negotiations taking place on these overlapping battlefields can look benign, almost insignificant to the stakeholders involved. Exploring the fictional world (Game Play) while ignoring the instrumental rules or goals (Game Design) to create a video showing the landscape of a particular in-game region (Game Culture) are hardly seen as problematic. Other battlefields contain more vicious clashes between stakeholders, including players exploiting game design flaws (Game Play, Game Design) resulting in Blizzard banning them from the game for EULA violations (Game Contract).

The variety of games of stake we find within the different battlefields of negotiation, both in terms of the play practices involved as well as the stakes these practices raise, remind us that *World of Warcraft* is not an easily defined cultural object to play, use, manage, or study. By looking at different games of stake from various perspectives, this dissertation aims to provide insight into the way the shifting boundaries of game and play define the *World of Warcraft* phenomenon.

1.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have provided a theoretical framework through which I approach and analyze the MMORPG *World of Warcraft.* Four perspectives where introduced, each presenting its own theoretical discourses, which together allow me to address the complexity of *World of Warcraft*, not just as a game but as a social-cultural phenomenon. Using these perspectives, *World of Warcraft* can be better explained as an arena of power negotiation in which the game and play are "at stake" for various stakeholders on social, technological, and managerial levels.

First, I have discussed *World of Warcraft* from the Game Design perspective, framing the MMORPG genre as a problematic type of game as it defies classic game definitions due to its lack of a quantifiable outcome. *World of Warcraft* is often considered part of the same group of online worlds as social worlds like *Second Life*. I argued that it is a gameworld first and foremost, with individualistic and instrumental play (like getting the best gear, or excelling in group challenges) being defining characteristics as much as if not more than purely social interaction (including representational role-playing).

The Game Play perspective is a logical successor. Here, I discussed the range of play practices *World of Warcraft* allows through its design. As I have shown, not all of these practices are geared towards group play. Individual and individualized group play, which can be anti-social in nature, are to be seen as important parts of the overall play experience. Play is framed as movement: players constantly change play styles between and even during play sessions.

This movement extends from play styles to levels of immersion or engrossment, making game play in *World of Warcraft* highly diverse in nature and experience.

In the section on the Game Culture perspective, I framed *World of Warcraft* as a leisure subculture which an extensive network of communication through which knowledge and experience is shared among the player community. What further defines *World of Warcraft* as a subculture is its participatory nature, with participation describing not just modification practices or the creative appropriation of the game's fiction but also play itself. It is noted here that the creative freedom and agency that participatory culture brings with it should not be overstated, as *World of Warcraft*'s developer and owner Blizzard Entertainment shows both collaborationist and protectionist tendencies towards participation.

In the fourth and final perspective, Game Contract, I have discussed the meta-rules of *World of Warcraft*. Two kinds of contracts were introduced: social protocols between players and license agreements between players and Blizzard. Social protocols were shown to be negotiated between different groups, or idiocultures, of players, resulting in constantly shifting rules of play boundaries. License agreements on the other hand are in place to make sure players agree with very specific boundaries, enabling Blizzard to act against players who go beyond them.

The four perspectives come together in what I call games of stake: negotiations between stakeholders (including both Blizzard and players) in which the rules of play are continually being defined and redefined like a palimpsest. These games of stake take place within and between the different perspective levels, with each of these levels contributing and redefining the very boundaries of play – and thus the object itself. Games of stake, I argue, form the basis for *World of Warcraft*'s ontological status, as well as the evolution thereof. In other words: games of stake *define World of Warcraft*'s existence.

What I, however, have not discussed in this chapter is how my role as a researcher engaging with *World of Warcraft* fits into these perspectives and the games of stake taking place within and between them. Having played the game extensively, I have both passively and actively participated in a host of games of stake myself. If I as a researcher enter these battlefields of negotiation to investigate what is at stake, I inevitably become an inherent part of their outcome and of the battle as well. Through play, my research cannot be seen as separate from but actually part of *World of Warcraft*. The following chapter is devoted to constructing this research position, showing both the challenges and benefits of active participation as a research method.

CHAPTER 2: RESEARCHING THE GAME

2.1 Introduction

Studying a complex game like *World of Warcraft* through the perspectives discussed in chapter one is not a straightforward process in terms of methodology. This chapter maps the approaches, choices, and considerations I kept in mind when engaging with *World of Warcraft* as a researcher, while the key issue of this chapter is discovering and navigating the boundaries between play and research.

In the introduction to his seminal book *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture*, Henry Jenkins states that when he writes about fan culture, he writes 'both as an academic (who has access to certain theories of popular culture, certain bodies of critical and ethnographic literature) and as a fan (who has access to the particular knowledge and traditions of that community)' (5). In many ways, the same applies to me and my work, with the notion of "fan" overlapping or replaced with that of "gamer". The distinctive use of the term "gamer" over "player" for example is deliberate. As media scholar Bernard Perron points out, the label gamer, is often used in the game industry to typify gaming fans, it delineates an activity and attitude towards the medium of games (242). It is a label I would not hesitate to apply to myself, having been an avid games enthusiast since my youth. I am not an outsider to the world of games but actually an insider, a participant, a status which is as much part of my writing as academic reflexive, critical distance.

Play is in many cases seen as a requirement to study games, especially within game studies as practiced in the humanities, whether the researcher calls him or herself a "gamer" or not.[25] As game scholar Espen Aarseth points out: 'If we have not experienced the game personally, we are liable to commit severe misunderstandings, even if we study the mechanics and try our best to guess at their workings' (2003 3). In the same way games need play to exist, game researchers need to play in order to understand them. As I will show in this chapter, the dual position of being both close to as well as distanced from the object of study can be considered highly beneficial to this experience process. I position myself as a researcher-as-player within the different perspectives discussed earlier, showing that, as a methodological approach, play enables great insight into the games of stake taking place on *World of Warcraft* battlefields of negotiation. Through play, I also became *part of* the games of stake, both willingly and coincidentally. By being part of the game

[25] Non-humanities disciplines have developed a wide range of methodological approaches to digital games and play, some of which do not necessarily include play. Examples are surveys, interviews, server data analysis and observation of gameplay practices (for an overview, see Montfort, Yee and Caplan).

while, at the same time, studying it, I moved between play and research, between virtual and real, and between overt and covert positions. These movements between methodological positions define the way I conducted my research, which in turn influenced its results.

2.2 Between play and research

As a researcher, playing *World of Warcraft* and participating in the game's community positioned me within the Game Play and Game Culture, the perspectives regular players are most active in, while the Game Design and (the legal part of) Game Contract perspectives are primarily Blizzard's territory. For reasons I will introduce below, engaging with *World of Warcraft* from Blizzard's perspective turned out to be challenging. Due to the overlap of the four perspectives in what I call battlegrounds of negotiation, playing and participating in *World of Warcraft* nevertheless allowed me to experience the games of stake taking place within all perspectives first-hand. In this section, however, I will focus on some of the methodological issues which concern the Game Play and Game Culture perspectives.

While it is important to play the game to understand it, for a coherent analysis of the game and its community one needs to go further than "just" play. In an effort to develop a methodological toolkit for qualitative game research, game researchers Mia Consalvo and Nathan Dutton argue that play should be augmented by a meticulous analysis of a game's components, including the in-game inventory of objects, the interface and the options to save or log the game's process during play (2006).[26] While an in-depth analysis of the specific features of *World of Warcraft*'s content and design is certainly part of this study (most prominent in chapter three), studying a complex multiplayer environment like a MMORPG requires an even larger commitment from the researcher. As game scholars Kurt Squire and Constance Steinkuehler argue, we must recognize MMORPGs as 'bona fide cultures': 'sites constituted through language and practice both within the game (e.g., virtual social interaction and joint activity) and beyond (e.g., discussion of game-related issues on player-driven web sites)' (178-79). As an active player, a MMORPG researcher is therefore part of a community of players which exists and moves beyond the borders of the game. To not just participate in but understand this community,

[26] While Consalvo and Durron's approach provides a thorough methodological approach to studying games as 'important cultural artefacts that can reveal social, political, and other insights about contemporary life' (Consalvo and Dutton), their focus on representational/textual elements in games limits the use of their approach when dealing with abstract games.

the researcher must 'go native', to borrow a term from anthropology, without losing critical distance.[27]

As a methodological strategy oscillating between participation and critical distance, participant observation characterizes my approach to *World of Warcraft* best. Participant observation is widely used in MMORPG studies.[28] For anthropologist Tom Boelstorff, participant observation is the primary method in order to arrive at a study of games as cultures:

> In place of surveys or interviewing, participant observation implies a form of ethical yet critical engagement that blurs the line between the researcher and researched, even when the researcher is clearly not a member of the community being studied (32).

Participant observation usually describes a wide range of qualitative methods. In my specific case, they included, among others, my own play practices, observation of play within the game and forum discussions outside of it, informal interviews with players, and the analysis of cultural objects created by the community (such as walkthrough guides, or film productions). Throughout this chapter, the different research practices mentioned above will be discussed separately. The approach I have chosen is not unlike game researcher T.L. Taylor's description of her work on the MMORPG *Everquest* as being a bricolage: 'pulling from a variety of techniques, tools, and methods to understand a mix of practices, representations, structures, rhetorics, and techniques' (2006c 17). To understand the complexity of a MMORPG, I needed the methodological flexibility of participant observation.

I started playing *World of Warcraft* in April 2005, a few weeks after the European release of the game, and stopped in December 2008. During this period, I accumulated a grand total of 2253 hours of play time – roughly ninety-four full days – spread between different characters. During (and after) this period, I read, monitored and participated in a range of different websites, information databases and forums dedicated to the game. In 2008, I also visited a large player convention in Paris organised by Blizzard. Additionally, I played numerous other games, including other MMORPGs, to keep up with developments happening in the larger game culture of which *World of Warcraft*

[27] One could argue that a researcher who considers him/herself a gamer is already at least partly native.

[28] MMORPGs did however seem to have been off the radar for quite some time outside of the realm of game studies itself. Several textbooks dealing with online qualitative research published around 2000 – a period dubbed the 'Golden Age of MMORPGs' by MMORPG analyst Bruce Sterling Woodcock (2006) – mention only the MUD and not the MMORPG, let alone other online games like the more successful online first-person shooter or real-time strategy titles of this period (cf. Mann and Stewart; Hine; Lindlof and Taylor).

is a part. I do not claim to have spent the entire amount of time in *World of Warcraft* (and other games) or on the many websites surrounding it doing dedicated research. The time was spent playing, chatting, reading, etc. with no direct link to my research. Still, the time spent indirectly contributed to my overall experience and understanding of *World of Warcraft* with its many facets.

Noteworthy was also my participation in The Truants, a *World of Warcraft* guild consisting of European game and new media researchers, since late 2006. While most of The Truants' in-game activities consisted of play for play's sake, the reason most of us were active within *World of Warcraft* was nonetheless serious, with The Truants research community spawning several conference panels and publications (Mortensen et al. forthcoming ; Corneliussen and Rettberg). As a sounding board for games of stake I wanted to pursue, or as an always friendly presence during play, the contribution of the members of The Truants to this study was invaluable.

My participatory observation activities in the realms of Game Play and Game Culture forced me to continually move between the frivolous and the serious, requiring a strong reflexive attitude. For game researcher Sybille Lammes, reflexivity as a tool helps render the process of going native by 'always reflecting upon your own involvement, thus paradoxically creating distance in the process of getting closer' (28). A case study in chapter five, which deals with virtual money trading and cybercrime, shows that this has not always been easy. The starting point for this particular case study was an unauthorized intrusion into my account which resulted in the theft of all my virtual belongings, potentially damaging both the fruits of my play and research.

The methodological principles of virtual ethnography as introduced by sociologist Christine Hine in her seminal work on the topic (2000), have provided an entry point for my participatory observation.[29] Drawing upon sociologists Keith Grint and Steve Woolgar (1997), Hine argues that 'rather than technology itself being an agent of social change, uses and understandings of the technology are central' (4). This idea translates well to my dissertation, where the uses (ie. play) and understandings (ie. negotiations about what the

[29] Considering the use of the word "virtual" in virtual ethnography, Hine explains that the term does not only imply its simulated, computer mediated aspect but also the fact that it is 'not quite' ethnography; 'adequate for practical purposes even if not strictly the real thing' (65). This does not imply however that virtual ethnography is not real ethnography. Ethnography's methodologies have always been adaptive and not rigid. It does imply that, just like the technologies and cultures that form around them, virtual ethnography is constantly in a state of flux.

game is and/or should be) shape the MMORPG itself. Stemming from the sociology of science and technology, this idea neither leaves technology out of the equation of social change, nor steps into the futurist trap of technological determinism (7). It enables Hine to view the Internet, or, in my case, a MMORPG, both as a culture as well as a cultural artefact shaped in production and use. As she points out, 'to concentrate on either aspect to the exclusion of the other leads to an impoverished view' (64).

Moreover, Hine underscores the importance of the ethnographers' own engagement with the medium as a valuable source of ethnographic data. If the virtual as a cultural artefact is actively shaped and interpreted by its users, then it is no different for the playing and participating researcher (65). Hine draws upon anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1993) to explain that sustained interaction is able to "reduce the puzzlement", allowing a researcher to grasp the often strange forms of human behaviour encountered. Prolonged engagement with the game enabled me to understand the different play forms and other practices within and around the game, many of which are puzzling for an outsider.

The next section will address my considerations towards other stakeholders during my prolonged engagement in *World of Warcraft*. Among these stakeholders are not just other players who, like myself, view the game primarily from a Game Play and Game Culture perspective, but also Blizzard, the company playing the most significant role within the Game Design and Game Contract perspectives.

2.3 Between players and Blizzard

One of the first methodological choices I had to make when I conceptualised my approach was whether or not to deal with the real persons behind the players and their characters. Players of *World of Warcraft* are not virtual but very real stakeholders. There are rich connections between the domains of the real and the virtual, and we can even argue that there is no clear boundary between them. For many players, *World of Warcraft* is part of their real identity as much as it is part of their virtual identity. As a researcher, however, I have no background in sociology or psychology. And with an academic interest aimed primarily at the cultural artefact itself rather than its users, I decided that investigating the real identities of the players I met during play or observed on forums, for example through face-to-face interviews, was beyond the scope of this study. While the real is certainly featured in this dissertation (though more on the meta-level of legal issues rather than social and/or individual level) the emphasis is on the virtual.

While not knowing who the players really are might sound as a potentially problematic limitation, from a viewpoint of virtual ethnography it is

not necessarily compulsory to fully disclose the real behind the virtual. As Hine points out:

> Many inhabitants of cyberspace […] have never met face-to-face and have no intention of doing so. To instigate face-to-face meetings in this situation would place the ethnographer in an asymmetric position, using more varied and different means of commutation to understand informants then are used by informants themselves (48).

And indeed, many of *World of Warcraft*'s inhabitants – even those who play with each other intensively for months or years on end – may never know and/or want to know who the other players "really" are. Going native by being a researcher-as-player meant that a symmetric position between myself and other players would suffice for my research aims. As Hine talks specifically about face-to-face meetings, one could argue that asking players who they really are through chat, email or other virtual means would have been an option. Without face-to-face confirmation however, there still is no reassurance that personal information players report about themselves is factual. While it could have provided an interesting layer of interpretation to this study, in the end, not knowing the true identities of other players did not interfere with many of the play practices nor games of stake I investigated.[30]

Another stakeholder I had to contend with was Blizzard, arguably the most powerful of all stakeholders and largely responsible for decisions made in the realms of Game Design and Game Contract. For these reasons, I could not ignore the company in my efforts to study *World of Warcraft*'s games of stake and including Blizzard in some way or form was part of my approach from the beginning. The initial aim was to visit Blizzard's Vélizy offices near Paris for a short period of time to observe game masters and community managers at work, and interview them about their activities within the game and on the forums. After several unsuccessful attempts to get access to the company I therefore had to revise my plan.[31] While it would have certainly been interesting to see and hear firsthand how the company functions from their particular perspective in the realms Game Design and Game Contract, it unfortunately remains beyond my reach.

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[30] For those interested, there is a growing wealth of socio-demographical data available on MMORPG players in general and *World of Warcraft* players in particular (Griffiths, Davies and Chappell; Kolo and Baur; Ducheneaut et al.; Yee 2006a, 2006b; Montfort, Yee and Caplan; Williams, Kennedy and Moore).

[31] After unsuccessful attempts to achieve direct contact, in 2007 I managed to receive a reply from Blizzard's Vélizy offices regarding a letter I sent through the game's Dutch publisher. Unfortunately, they informed that they had no time for a visiting researcher at this point due to the release of new content.

Being a researcher-as-player, which suggests operating at least partly on the same level as regular players, did mean that a direct link with Blizzard would also align me in an asymmetrical position with other players. While not ideal, my restrictions within the realms of Game Design and Game Contract are comparable with those of regular players. If part of the process of studying *World of Warcraft* as a game and culture is being a player, then having the same restrictions as a player is not counterproductive. The situation allowed me to experience the game with the same affordances, limitations and, sometimes, frustrations as the regular player rather than for instance engaging with the game from what in war journalism is called an embedded position. With no direct access to Blizzard's perspective, I had to manage with what Blizzard communicated through its game design (including both the core game and its subsequent patches and expansion packs), interviews, statements on the official forums and press releases.

While not instigated from a research perspective, I nevertheless did have direct contact with Blizzard employees on several occasions, both in-game as well as through e-mail. The case study concerning my compromised account and the theft of my virtual belongings, for instance, led to extensive interaction between myself and Blizzard in an effort to retrieve my belongings. I also occasionally interacted with Blizzard employees when experiencing technical difficulties or other game-related issues. Such encounters are similar to interactions regular players had with Blizzard employees; they were not sought out or initiated for research purposes. Some excerpts and analysis of my personal interaction with Blizzard employees can be found in later chapters, mostly when contractual games of stake were involved. I did not convey to these Blizzard employees that I was, in fact, not just a player but also a researcher. This was a deliberate choice, meant to receive similar rather than a potentially privileged or in any other way a different treatment than other players interacting with Blizzard.

When interacting with players, different choices between overt or covert roles were made throughout my research. Limiting myself to either one of the traditional forms of participant observation – being a complete participant, participants-as-observer, observer-as-participant or complete observer (Gold 1958) – would not suffice, due to *World of Warcraft*'s complexity as a game and culture. Instead, I more or less played all four roles, as different encounters solicited different approaches.

In the first phase of engagement with *World of Warcraft*, the period in which I learned to play the game, my activities can best be described as complete participation. Although I had extensive experience playing a large variety of digital games, both offline and online, on a variety of platforms, my experience with MMORPGs was limited. In the exploratory first few months of

the research it was not even decided that *World of Warcraft* would be the main case study, further downplaying the need for me to play an overt role. I began playing *World of Warcraft* as a regular player, without letting other players know that I was, in fact, a researcher too.[32] I learned my way around the game and its many satellite websites in the same way all players do: through play and community participation. This role allowed me to appreciate player behaviour (including my own) in a naturalistic setting.

A drawback of remaining covert was my inability to conduct any qualitative research requiring the participation of other players without having my "cover blown". Additionally, the danger of failing to remain at a critical distance became a recurring fear, especially as playing *World of Warcraft* turned into a personal leisure activity shared with several real life friends and colleagues. Throughout my research, I remained a player, a complete participant, but the recurring need for reflexivity and potential loss of interesting inquiries due to the lack of ability to talk to other players as a researcher also lead to more overt positions.

Taking up an overt position as a researcher in a participant-as-observer role is not as straightforward as one might think, so I did not take this step without concerns. First of all, a researcher conceals his/her real life appearance and identity behind virtual characters, just like every other players does. This means players will not spot you in a crowd as being different; without telling players you are a researcher they will not easily perceive you as one. Communicating one's role as a player/researcher to all players through using the in-game communication channels is impractical if not impossible in practice. I could, however, have made announcements on the official forums in the hope all players active in realms I was active in would read it, or at least would have had the chance to do so. In the end, however, I decided to only position myself in participant-as-observer roles when the situation called for it. In the same way I did not want Blizzard to treat me differently, I was hesitant to make my dual role as player/researcher known. If players would have been aware of my double role, it might have resulted in potentially altered player behaviour in my presence, something I aimed to avoid. Decisions on when to play a more overt role were usually based on pragmatics (to negotiate access to otherwise inaccessible information for instance) or ethics (when remaining covert would have been a breach of trust). For instance, I made my dual

[32] Due to the enormous popularity of the game in early 2005, some real life friends had started playing the game before I did, with more friends and even colleagues following at later points. As I could not keep my job secret from my friends, they were the only ones with knowledge of my dual presence as both player and researcher. While I didn't press them to preserve my anonymity, they kindly did so anyway.

player/researcher role known to key informants like guild or raiding group leaders with which my characters participated.

While I ultimately preferred a relatively covert approach, the degree of openness towards other players depends on the situation and the kind of research topics pursued. There are numerous examples of researchers having been more overt to their fellow players for a variety of reasons (see, for instance, Taylor 2006c; Copier; Corneliussen and Rettberg; Bainbridge). To study games of stake, where stakeholders sometimes engage in heated debates or practice controversial play forms, a more covert approach seemed most appropriate: I did not want to influence stakeholders in the way they acted on battlefields of negotiation with my presence as a researcher.

On the websites surrounding *World of Warcraft* my role as a researcher was noticeably different. On forums, information databases and other sites, I primarily acted as a completer observer, or, in some cases, observer-as-participant. The practice of "lurking" allowed me to observe online web forums and other sites of communication without letting its members know that I was observing. I could follow and record streams of discussions without them being influenced by my presence. This role was limited to open domains like the official *World of Warcraft* forums where users know that everything they say is publicly accessible. As soon as access had to be negotiated, for example in the case of private forums, I turned into an observer-as-participant for ethical reasons, making sure that the appropriate gatekeepers (forum administrators, guild leaders, etc.) were aware of my dual position.

Traditionally, observers-as-participant and complete observers are seen as being in danger of interpreting actions and values of those observed wrongly, as they do not have any close relationship to the issues under investigation (Lindlof and Taylor 150-51). Having a complete participant or participant-as-observer role within the game on which the websites I observed were based largely eliminated such issues. My ability to interpret and reflect on ongoing games of stake outside of the game was a direct result of being an active player myself. While for outsiders, a discussion involving all sorts of minor details might seem trivial, for an insider they can point to larger issues at stake.

During my research, a large quantity of data was gathered through the different player/researcher roles described above, ranging from chat logs, interviews, articles, forum discussions, notes, fan productions and so forth. In relation to this material, securing informed consent from participants is a point I wish to briefly address. It has not always been possible or necessary to achieve informed consent, especially not while active as a complete participant and/or observer. According to sociologists Chris Mann and Fiona Stewart, there is a lack of consensus on the matter of the ethical use of data gathered without

consent, which does not imply one should use data without concern (48). A researcher should be sensitive to potential ethical conflicts of doing research in the virtual. I therefore adjusted my approach to attaining informed consent depending on the situation and/or kind of data used. Chat log data or forum discussions, for instance, were often found or processed weeks, even months after the initial communication, making it nearly impossible to retrieve any form of informed consent. My standpoint became simply this: when in the case of private communication consent could not be retrieved beforehand or afterwards, I used pseudonyms to retain anonymity and prevent identity related problems. Whether or not to use players' "real" names when data was gathered from public sources, is considered on a case-by-case basis. Most players use their character's names or other pseudonyms rather than their actual real life names when online. Virtual identities can nevertheless be harassed by malevolent individuals, forcing me to treat them carefully.

2.4 Between field and scene

In the final part of this chapter, I will introduce some of the methodological considerations I took and challenges I met considering the fact that *World of Warcraft*, like the websites surrounding it, is not easily located or defined, both as a cultural object and as a virtual ethnographic field of study. To approach it as a researcher, I had to contend with the fact that I could only study part of it. Without direct access to Blizzard's point of view, I needed to find ways to challenge the boundaries of the field of study through what some would consider cheating in order to understand play phenomena that would otherwise be inaccessible.

As discussed and problematized in terms of games of stake in the previous chapter, *World of Warcraft* exists in multiple forms (through hundreds of different realms) and definitions (in terms of play, design and contract). As a result, *World of Warcraft* and its communities are not located in one easily defined "place" but is rather multi-sited. Distinguishing between the traditional ethnographic terms "field", "site", and "scene" of study, however, provides some clarity. The "field" of study is the most broadly bounded of ethnographic practices and includes all theoretically relevant places in which the topic meets the territory. The "site" (or setting) is the specific, physical place in which an ethnographer meets his actors. The "scene" is articulated by the actors themselves; it describes what they feel, which frames their social actions (Lindlof and Taylor 79-80). In my case, the "field" of study includes *World of Warcraft*, other MMORPGs, websites directly or indirectly linked to these games or the play practices they offer, academic or journalistic work on MMORPGs, and my own play experiences. Defined broadly, the field of study therefore includes everything related to *World of Warcraft*, both online and offline, both

tangible and virtual. As such, it functions as an umbrella term. When we look at the site and scene of study, both of which offer a more specific look at "where" one does research, *World of Warcraft* appears more problematic.

What constitutes the "site" of study is not instantly obvious: there is no actual physical place to meet actors, except through countless interconnected and overlapping virtual spaces through which mediated communication and interaction with actors takes place. While I did try out different realm types, in order to achieve a thorough understanding of the game's mechanics and play practices I chose sustained play in just two realms – Argent Dawn and Moonglade**.** What takes place within these realms does not universally translate to all realms, especially as both are role-playing realms. This makes any holistic statement about *World of Warcraft* by definition complicated, echoing Lammes argument that we should acknowledge the situatedness of games as culture because 'the researched material is always rooted in the local or embodied space of a player/researcher and has no universal meaning as such' (29).[33] The result of this kind of approach is a certain inevitability of partiality and subjectivity.

What constituted the "scene" of study was most interesting for my dissertation, as it is defined by players themselves; investigating *World of Warcraft* as a scene implies investigating the negotiations taking place between those involved. In many ways, this dissertation describes the problems both players and developers encounter when trying to define what "their" game is. The games of stake presented throughout this study thus contribute to constructing and deconstructing the scene of study, as they all involve the framing and reframing of social actions through a constant negotiation of the actual (as in: coded or contractual) or social boundaries.

Being a researcher-as-player made me not just an observer but an active participant in negotiating the scene of study. Like other players, I articulated "my" version of the game through play, and discussed them on forums or through chat. To understand not just play, but also the wide variety of games of stake, I turned to what Hine calls 'inducing' rather than reducing the puzzlement, in order to question what is taken for granted (64). While some games of stake just happened to me (like the aforementioned theft) or went on unbeknownst to me (like Blizzard data-mining my actions through Warden), I actually played a more active part in the creation of several games of stake discussed in this dissertation. In the case studies on the practices of "powerleveling" and "twinking" in chapter four, I actively participated, arguably

[33] Some researchers take diversity rather than selective focus very seriously. Sociologist William Sims Bainbridge, for instance, managed to play an impressive 21 characters for his book on *World of Warcraft*, spread over six realms of varying type. He even had two separate active accounts, and sometimes used two computers side by side. (15-18).

even provoked games of stake through divergent and devious play practices which some players would consider cheating.

Even though what is considered cheating is hard if not impossible to define as it is socially negotiated and highly context dependent, as a research practice it is considered controversial. As game scholar Julian Kücklich has pointed out, the term cheating has connotations that usually do not meet the game research community's professional and ethical guidelines (2007 356). As Aarseth for instance once stated, researchers who cheat in the games they study 'cannot reach a deep understanding of the games they examine' (2003 7). In reaction to Aarseth, Lammes however argues that 'a self confessed cheater/researcher' that takes [the position of a cheater] as a reflexive practice could actually engender very interesting material' (2007 28). In his work on cheating as a methodological tool in digital games research, Kücklich takes up a similar position, in effect summing up some of the advantages of inducing the puzzlement through cheating:

> As a method, cheating allows us to reflect upon the presuppositions that we bring to games, no matter from which perspective we are studying them. It also enables us to identify blind spots in our research perspectives and thus discover new avenues of inquiry with regard to the phenomena we study. Perhaps even more importantly, taking into account unorthodox forms of play can help us recognize flaws in our theoretical models, which are so often built upon the experience of playing by the rules, rather than breaking them. (2007 357)

Engaging in games of stake some players would consider cheating, allowed me to indeed identify and reflect on play practices which would have been otherwise inaccessible. Some of these practices, like the use of walkthroughs and other external information supporting advantageous play, are not uncommon but widespread among the player community. For me, this meant that taking this approach was not problematic but necessary in order to broaden my overall experience and understanding of the game and its stakeholders.

As Hine points out, the multi-sited (and multi-scened) nature of *World of Warcraft* requires the researcher to be flexible: 'if culture and community are not self-evidently located in place, then neither is ethnography' (64). The researcher, like the regular player, is not bound by place, and neither is he bound by time, as 'with spatial dislocation comes temporal dislocation' (65). Players step in and out of the game at will, for instance to look something up on an online information base or check their Facebook account, they multi-task; playing the game while watching TV or making phone calls, and they

communicate with each other both through in-game chat and asynchronous means like forums or email. Additionally, players spend an average of around twenty-two hours a week playing the game (Yee 2006a). This might be a considerable time investment, rendering the game an undeniable part of daily life, if not daily life itself. Playing *World of Warcraft* is something most players do in their free time, not all the time – *World of Warcraft* after all is a *leisure* subculture. As a researcher, I was not required to travel to a physical site of study for a sustained amount of time. Like a regular player, I was able to fit the fieldwork into my daily activities. As most players are active on evenings and weekends due to workday obligations, I too often went online to play during these hours.

With both spatial and temporal fragmentation, and a constantly changing and re-negotiated object of study, knowing when to end the fieldwork (ie. play) is primarily a pragmatic decision (Hine 64). The December 2008 release of *World of Warcraft*'s second expansion pack *Wrath of the Lich King* (Blizzard Entertainment 2008) marked the end of my official fieldwork. The release of expansion packs in MMORPGs in general and in *World of Warcraft* specifically, form key moments in the evolution of the game's design. They mark significant evolutionary points in the game's history, both on the level of rules and fiction, where change is so profound that stakeholders have to fully re-stake their claims over the new version of "their" game. Concluding my fieldwork at such a moment of change was therefore not just a pragmatic choice but also logical one: the release of *Wrath of the Lich King* represented such a flood of potential new research topics that it was best to "pull up stakes". Even though I have continued to play the game occasionally, and continued to monitor several key online news outlets and discussion forums after the expansion pack's release, the changes to the game's design through this expansion pack, or the games of stake resulting from these changes, are not included in this dissertation.

2.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have made an effort to explain my methodological approach to a very complex virtual object of study. As I have shown, participant observation within the framework of virtual ethnography is an apt approach to study games of stake, which I consider the defining element of *World of Warcraft*. The virtual ethnography approach emphasizes the interaction between culture and cultural artefact, an interaction which ultimately shapes both. It is this shaping force I am interested in – it constitutes the negotiations taking place between Game Play, Game Culture, Game Design and Game Contract. As Hine puts it, 'the shaping of the ethnographic object as it is made possible by the available

technologies *is* the ethnography. This is ethnography *in*, *of* and *through* the virtual' (66, emphasis in original).

Throughout this chapter, I have also mentioned a series of challenges I encountered while engaging with *World of Warcraft*. In terms of Game Play, I have discussed my dual role as researcher and player as both an enrichment for this type of game analysis, as well as a potential pitfall in terms of critical distance. From the perspective of Game Culture, I addressed the inevitability that this approach offers; a partial and subjective view on *World of Warcraft* as a game and as a subculture. Having limited access to Blizzard in the games of stake investigated, I have furthermore pointed out that I have approached the perspectives of Game Design and Game Contract from the perspective of the players. One research tool used to "induce the puzzlement" within these perspectives was cheating, a practice not accepted by everyone within the field of game studies. In the conclusion of the dissertation, I will return to the methodological choices in order to re-evaluate them.

In the following chapters, I will present case studies exhibiting a range of games of stake, each showcasing different theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches. I will begin with a chapter featuring a comprehensive analysis of *World of Warcraft*'s design in terms of technical structure, coded game rules and fictional universe. I will discuss what can be considered the "indented" use of *World of Warcraft* built-in by Blizzard through a close analysis of the choices made from the perspectives of Game Design and Game Contract. Additionally, the chapter will function as introductory support for understanding the intricacies of the case studies in the subsequent chapters.

CHAPTER 3: CONTROLLING THE GAME

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter *World of Warcraft* is analyzed as a cultural artefact designed and controlled by a team of programmers, artists, community managers, game masters and other Blizzard employees. Using the perspectives of Game Design and Game Contract, the chapter addresses *World of Warcraft* as it is intended to be used by the player community, both in terms of coded rules and structures and as a 'pre-player text', a fictional world which exists with or without player activity (Lastowka 2009). By doing so, I will provide insight into the control mechanisms at work through Game Design and, to a lesser extent, Game Contract. The question this chapter asks is how do these control mechanisms guide players through the game and which affordances and limitations for play and other uses are provided? By investigating the control mechanisms in place, the question can be answered about which play practices Blizzard, as a stakeholder, deems desirable or not. A game like *World of Warcraft* is always developed with, as game researcher T.L. Taylor puts it, an 'attempt to embed within it particular forms of use and, by extension, particular users' (2006a). Through an analysis of the game's technology, rules and fiction, my goal is to demonstrate how *World of Warcraft* is constructed with particular intended uses and users in mind, and, by doing so, I hope to shed light on Blizzard's role in *World of Warcraft* as the primary stakeholder on the levels of Game Design and Game Contract.

While games in general might not necessarily be tied to certain media or platforms – you can play chess on almost anything – in digital games the practices of play are, as media theorist Alexander Galloway notes, 'embedded inside algorithmic game machines' (2006 21). The technology that carries digital games, both in terms of hardware and software, shapes the possibilities for play, as well as the game world in which this play takes place, in advance of the players' arrival. The game technology is set up to allow for certain play practices, while making others impossible by design. Where code shape the game before use, the End User Licence Agreements and Terms of Service help to retain this shape after players start to interact with the game, protecting the game from potentially destructive outside forces. To understand the negotiations taking place in and around *World of Warcraft*, we need to therefore understand the game itself as a cultural artefact. As media theorist Eugene Thacker reminds us, in computer technology 'the technical specs matter, ontologically and politically' (xii). The technical specs, together with the contractual agreements players are forced to sign in order to play, reveal how players' behaviours are regulated and controlled. This chapter will therefore serve as both an in-depth introduction to the game and a reference point for the

following chapters, where player behaviour deliberately or accidentally diverges from Blizzard's intended use.

In terms of games of stake, the intended use of *World of Warcraft* as designed by Blizzard through technology, rules and fiction is what players try to manipulate, deviate from and defy. For this reason, the three sections that follow will put forward the affordances and limitations of play as a result of Blizzard's game design and contractual choices. First, I will investigate how the computer and network technology, as well as the configurational options that the game provides, distributes player agency over the game. In the second section, I will delve into the instrumental side of play, while asking what elements define *World of Warcraft* as a game both in terms of singleplayer and multiplayer modes of play, and which dominant strategies are compulsory for instrumental progress and success. In the final section, I will interrogate *World of Warcraft* as a fictional world: does Azeroth provide the player with a coherent virtual world to live in, or does it resemble, as Aarseth puts it, a theme park or zoo (2008 125)?

In a game like *World of Warcraft*, Taylor explains, 'users find themselves engaging with a world that has been created with a particular vision of community, identity, and social life' (2003 28). This chapter does not just provide a description of the technology, rules and fiction of *World of Warcraft*, it will also attempt to convey this vision to the reader. Ultimately, I hope to show that, as a result of Blizzard's decisions from the perspectives of Game Design and Game Contract, players do not just play *World of Warcraft* but are played by it too.

3.2 Setting up the game

Before players are allowed to play within the fictional universe of *World of Warcraft*, they must first get to it. Not unlike other computer games, *World of Warcraft* has certain technological and contractual thresholds and barriers, often working in conjunction, which must be traversed in order to arrive at the playable part. This section looks into three such thresholds – the network, the platform technology (both hardware and software) and the game configuration – each playing its own role in the affordances and limitations of playing *World of Warcraft*. The technological and configurational thresholds discussed below show the amount of control Blizzard as a stakeholder has given itself over *World of Warcraft*, both enabling and restricting play before it has even started, as well as influencing what you can and cannot do with(in) *World of Warcraft* during play.

3.2.1 The network of play

World of Warcraft offers networked play, where players are connected to each other over the Internet through a system of servers managed by Blizzard Entertainment. Without an Internet connection, you cannot play *World of Warcraft*; you might be able to open the game software, but engaging in play remains impossible. What you install on your computer is, as Blizzard calls it in the EULA, the 'game client'. This client might be able to load, render and animate the virtual environment, but it only does so through requests from a server located elsewhere. Therefore, a permanent Internet connection is one of the primary technological preconditions players must meet to in order to play, in addition to the actual computer the game client runs on (which will be discussed below).

Making the game client connect to Blizzard's servers requires a contractual hurdle. The road to accessing the *World of Warcraft* network begins with buying the game client or, to be more precise, the serial number included with every copy of *World of Warcraft* as commercially sold. It does not matter where you actually get the installation software, as long as you buy a unique serial number. Each player needs an individual serial number to set up an account which gives access to the actual game by logging into the network. Buying the game client's serial number is, however, not enough to enter the network. Activating the account also requires players to choose one of the many monthly payment options. *World of Warcraft* is a subscription-based service, so no pay equals no play. In addition, installing the game client (and every subsequent update of it through patches) requires players to accept *World of Warcraft*'s EULA and Terms of Service. Refusing these means you will not be able to access the software.

Controlling access to *World of Warcraft* through the network then is achieved by a combination of choices from the Game Design perspective (the way the game client is set up to work with the servers) and Game Contract perspective (subscription service, the EULA). Players need to negotiate both in order to start playing. With this level of control, Blizzard is deliberately diverging from the way the Internet itself is set up as an open distributed network consisting of autonomous nodes, connected to each other without central hubs of control.[34] Individual players are connected to one central server at a time, called a 'realm' by Blizzard. Communication and interaction with

[34] We must be cautious to assume that the computer protocols enabling the Internet to function as a distributed network exist entirely outside centralised control mechanisms. As Galloway points out: 'while protocol may be more *democratic* than the panopticon in that it strives to eliminate hierarchy, it is still very much structured around command and control' (2004 13, emphasis in original). The non-hierarchical, horizontally distributed network allowed by TCP/IP for instance still has to cope with the decentralized, hierarchical, vertical structure of the DNS (Domain Name System) protocol (2004 8-9).

other players always passes through central hubs, not peer-to-peer directly. If one of the data centers is inoperable, it will take down all of its subordinate realms, showing that, on a physical level, the realms are highly centralized. There are six physical centralized host servers in Europe as of 2010.[35] As soon as you log on to *World of Warcraft*, the distributed network of the Internet is therefore replaced with a classic decentralized network, with multiple central hosts each with their own sets of satellite clients. This would suggest a system where 'no single zenith exercises control over all others' (Galloway 2004 31). As all zeniths in *World of Warcraft*'s network are controlled by one company, Blizzard, one single control point still exists. Additionally, players always login through the login-server, a single server point through which all connections between clients and the decentralized realms are made possible (the one for the European realms is located in Paris), which implies the presence of an actual, physical centralised network. For these reasons, within the *World of Warcraft* network, Blizzard is in full control.

Centralised and especially decentralized networks are, however, not unique in the world of online gaming. In fact, most online multiplayer games are played with one host acting as a server and all others acting as clients. Not all online multiplayer games have fixed, company controlled servers either. With many PC-based first-person shooters, players themselves are able to act as servers, becoming in charge of the central network hub by doing so. This gives the party running the server considerable power over the others, because they can stop play whenever they wish. *World of Warcraft*, like most other MMORPGs, does not allow self-hosted games, it is made impossible through Game Design and illegal through Game Contract. As players share the same game space in MMORPGs like *World of Warcraft,* keeping security tight is vital; one devious player could hack his or her client and, through the network, destroy the game experience for many thousands of players. As game designer Richard Bartle emphasizes in a similar discussion on MUD security: 'absolutely *no* decisions with regard to what happens in a virtual world can be relegated to a client. *No* decisions. That's *no* decisions' (2004 109, emphasis in original). Therefore, when designing *World of Warcraft*, Blizzard kept control over the game's network centralised and the amount of freedom players were allowed over the game client limited.

[35] In Europe, on the server zone I played, there are close to one hundred separate *World of Warcraft* realms, each with a unique IP address with which clients can communicate. They are distributed over six physical locations in Paris (three data centers), Frankfurt (two data centers) and Hamburg (one data center). The first part of each realm's IP address refers to one of these locations, with the latter part indicating the unique realm itself. For a European realm list including dedicated data centers and IP addresses, see: http://www.wowwiki.com/EU_English_Realms_Info (Accessed January, 2010).

The result of the regulatory security measures might keep evil-doers at bay, it also turns *World of Warcraft* into what Thacker calls 'a new kind of gated community', with its borders being controlled through surveillance (xvii). Evoking the concept of the panopticon, Blizzard even installs a software program called Warden alongside the game client, monitoring computer activity that goes on while the game is played, silently reporting to Blizzard, information about third-party applications use which violate the EULA. Warden is part of Blizzard's ongoing struggle with cheaters and/or hackers using non-approved third-party software to alter the game.[36] In contrast to the panopticon, where people discipline themselves because they know someone might be watching, most *WoW* players are not aware of Warden's presence on their systems, even though Blizzard has never made a secret of its existence.[37] It has long remained unclear what this program actually does behind the scenes. Security software engineer Greg Hoglund decided to investigate the Warden program in October 2005. He found that, apparently, the watchdog software did not only scan for illegal third-party software, but also gave access to all kinds of private information (Hoglund 2005).[38] While Blizzard promptly denied that Warden reviews or retrieves any information identifiable as personal information, a wave of discussions on spyware and privacy issues ensued, mostly from the security software and user interface modding scenes (Ward ; Fulton III ; Hoglund and McGraw).[39]

Blizzard Entertainment thus controls the game and its usage by controlling the network on which it exists. Signing *World of Warcraft*'s EULA, which you *must* sign in order to be able to play, and entering Blizzard's decentralized network of servers, are the first thresholds which need to be overcome in order to play. On the levels of Game Design and Game Contract, these thresholds ensure a reliable multiplayer experience in terms of client/server stability and safety by limiting what players may do with the

[36] Blizzard uses a deliberately vague notion of unauthorized third-party software: 'any third-party software, including without limitation any addon, mod, hack, trainer, or cheat, that in Blizzard's sole determination: (i) enables or facilitates cheating of any type; (ii) allows users to modify or hack the game interface, environments, and/or experience in any way not expressly authorized by Blizzard; or (iii) intercepts, mines, or otherwise collects information from or through the game' (2004b).

[37] Warden-software has been part of other Blizzard titles.

[38] From Hoglund's blog: 'I watched the warden sniff down the email addresses of people I was communicating with on MSN, the URL of several websites that I had open at the time, and the names of all my running programs, including those that were minimized or in the toolbar. These strings can easily contain social security numbers or credit card numbers, for example, if I have Microsoft Excel or Quickbooks open w/ my personal finances at the time' (2005).

[39] Hoglund eventually created a piece of third-party software called the Governor which spied on the Warden. While it does nothing more than look at the Warden's activities, it remains unknown to this day if using the Governor will get you banned, as no bans caused by this program have ever been reported (Gilbert and Whitehead II). Others have argued for less-intrusive server-based detection methods (Mitterhofer et al.).

game software. Privacy concerns remain; the game communicates all in-game practices back to Blizzard, while the Warden program quietly monitors other computer uses.

3.2.2 Playing machines

Digital games exist through hardware platforms – be they PCs, consoles, handheld gameplaying devices, etc. – as well as software running on this hardware. The game client discussed earlier represents *World of Warcraft*'s software, which is bound to either the PC (with the Microsoft Windows operating system) or to a Mac platform. Additionally, certain system requirements must be met in order for the software to function correctly (or even at all).[40] The computer, however, is not just a host for the software, it becomes an actor through the software – you do not simply play on a computer, but also with and against it. This section focuses on the question: how does *World of Warcraft*'s software use computer technology's function as an actor to ensure that the game is played as intended?

In many ways, the rules of a game are similar to the inner workings of a computer. Game scholar Jesper Juul looks at computer science to describe the workings of the rules of a game (digital or not) as a 'state machine':

> A machine that has an *initial state*, accepts a specific amount of *input events*, changes state in response to inputs using a *state transition function* (ie. rules), and produces specific outputs using an *output function* (2005 60, emphasis in original).

The hardware and software support a videogame in two distinct ways which separate them from non-digital games. Firstly, the computational power which forms the basis of the technology is able to uphold the rules; it decides what happens in response to player input. Secondly, it keeps track of the current game state through its memory (2005 48-49).

In many ways, computer technology has taken over tasks players needed to perform themselves in non-computer games, especially in role-playing games. As sociologist Gary Alan Fine has shows, in a table-top role-

[40] While not as demanding as other high-end PC and Mac games, *World of Warcraft* remains quite a hefty game. Excluding the expansion packs, which improved the audiovisuals and thus system requirements somewhat, the minimum system requirements for a PC are: Windows 2000/XP OS, Intel Pentium III 800 MHz or AMD Athlon 800 MHz, 512 MB or more of RAM, 32 MB 3D graphics card with Hardware Transform or Lightning, DirectX 9.0c, 6.0 GB available HD space, 4x CD-Rom drive and a 56k or better internet connection. This means that you can run the game but it will be a slow and austere looking experience; for recommended system requirements you can double most of the figures above. The most current system requirements can be found at: http://www.worldofwarcraft.com/info/faq/technology.html (accessed January, 2010).

playing game like *Dungeons & Dragons*, the dungeon master acts both as storyteller and referee and 'sculpts' the way a particular scenario evolves on the fly (1983 88). Emphasizing what is most appealing to the players is more important within this process than strictly following the rules; if something turns out not to be fun, the rules are adjusted or tweaked. With computer-based games, including *World of Warcraft*, the rules are programmed and therefore fixed. The computer is an automated referee; it does not think about what's appealing, but follows algorithms written by the design team. In table-top RPGs, cheating chance by controlling or changing dice rolls is also a well-known practice; as Fine showed, 'the dice are used in conjunction with the logical structure of the game', adding that most referees nevertheless give the aesthetic logic priority (1983 105). In computer-based games, the computer-as-referee does not follow aesthetic-based logic founded on particular play situations. It follows the logic of coded rules.

With the computer as referee, the basic rules and structures of a videogame are beyond discussion – social protocols and other player-created rules might exist within the game but the coded rules are definite and unambiguous. As Juul points out,

> What can qualify as an algorithm – and therefore what can be made a rule in a game – hinges on *decontextualization*: an algorithm can work *because* it requires no understanding of the domain and because it only reacts to very selected aspects of the world – the state of the system; the well defined inputs; but generally *not* the weather, the color of the computer case, the personality of the computer operators, or the current political climate (2005 63, emphasis in original).

The only way to negotiate coded, algorithmic rules is to find loopholes or other design flaws or faults in order to exploit the rules, to hack the game software, to complain about the rules on the official forums in the hope that the design team acts on the complaints, or, in an act of ultimate defiance, to simply refrain from playing. In the latter three cases, control over the game remains in Blizzard's hands. In the first case, where the coded rules are defied through manipulation and circumvention, players gain a certain degree of agency over the otherwise definitive rule system, representing a variety of games of stake, which are featured throughout the next chapters.

In a state machine governed by computational power and memory, the computer (or computers when one considers the networked interplay between client and server) is in charge of enforcing the algorithmic rules of the software but, additionally, also controls all the mobs and non-player characters or NPCs

the player meets in the virtual world.[41] The computer therefore is not just a referee but also another player controlling virtual characters; some friendly, others hostile. The computer for instance decides whether or not a mob or NPC will attack a player's character (and how), if it will present the character with a quest or not, or if it allows you to buy something from his inventory. It does not judge your character to make these decisions, but simply refers to algorithmic rules related to the player's character data (his level, his faction, his class, etc.). The computer thus functions as an important actor in the process of play alongside the players: it enables and referees play, and controls every virtual life form in the game world not controlled by other, real players. Acting solely on rules designed by Blizzard, the computer *represents* Blizzard within the game.

Galloway reminds us that distinguishing between what he calls machine actions, performed by software and hardware, and operator actions, performed by the player, creates an entirely artificial division. 'In fact', he states, 'in much of gameplay, the two actions exist as a *unified, single phenomenon*, even if they are distinguishable for the purposes of analysis' (2006 5, emphasis in original). Being a virtual world filled with NPCs and mobs to interact with, machine actions form an important part of *World of Warcraft*'s appeal, especially for those players not interested in playing with other "real" players.

Machine actors can even function as a companion to players. My main character was a hunter, a class which is allowed to train a wild animal to become a fighting pet. These pets act according to player commands but can also be instructed to act on their own (which is to say: to follow algorithmic rules prescribed by the game). For instance, a pet which is ordered to be vigilant in dangerous situations will attack any potential threat without requiring a direct order from the player. I trained a rare sabretooth cat called Humar the Pridelord which I kept with me for years, even after acquiring other, newer pets that might have made more sense in terms of damage output. Rationally, I was very much aware that Humar was a machine actor following set algorithms just like any other pet. I was nevertheless attached to the beast – an emotional link between human and machine.

Even though *World of Warcraft*'s appeal lies in the interplay between machine and operator, some players prefer to automate their own actions. Using bots, third-party software created to emulate human input, players can replace their own operator acts with machine acts. The use of bots creates a situation where machines are playing each other (in this case Blizzard's server

[41] Mobs is an umbrella term for all the creatures roaming around in the virtual world. The term is derived from "mobiles" or "mobile objects" and dates back to *MUD1* (Bartle 2004 102).

against the client operated by bot software). Players use bots for a variety of reasons, mostly related to either time saving or virtual money gathering. The advantage of using a bot is substantial: collecting items or gold via an automated process means a player's character 'reaps experience points and gold without the player investing any time in the game, as the bot can reap those rewards very efficiently 24 hours a day, without fatigue or boredom' (Mitterhofer et al. 18).

From the perspective of Game Contract, the use of third-party software like bots is both controversial (in terms of social protocol) and expressly forbidden by Blizzard (in terms of license agreements). As game researcher Mia Consalco point out, players see the automated collecting of virtual goods as an unfair advantage over "normal" play, making it a cheating practice (2009 412). Blizzard fears that the amount of extra virtual income these bots generate might disrupt the in-game economy. While players using bots tend to keep their activities quiet so as not to attract scorn from other players, commercial bot software sellers have faced legal action from Blizzard. In one notable lawsuit, MDY Industries, creator of the Glider bot software, agreed to pay 6 million dollars in damages to Blizzard (Duranske 2008b). This case shows how large the stakes can be in virtual currency-related games of stake. Players who use bots and are caught (either by Warden or by other players reporting them) are in danger of having their accounts terminated. Trying to abolish bots from a MMORPG like *World of Warcraft* looks like an uphill battle due to the ever present demand for virtual money, coupled with constant improvements of bot software in terms of detection avoidance. Through the enforcement of their license agreements, Blizzard nevertheless tries to keep these malevolent machine acts at bay, ensuring that they alone control what machine actors may do with the game.

In conclusion, we should keep in mind that, in a game like *World of Warcraft*, the computer functions as a machine actor during play, both as a referee enforcing the rules and as the controller of mobs and NPCs, a role it can only perform by following coded, algorithmic rules designed by Blizzard. Through the computer, Blizzard as a stakeholder is not absent during play, but present by proxy. By interacting with the players vicariously through machine acts, they remain at a distance when players want to negotiate the viability or desirability of certain rules or the fairness of their outcomes, positioning many of the rules of play and the way they are enforced as non-negotiable.

This situation above is not unique to *World of Warcraft*; all digital games feature machine acts in conjunction with operator acts. It is, however, not the presence of a machine actor but the rules guiding the machine's acts, which inform the amount of control the game designer has over play. As I will show in the second and third sections of this chapter, *World of Warcraft* is

tightly controlled, pushing players into certain dominant play practices, while limiting the options for other strategies.

3.2.3 Setting up the game

Before being able to interact with the rules of play, both new and experienced players of *World of Warcraft* will need to traverse the setup screens where the player's character is configured. Many of the choices made here cannot be reversed in a later stage of play without cost (both financially and in terms of time investment). Such choices tremendously influence play, both setting up the range of gameplay options a player will have, as well as defining part of the identity and role of their character within *World of Warcraft*'s fictional world. From the perspective of Game Design, the setup screens are thresholds where players do not only configure the game they are about to play, but also where designers configure the players into certain gameplay patterns.

In the case of *World of Warcraft* and other virtual worlds, the tools and affordances with which players are able to build their avatars are embedded within a certain 'world vision', ranging from 'aesthetic choices to deep value systems', of individual designers or the organisation as a whole (Taylor 2003 28). Part of the world vision Blizzard (or its individual designers) tried to inscribe into *World of Warcraft* can be discerned when analysing the way the setup phase positions the players into certain fixed identities with limited options for deviation during play. The setup phase also regulates the amount of freedom players have for virtual identity creation in terms of the appearance and naming of characters. Both in terms of Game Design and Game Contract, setting up a new character through the afforded configuration options means setting up a player to participate in Blizzard's world vision.

After having logged into the network by entering your account name and password, new players are presented with a multitude of choices for their first character.[42] The option which precedes all and presents itself the moment after you log in for the first time is the realm choice for your character. At this point, your characters' place within the decentralized network of *World of Warcraft* is decided. As I mentioned earlier, hundreds of different realms exist. These realms are not all the same. To begin with, each realm carries a unique name which is derived from elements of Warcraft's fictional world ('Moonglade', 'Burning Legion', 'Hakkar' and so forth). This name is mostly cosmetic: what matters is the realm *type*.

On the rules level, there is a distinction between a PvE (Player vs. Environment) and a PvP (Player vs. Player) realm type. In a PvE realm, you

[42] Players who have already created one or more characters may skip this phase by selecting their character of choice and entering the game.

cannot be attacked by other players without your consent while on a PvP realm opposing players are free to engage in combat whether you agree or not. This distinction is not based on social protocols about fair play in combat situations but is rather based on non-negotiable code: in PvE realms the game simply prevents you from attacking someone when this person has not given his explicit consent. Choosing a PvP realm means you can play more aggressively against other players, but it also means subjecting yourself to the potential of unexpected and sometimes unwelcome combat situations (including attacks bordering on harassment). For some, this situation sounds thrilling, for others it is a reason to choose a less chaotic PvE realm. On the level of fiction, players can furthermore choose between a "normal" realm or a realm dedicated to (representational) role-playing. These so-called RP realms exist both in PvE and PvP varieties and fall under additional role-playing policies within *World of Warcraft*'s game contracts, some of which will be discussed below.[43]

In many cases, the initial realm selection is an important choice for (virtual) life. Players are allowed to change realms whenever they please, but switching costs are high. You cannot easily transfer established characters; you must create new ones, each requiring the same time investment.[44] This means that players' particular experience with and/or view of *World of Warcraft* as a whole is actually based on a fragment, which can differ greatly from other fragments. One of the games of stake discussed in chapter five deals with an instance of community breakdown due to differences between player groups concerning a new content patch released by Blizzard. This breakdown, however, took place in the realm in which I was playing and observing; in other realms players might have embraced the new content without any problems.[45] A game design choice further emphasising the fragmented nature of *World of Warcraft* is the lack of in-game play and communication options between players in different realms. Some PvP situations allow play and communication between players from different realms, but interaction is limited (no trading items) and acquaintanceships are random and fleeting in nature (you never know who you are going to meet or fight and after a fight each players is automatically returned to his or her realm) making sustained in-game social interaction between realms nearly impossible.

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[43] RP-PvP realms did not exist upon the game's release. The first RP-PvP realms were added in patch 1.8 in October 2005.

[44] Eventually, Blizzard made it possible to *migrate* characters from one realm to another if certain conditions are met (including a payment of 20 euro per character). For the full official character migration FAQ, see http://www.wow-europe.com/en/info/faq/paidcharactertransfer.html (accessed January, 2010).

[45] This case study also highlights the inevitability of partiality and subjectivity as a researcher as I discussed in chapter two.

A result of *World of Warcraft*'s fragmentation into strictly separated realms is the creation of realm-unique communities. Some realms attract relatively more instrumental play-oriented players due to the presence of renowned raiding guilds. Other realms might have become famous for their (representational) role-playing activities. Players sometimes loosely organise themselves in order to create their "own" realm. Before Blizzard added a dedicated Spanish-language realm, Spanish players had already colonized an English-language realm called Agamaggan. According to a wiki entry on the background and history of this realm, at one point its population was well over 50% Spanish-speaking, creating large rifts regarding the realm's official language.[46]

Blizzard's decision to break up *World of Warcraft* into many parallel realms, a decision which, in all honestly, for a large part more practical than ideological, has resulted in a host of world *visions* rather than a singular, unified world vision. The fragmented nature of *World of Warcraft* thus can result in realm-related games of stake, triggered by players and due to the segregation or concentration of player groups. The different realm types designed by Blizzard and the unique nature of realm communities as organised by players, still present a large freedom of choice for players. Survey data has, however, shown that many players tend to play with people they know in real life (Yee 2005d).[47] Whether friends, family or romantic partners are already playing in a certain realm can be as important a part in choosing your own realm as any play preference-related reason. This makes winding up in a realm with a high population of players diverging from your play preference (or language) not easily avoidable.

After having picked a realm to play in, players are allowed to create one or more characters. Where realm choice influences your instrumental and representational limitations and affordances on a macro level of play – what you can do within the boundaries of your realm – character creation dictates the way you play on a micro level. That is, what you can do within the boundaries of your character(s). On the one hand, you are asked to make a choice in the type of instrumental role you want to play within the game which defines your options for ludic role-playing. On the other hand, you are asked to create a virtual identity for this character in terms of look, name and faction alliance – setting up your character for representational role-playing. The difference between ludic and representational character options signals the persistant double role of the in-game character. As game scholar Ragnhild

[46] From *wowwiki.com* (http://www.wowwiki.com/Server:Agamaggan_Europe, accessed March, 2010).
[47] My initial choice of realm was based on real life reasons too; a friend had started playing *World of Warcraft* in a particular realm a few weeks earlier and I followed to join him there.

Tronstad points out in a study on character identification in *World of Warcraft*: 'on the one hand, [the character] represents the player vis à vis other players in the game. On the other hand, it functions as a tool for the player's agency in the game' (2008 255).

When it comes to ludic role-playing, there are nine classes to choose from for your character – druids, hunters, mages, paladins, priests, rogues, shaman, warlocks and warriors – each offering a unique style of play.[48] Choosing a particular class means choosing a particular style of play. This is what ludic role-playing is all about: you take up a role within the game from which you can only deviate within boundaries set by the game's design. For many classes certain play styles are simply impossible: a warrior or warlock cannot heal other players, mages or priests are too fragile for close combat, etc. Some classes are "hybrids": they allow for different play styles. In many group play situations, however, hybrid classes are required to specialize in one play style to prevent becoming a jack of all trades but masters of none. From a Game Design perspective, the class system means that players are forced to work together in order to overcome challenges they cannot overcome themselves due to class weaknesses. I will discuss the interplay between the classes and the way it affects group play later in this chapter. For the character creation phase is it important to emphasize that players are not limited to playing only one class: they may create and play several characters if they wish to. They are, however, limited to one play style of ludic role-playing for each of their individual characters – you cannot switch your character's class should you not like it, only to start a new one. Within each class, there is a lot of flexibility for those looking for it. In terms of ludic role-playing, switching *between* classes is however not an option with Blizzard's world vision – if you would rather be a warrior than a priest you have no other option than to start anew with a fresh character.

Influencing both the affordances and limitations of ludic and representational role-playing is the choice of faction. Each character must choose between either the Horde or the Alliance faction. On a fictional level, eternal war rages between these factions. Each faction has its own cities, its own transportation system, its own economy and so on, all of which are out of bounds for members of the other faction. Within the game, players having chosen Alliance for their character are also not permitted to chat to members of the other faction by design. If they want to role-play with members of the opposing faction in-game, they must do so through gestures (nothing prevents

[48] A tenth class, the death knight, was added to the game with the Wrath of the Lich King expansion in late 2008. These ten class types are not unique to *World of Warcraft* or the MMORPG genre; many of them can be found throughout fantasy culture, and most of them having been a staple in role-playing games since the early titles (McCubbin).

them of meeting outside of the game though). On an instrumental level, players are not allowed to form any formal group if their characters are not part of the same faction. They cannot trade items or visit dungeons together, nor can they take on quests meant for the opposing faction. Like realm choice, the impact of faction choice, as well as Blizzard's reasoning behind the split-up in factions, will be analysed further later in this chapter.

The choice of faction directly influences other character creation choices players can make in terms of representational role-playing. Based on faction choice, a character is either human, dwarf, gnome, night elf or drainei – races allied within the Alliance – or they become orc, troll, undead, tauren or blood elf – the combined Horde races.[49] As one would expect, the choice of race influences a character's look. From the ordinarily human to the zombie-like undead, from the hulking minotaur-like tauren to the cute diminutive gnome, all races have a distinct look. While this outward appearance is mostly cosmetic, each race does have several unique abilities that provide instrumental advantages. The tauren race for example has been given a stamina boost, justified on a fictional level by their size and muscular build. On an instrumental level, extra stamina means the tauren race is well suited for classes who specialize in surviving copious amounts of damage like the warrior. Here, fantasy culture tropes concerning a certain type of fictional race are translated into instrumental advantages, showing that ludic and representational role-playing are not opposites but, by design, can indeed go hand in hand. In contradistinction, by the same design some ludic/representational combinations are not allowed. Night elves loath the use of magic on a fictional level, making it impossible to pick classes using magic (like mages or warlocks) on an instrumental level. By promoting and preventing certain combinations of race and class, Blizzard regulates both ludic and representational role-playing, exposing in the process the forms of play that fit into the world vision of *World of Warcraft*.

While the choice of race had some impact of instrumental play, the final representational character creation options – gender, appearance and personal naming – are purely cosmetic. The choice of either a male or female character comes down to individual preference. Experimenting with a character's skin and hair colour and other facial characteristics (each chosen from a limited set of options) makes it possible to construct the illusion of age in a character's face (like choosing a wrinkled face underneath a bald head or gray hair to signify being old). The character's body, however, cannot be changed. Characters all

[49] The Alliance's draenei and the Horde's blood elf races were added to the game world with the The Burning Crusade expansion pack in January 2007. Blizzard has announced that the forthcoming expansion pack called Cataclysm will add two additional races: the Horde acquire the goblin race, while the werewolf-like worgen will join the Alliance.

have the same hypersexualized features, especially with those races most closely resembling humans, limiting the options for identity play.[50] For many players, the gender and appearance of their character are pragmatic choices. *World of Warcraft* is a game played from a third-person perspective, with the character in constant view of the player's gaze. Many players choose a character they enjoy looking at, while many players opt for gender-bending (ie. choosing the gender which is not their own). Survey data from 2005 showed that the gender distribution among characters was 65% male and 35% female while in reality, only 16% of all *World of Warcraft* players were female (Yee 2005e).[51]

With relatively limited means to create a unique character in terms of race, gender and looks due to design-imposed constraints, the choice of name makes a character truly individual. Character names are therefore among the most powerful ways of expressing identity because the rest of the characters' appearance is bound to Blizzard's design (Tronstad 2008 ; Hagström). In theory, players of games like *World of Warcraft* can enter any name they want for their character, allowing them to use their name as a depiction of their context, preferences or playing styles (see also Schaap). However, the naming option is not completely devoid of control. The game's design for instance will not allow names surpassing fifteen letters, nor can it have punctuation marks or consist of more than one word. Naming practices are not only controlled on the level op Game Design but also on the level of Game Contract. Blizzard's naming policy in the Terms of Use states that characters names should not include vulgarity, racial slurs, advertising and other forms of abuse defined by Blizzard (2005c). For dedicated role-playing realms, Blizzard has even created

[50] While the features to configure gender appearance in digital games – or more precisely the lack of them – have been the subject of much discussion in the discipline of cultural analysis (see for instance Kennedy ; Cassell and Jenkins ; Kafai et al.), but participating in this discussion is beyond the scope of this dissertation. Research on gender in MMORPGs, including *World of Warcraft*, is available. Taylor, for instance, assesses that while the hypersexualization is the same for male and female characters, in many cases women experience more hesitation in accepting this fixed perfection, perceiving conflicting meanings instead. Many female players active in, *Everquest*, the MMORPG Taylor investigated, had the feeling they had to 'bracket' or ignore character appearances to be able to enjoy the game (2006c 110). For more views on characters, identity play and gender issues in *World of Warcraft* see (Hagström; Corneliussen; Tronstad).

[51] Male players especially appear prone to choose a female character as their favourite character to play. According to survey based research by psychologist and game researcher Nick Yee, 23% of male players prefer a female character as their main character as opposed to 3% of female players preferring a male character. Coupled with the gender distribution data this results in a 55% chance of a female character being played by a male while less than 1% of all male characters are played by a real-life female (2005e). As one student following a games-related course I taught once put it: 'if I'm going to play this game for such a long time, why not pick something nice to look at'. It must be noted here that in some cases, male players actively choose female players for beneficial reasons as male players tend to help female characters more easily than they would male characters. Thus, actively or passively fooling other male players into believing you are female can actually result in rewards (Yee 2001).

a separate "role-playing realms policy", supporting players who appreciate that their fellow players do not use names which break the "magic circle" of the fictional world.[52] If players are caught violating the naming policy they may face penalties.

In contrast to the other setup options, where the rules are enforced automatically through coded game design limitations, the naming policy is enforced after the setup phase. Blizzard might catch players themselves through surveillance software (which, for example, picks up gibberish names like 'fggtfwjq' often generated by bot software) but usually, inappropriate names are reported by other players. I have witnessed players reporting inappropriate names (or at least claiming they would do so) many times in the role-playing realms in which I was active. In one case my own character's name, Grmbl, was even at stake (it was reported for being gibberish, even though it is a well-known exclamation of grumpy characters in comics).[53] This leads to an interesting situation where Blizzard's world vision concerning names, as stated in the game's contractual documents, is recalled and enforced by players themselves. Whether this is for better or worse depends on the stakes of the players involved; while for some, having a devious name is a way to claim agency over the restrictions of the game, while for others it represents a form of destructive deviance lessening the immersion of the fictional world.

Concluding this section, I want to stress that most of the thresholds and other control mechanisms mentioned above, be they instrumental or fictional in nature, are not necessarily intrusive or in other ways negatively impacting the enjoyment of the game or its fictional world. Limitations in the character creation phase for instance can add to the worldliness of Azeroth, limiting the ways players are able to abuse the character creation for divergent or devious

[52] Adding to the basic naming policies, characters in role-playing realms are not supposed to include partial or complete sentences (Inyourface, Welovebeef, Howareyou), real-world references (Britneyspears, Austinpowers, Newyork), 'Leet' or 'Dudespeak' (Roflcopter, xxnewbxx, Roxxoryou) and immersion breaking titles (Privatemike, Knightpotatoe, Masteroftheworld). These can be deemed 'mildly inappropriate' and, among other penalties, result in a forced name change. In most cases, players report other players for using inappropriate role-playing names but in the end, what is deemed inappropriate is left to those who enforce the naming policy rules. All examples come from the official role-playing realm policy (Blizzard Entertainment 2005a).

[53] Apparently, "grmbl" was not well-known enough. After logging in one day I found my character's name changed into a randomly generated temporal name. I found out my name was deemed inappropriate through email and was asked to change it before I could re-enter the game. I eventually contacted a Game Master who, after referring to google to look up 'Grmbl', removed the temporal name and reinstated my original one. The exact same thing happened a year later again, with the same character and name (after which they changed it into 'Grumbl'). In another case, a friend was harassed in-game in a role-playing realm several times because his character's name was "Motorbreath". Even though he claimed this name had its roots in his character being a engineer, a standard *World of Warcraft* profession, his harassers pointed to their real-world reference of the name of a well-known song by rock band Metallica. In the end, my friend's character never received an official name ban from Blizzard.

purposes. For some players, however, the lack of class and/or customization options on the level of Game Design and restrictive policies on the level of Game Contract may hinder them in building a meaningful virtual identity, or the play style to which they aspire. The control mechanisms in the setup phase analysed above show that *World of Warcraft* is designed with an intended use in mind. In the next sections, I will investigate how Game Design and Game Contract further 'norm' the player into appropriate behaviour (Taylor 2006a).

3.3 The rules of play

This section deals with *World of Warcraft* as a *game*, or as Galloway puts it: the 'gamic elements that all are inside the total gamic apparatus yet outside the portion of the apparatus that constitutes a pretend world of character and story' (2006 7-8). Much of the gamic apparatus is, however, articulated to the player through the fictional world. While one could describe *World of Warcraft*'s rules and structures using only abstract descriptions (referring to characters as player-controlled objects for instance), rules and fiction are inextricably intertwined. In this section, I will not refrain from referring to fictional elements if it helps to understand the underlying instrumental rule system.

Overall, this section asks the question of how dominant play strategies – and thus the preferred or intended use of *World of Warcraft* as designed by Blizzard – are implemented to guide players through the game. Firstly, I will look at the way the individual player is introduced to the game, looking in particular at the way progress is designed as a player's primary goal. Secondly, I will discuss dedicated group play as a form of play being all about strict group composition and behaviour which is not necessarily or inherently social. Lastly, I will look at player versus player combat as an instrumental goal in and of itself, designed to perpetuate eternal war between player factions.

3.3.1 Designing play

The previous section concluded with the character creation phase; now I will continue with what happens as soon as the player actually engages in play after logging into the game with one of his or her characters. By doing so, I will convey how *World of Warcraft*'s design structures function on an instrumental level. I will start where every new player starts: at the moment a player first engages with play. Depending on the chosen race, a new character will magically appear within the game world in the so-called starter zone of that

particular race.[54] For a troll hunter for instance (the combination of race and class which formed my main character), this means appearing in an area called the 'Valley of Trials', a nicely rendered rocky valley with appropriate flora and fauna within the land of Durator. Other characters are present too: "non-player characters" or NPCs and, potentially, other players' characters (those who have just started a new character too, or chose to visit with an established character). On an instrumental level, little of the diegetic geographical and scenic information matters. What does matter instrumentally, however, is the non-diegetic user interface sitting between the player and the fictional world. The user interface or UI includes a large selection of options in bars in the lower bottom of the screen, a mini-map (showing your character's position in the world) in the right hand corner and some statistical information about the character in the left-hand corner including the amount of health and a simple number 1 depicting that the character is, in fact, still on level one.

As the UI exist on the fringes of the screen, what arguably draws our most immediate attention after appearing in the game world is a character standing just a few meters in front of your character. It is framed in the centre of the screen, an obvious design trick to focus the player's attention on him and, more importantly, the bright yellow exclamation mark floating above its head. It is an invitation for interaction, a non-diegetic signifier for possible action. Moving the mouse pointer over this character reveals a change in cursor appearance from a gloved hand to a symbol resembling a talk balloon, again an invitation to interact with this NPC. What follows is a description of what happens when a player accepts this invitation.

Right-clicking on the character reveals a UI pop-up window filled with text under the header 'Your place in the world'. The text explains that your character must go talk to another NPC standing in the near vicinity, and offers to either accept or decline this simple mission. It is the character's first mission in the game which comes in the form of a so-called quest. After accepting the quest, the other NPC suddenly has a large, bright yellow question mark above its head. Interacting with this target NPC reveals the message that you have 'completed' the 'Your place in the world' quest. This leads to another quest, this time offering a pair of boots or gloves as a reward. You are also informed that by completing the quest, you have earned forty experience points, visualized by one of the previously transparent bars in the bottom of the screen appearing now partly filled up. Doing the follow-up quests, involving the killing of ten "mottled boars" in an adjacent valley, leads to more experience points, both for each boar killed and for 'completing' the quest by conversing with the quest

[54] This sudden appearance in the world is actually preceded by a short, introductory "cut-scene" – a non-playable moment, often in the form of a short movie – with a voiceover introducing the race, its history and your place and goal within it. The moment this cut-scene stops, play may begin.

giver again. After a certain experience point threshold is met, a "ding!" sound is heard and the character is suddenly engulfed in bright yellow light. Congratulations: you have just levelled up to level two. When you complete the quest you also receive the boots or gloves, each granting the character extra strength when worn. Other NPCs in the area now also exhibit exclamation marks above their heads: more quests to do, experience points to gain, and rewards to be earned.

The short series of actions described above reveal the basic instrumental structure of *World of Warcraft* for individual play: accumulating experience points and rewards by completing quests and slaying mobs. The higher the level, the stronger the character becomes and the broader your options become for additional quests and killing. The term 'stronger' does not necessarily – or only partly – refer to skill. In *World of Warcraft*, strength is measured through a large set of different abstract values, or attributes, describing a character's level, its health, its agility during combat, the amount of damage its weapons inflict, and so forth.[55] Increasing these attributes, which are communicated to the player through the UI in the form of data, means increasing a character's overall defensive and offensive capabilities. Combined, the different values form a character's "stats"; the better your stats, the stronger you are in the game. A player still needs skill to get the best out of a character's capabilities, but the general idea is that having better statistics or "stats" than your adversary means that you will probably win a battle.[56]

The emphasis on increasing numerical values throughout the game – as I will show below, every instrumental goal is linked to increasing your stats – controls the way players think of progress and success in the game. By measuring success through stats, *World of Warcraft* concretizes the accomplishments of a character, as well as the players behind the character.

[55] The primary attributes *World of Warcraft* incorporates and keeps track of are strength, agility, stamina, intellect and spirit. Other attributes are found on gear or through upgrades like enchantments like (ranged) attack power, critical strike rating and hit rating. All these attributes are given numerical values which, through computational calculation, result in a certain amount of health (the amount of hit points a character can sustain before it "dies"); armour (the more, the higher the chances are you can withstand physical damage); mana (the amount of magical power for spell casting); dodge chance; critical strike chance (the chance that you inflict double damage); hit chance and dps or damage-per-second. The importance (and even existence) of the attributes mentioned here varies between patches and expansion packs, with Blizzard constantly adjusting them for game balance purposes.

[56] Many of *World of Warcraft*'s attributes and the way they compare to each other originate from classic wargaming, where the strength and weaknesses of army units were also articulated through attributes (see for instance Fine 1983). This system allowed referees to calculate the outcome of battles on the basis of these numerical values, a process taken over by the computer in a game like *World of Warcraft*. Like in wargames' units, the attribute numbers of a character will tell you much about his strength and potential weaknesses. Each class, for instance, benefits from certain attributes more than from another.

Striving for the best possible stats for your character is a driving force of both individual and, eventually, group-based instrumental play. The accumulation of better stats forms the instrumental backbone of *World of Warcraft*, providing a constant incentive for improvement. There are always better items than the one's your characters has; even if you have earned, produced or bought the best items the game has on offer, Blizzard will add more to keep you busy through expansion packs and updates. The heavy reliance on stats therefore does not just concretize a player's strength but also keeps players coming back for more. *World of Warcraft* is far from unique in the way it uses stats to create player incentive – many digital games have similar setups – and for many instrumentally oriented players it presents the main appeal of the game. In terms of control and agency, we should nevertheless remain attentive to the fact that *World of Warcraft* is a subscription-based game, where continued play is beneficial to the game's key stakeholder in terms of income.

Character and item stats are not the only forms of data conveyed through the UI. Many actions related to combat, like damaging mobs or healing other players' characters, are articulated through data visible within (or retrievable through) the UI. Players can see which of their powers are most effective not through diegetic means (character and mob models do for instance not show inflicted wounds) but through non-diegetic information. In chapter four, I will introduce a case study in which players analyse and use the UI information flows to such a degree that their play exists primarily on interface level only, allowing them to theorize about the algorithms driving *World of Warcraft* (a practice known as "theorycrafting"). As many of the algorithms responsible for the calculation and processing of the different data sets are hidden within the game's code, players need to pay attention to UI data in order to optimize their performance. As Galloway points out:

> To play [a] game means to play the code of the game. To win means to know the system. And thus to *interpret* a game means to interpret its algorithm (2006 90-91, emphasis in original).

The emphasis on data interpretation and manipulation therefore is critical when trying to answer the question about how Blizzard controls play from the perspective of Game Design: it presents a system where players are trained and conditioned for certain dominant play practices.

As shown in the Valley of Trials introduction above, one key form of data needed to advance through the game are experience points, and the best way to acquire them is through quests. While many actions (including defeating mobs) yield experience points, quests represent by far the most efficient way to gain experience points. The additional gear and monetary rewards from quests

are also generally better than those pillaged from dead mobs. Quests are designed to guide progress through the game, both instrumentally and, as will be discussed in the last section of this chapter, fictionally. Even though the emphasis lies on performing continuous sequences of quests, it is possible to skip, circumvent or even ignore them entirely. The result is that, through quests, advancement is structured as an inverted tree model in which players decide which quest branches they want to follow, and in what order.

Like the classic literary quest in literature, computer games quests do not just tell a story but are meant to give a character – and, in computer games, therefore also the player – a clear goal by performing a task. The variety of quests found in games like *World of Warcraft* is extensive. As game scholar Aarseth explains, quest-tasks can be place, time and/or objective-oriented and quests themselves can be 'weaved, mixed, parallelized and sequentialized' (2005 498). The mottled boar quest mentioned above for instance ask the player to venture further into a particular part of the Valley of Trials (place) to kill a specific number of boars (objective). You *must* complete this quest in order to qualify for new quests (sequence). These new quests can be pursued in any order, but pursuing several quests at the same time (parallel) is often the smartest thing to do if their objectives are located in the same area of the game world. To prevent players from getting lost in an endless supply of quests, characters are limited to a certain amount of quests at the same time through a quest log. They either need to finish the quests they are currently on, or drop them, if they want to pursue others.

Even though a major part of *World of Warcraft*'s fiction is told through quests (including a character's own place within the greater Warcraft narrative), they function as a means to an end – attaining experience points and gear in order to progress through the game. As literary scholar Jill-Walker notes most players do not even pay attention to the narratives in *World of Warcraft*'s quests. They tend to gravitate towards external information databases like thottbot.com or wowhead.com for instrumental information on where to go or what to do in order to achieve the quest's goals, rather than deciphering this information from the quest's story (Rettberg 2008a).

Due to the quests' instrumental function of providing players with a task to perform, Aarseth proposes the term 'quest games' as a replacement for 'narrative games' or similar terms describing games with narrative aspirations (2004, 2005). In an effort to define the term 'quest game' itself, Aarseth distills the following:

> A game with a concrete and attainable goal, which supersedes performance or the accumulation of points Such goals can be nested

(hierarchic), concurrent, or serial, or a combination of the above (2005 497).[57]

In the case of *World of Warcraft* and similar games, it is hard to divorce the instrumental goals Aarseth mentions (performance; accumulation of points) from the quest goals. *World of Warcraft*'s quests are not designed to supersede performance or the accumulation of points, however they do form a substantial part of instrumental play. This contradiction would suggest that *World of Warcraft* is not a quest game, or that the definition of a quest game is too narrow. Game scholar Susan Tosca, contrastingly, feels that Aarseth's definition of quest games might be too *broad*: 'even "simple" games with no visible plot/narrative content (like C*hess* or *Tetris*) would have particular goals or objectives (take the enemy king, don't let the pieces accumulate), so that all games would be quest games except for simulations' (2003).[58] While such observations contain valid criticism of Aarseth's definitions of quests and quest games, they do reaffirm Aarseth's argument that quests are not necessarily or purely about story-telling.[59]

In *World of Warcraft*, quests function not merely as means to an end (to obtain experience points or rewards) but additionally serve to guide and control a player's movement and activities through the game. The more quests you perform (and mobs you kill), the higher your character's level becomes. This process slowly opens up the range of possibilities for your character, both in terms of objectives (each quest leads to new quests) as well as in terms of spatial layout (the higher your level, the easier it becomes to travel to places which were previously too dangerous). This structure, which can be found in many MMORPGs, allows the game to feel emergent in nature while still containing sequences of events which players need to follow in order to acquire the best rewards (Juul 2005 72).[60]

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[57] An even more dressed-down definition proposed by Aarseth for the quest game is 'a game which depends on the mere movement from position A to position B' (2005 497).

[58] Tosca refers to an earlier piece by Aarseth (eventually published in 2004) in which he defines a quest as 'The player-avatar must move through a landscape in order to fulfill a goal, while mastering a series of challenges. This phenomenon is called a quest' (2004 386).

[59] Blizzard even accommodated players uninterested in the quests' stories by changing the way the quest UI pop-ups function. In the initial version of the game's design, quest text would slowly appear to players, forcing them to take the time to read it before being able to accept a quest. From patch 1.7 (September 2005) onwards, the slow scrolling quest text could be disabled, allowing players to ignore the story-bits entirely. For players uninterested in the reasons why their characters were actually sent on quests, this transformed NPC quest-givers from story-tellers into purely instrumental task-providers.

[60] As explained in chapter one, the quest system also gives players a sense of short-term closure by pursuing quest goals and granting quantifiable outcomes that the game as a whole lacks (Salen and Zimmerman 81-82). You might not be able to finish *World of Warcraft* as a whole – you can finish the parts of it you find important by doing quests.

As Aarseth points out, quests control players' agendas, 'forcing them to perform certain actions that might otherwise not have been chosen, thus reducing the possibility space offered by the game rules and the landscape' (2005 503). Media scholar Jill Walker Rettberg argues that *World of Warcraft*'s quests lean heavily on deferral (the constant promise of bigger, better rewards) and repetition (all quests can be followed by all players). Both deferral and repetition urge the player to advance through the game; players know that when they see a higher level character walking around with a big, shiny axe, they know they too can obtain it if they invest the appropriate amount of time. While this situation might not always make sense on a fictional level (as I will show below), in terms of instrumental Game Design it makes sense. As Rettberg explains:

> [The] rhetorical figures of deferral and repetition are solutions to the problem of how to construct a game played by many people at once that needs to accommodate group play, solo play, and players who are at every possible point in the game (from newbie to highly experienced, from level 1 to level 70) – in the same game system and game world' (2008a 182).

Quests keep players occupied at every point of the game. Even when they have run out of quests to perform individually, there are group quests and raid quests to accomplish. Quests are *World of Warcraft*'s carrots on a stick; 'in a sense *World of Warcraft* is evidence that we humans have finally succeeded in creating something that we can desire endlessly, have entirely, and never consume (2008a 176). In terms of Game Design, the 'we humans' actually refers to Blizzard. The game is designed to create endless desire through deferral and repetition, which translates to players continuing to play instead of cancelling their subscriptions.

To further emphasize how *World of Warcraft* is structured to perpetuate endless play (and thus endless subscription pay), it is useful to look at the way the game foregoes the traditional "game over" scenario of digital games. In *World of Warcraft*, the player's character simply cannot perish, at least not forever. Media scholar Lisbeth Klastrup has studied death in games including *World of Warcraft*. She writes about the challenge of game design to provide a 'form of death penalty severe enough that it results in a certain excitement, which forces players to take death seriously and play strategically to avoid it', however 'they must not make it so harsh that players are scared away from the game at an early point in their gaming experience' (2008 146).

In the specific case of *World of Warcraft*, death is designed to be as lenient as possible without being meaningless. When a character's health points

run out due to receiving too much damage from an opponent, it dies. The character's death, however, is temporal. After being killed, the player sees his or her character appear in a grayish ghost world; there are several resurrection options that allow the character to be brought back to the world of the living.[61] Alive again, the only penalty is a certain amount of damage to the worn gear (which can be fixed for a price) and, in some cases, a temporal health and power reduction ('resurrection sickness'). Death is designed as a nuisance but never a game breaker.[62]

Through death penalty design, Blizzard has made mortality within *World of Warcraft* part of play, not an endpoint. Death becomes a learning experience, forcing players to rethink their strategy in order to prevent dying again – it presents us with a very literal example of "what doesn't kill you makes you stronger". It is also a way to ensure that players never give up the game because of their character's demise. With no "game over"-scenario to worry about, and an endless supply of quests to do and rewards to collect, we could say that players themselves are "being played" by the game's design and coaxed to continue playing, and therefore paying subscription fees, indefinitely.

3.3.2 Designing cooperation

Even though hundreds of quests exist and more are added with every patch and expansion pack, the appeal of the quest system as the basic underlying structure of instrumental play is finite. The main reason is the lack of character improvement options beyond a certain point when playing the game individually. After reaching the highest level (in the original *World of Warcraft* 60, each expansion pack adding more levels) no more experience points can be earned. From this point on, improving one's character's stats relies on attaining better gear. The best gear are rewards for conquering *World of Warcraft*'s many dungeons. Within these dungeons are "bosses", the strongest types of mobs in the game which, when defeated, yield the best rewards. Bosses form challenges unlike most of the solo content, as they require a group of players who, through an often lengthy process of trial and error, need to learn their attack and defence patterns in order to defeat them. If players want to continue advancing and improve their instrumental power, they simply *must* turn to others for

[61] When a character dies, his ghost is transferred to the nearest graveyard. Returning the character's ghost back from this graveyard to the spot where the dead body lies in order to resurrect it, a practice known as corpse running, is the most common way to revive a character. Some classes like the priest can also resurrect dead characters.

[62] Judging from the many death stories Klastrup has gathered, death in *World of Warcraft* can provide fun and entertainment too, especially in a social context. Strategic use (or exploitation) of the death/resurrection-system can even result into gameplay advantages on one's opponent (2008 162-63).

instrumental group play. In terms of Game Design, I will discuss two design mechanisms that drive and control instrumental group play, both imposing a certain world vision on the game. The first one addresses the economics of availability of the game's "best" rewards. The second mechanism shows how intended group configurations control collective action.

For many players with a preference for instrumental play, the leveling process, though fun, is seen as something which stands in the way of the core game experience: collecting the best gear possible in the group-based end-game phase. Even legendary weapons which should be rare or even unique according to Warcraft's fiction can be obtained by each player who puts enough time and effort into it. Some exceptions to the rule aside, unlimited and equal availability of items defines *World of Warcraft*'s internal economy. For Fine, who recognized similar economics in table-top role-playing games, the equal availability of goods on an instrumental level makes sense even if it is often unexplainable on a fictional level. 'Because the rationale for the existence of the treasure is frequently left undefined', explains Fine, 'an unlimited supply of "good" is possible, and this maintains players' interest in the game' (1983 77). In an effort to explain the appeal of the economics of MMORPGs, economist Edward Castranova lists several responses, the first of which is quite simple: consumption and acquisition is enjoyable in and of itself (2005 177). Other reasons Castranova gives are directly related to instrumental play: economics are directly tied to defining elements of games: player effort, quantifiable outcomes, and systems to valorize and attach meaning to such outcomes. They include getting fair returns for work and skill, creating one's own personal rags-to-riches story, injecting meaning and purpose into gathering gear and other virtual goods, creating competition under equal opportunity, generating risk situations, and providing the means to own property (2005 177-79).

The way the in-game economy is set up can make a game more interesting and/or challenging, but we should not forget that it represents a certain world view including, as Fine reminds us, an 'implicit philosophy or ideals by which the world operates' which players will adopt in order to succeed and/or survive (1983 76). According to Fine, one of the world views which has been part of the role-playing game genre since its table-top days is the principle of unlimited goods in American culture: 'the structure of dungeons and fantasy worlds reflects the American image of a potentially unlimited supply of treasure' (1983 76).[63] The unlimited availability of items implies that all players will, in the end, be wanting, wearing and wielding the same gear. This might lessen the enjoyment of being different and/or "stronger" than other

[63] Fine takes this principle from folklorist Alan Dundes work on 'folk ideas' as the integral components of world views (1971 96-97).

players. Many items are therefore rationed through a chance-based system. The chance a boss will "drop" a certain rare sword might be designed to be only 5%. Low drop rates mean groups of players will have to return to the same dungeon over and over again to collect all the items they want. Even if you finally obtain the rare sword you wanted, another player in the group might still be looking for his rare staff. Playing on to help friends get the item they want might be a social act but it is nonetheless driven by the way item availability is allocated.

While it might take time and effort, players almost always have access to more and better items, and are teased with these items through deferral and repetition, potentially leading to addictive levels of consumption (and, one could argue, play). Taking this one step further, new media scholar Scott Rettberg sees a MMORPG like *World of Warcraft* as a 'convincing and detailed simulacrum of the process of becoming successful in capitalist society', with playing serving as a 'form of corporate training' (2008b 20). We could argue whether this situation is corruptive or educational in nature. Either way, the capitalist ideology embedded in *World of Warcraft*'s design can cause economic woes, especially when its internal economy starts to intermingle with the real-world economy. As I will show in chapter five, a large-scale and, according to Game Contract, mostly illegal market exists for the exchange of virtual money for real money.[64]

The second mechanism driving and controlling instrumental group play disciplines players to play in certain styles and group compositions. As I said earlier, dungeons are the places to go in order to get to the best gear improvements. To prevent hundreds of players visiting the same dungeon at the same time, they are "instanced"– automatically duplicated for every group which enters them. Several groups of players can therefore fight a boss at the same time while never meeting each other. While the existence of multiple "instances" of the same dungeon at the same time makes no sense on a fictional level, the prevalence of the term instance as an alternative for dungeon among players suggests that most do not mind this privatization of space in an otherwise shared persistent environment. In terms of instrumental Game Design level, the instanced nature of dungeons allowed Blizzard to create a way to focus the dungeon's challenges on a limited group of players, stimulating highly strategic instrumental group play.

Even though "doing" dungeons with a group is one of the most popular forms of instrumental group play, it limits the possibilities of group play as much as it enables. Taylor for example argues that 'instancing the game world into smaller, privatized spaces limits large scale collective action on behalf of

[64] Interestingly enough, acts of trade between virtual and real economies are illegal in terms of Game Contract, even though a truly capitalist economy should subscribe to free trade across state borders.

the player to explore other ways to approach challenging goals', adding that 'game designers are always making choices about what kinds of activities and player identities are to be supported to the exclusion of others' (2006a). One of the major design choices made in relation to dedicated group content like dungeons concerns the way groups are intended to be composed within dungeons and other dedicated group situations. As I show below, some compositions are preferred, even required to win against *World of Warcraft*'s computer-controlled adversaries. It results in group action predestined by design, not choice.

In the first section of this chapter I introduced the fact that players must choose a class for their character; here I want to explain how these classes are designed to function together in group situations. There are three basic types of classes: tanks, healers and dps'ers (which stands for damage-per-second). A tank (for example a warrior) is built to draw a mob's attention and prevent it from focusing on other players. Tanks have heavy armour, often carry shields to protect them and specialize in absorbing and sustaining considerable amounts of damage. The healer type (for example a priest) keeps other classes alive with their healing powers. Their main attention is the tank, who is taking most of the hits. The dps'ers (for example a mage) are specialised in inflicting as much damage as possible to the target. This role is important too: they must kill a mob before it kills the tank(s) and healer(s) protecting them from harm. This system only works because *World of Warcraft*'s mobs are designed to be deliberately dumb. Mobs only attack the character which generates the highest "threat" (the tank's task), whether this makes sense or not. Even supposedly intelligent adversaries go straight for these characters even though they should have "known" that killing another, weaker character (like the healer, or a dps'er) would seriously diminish the survival chances of the entire group.[65]

Such a basic combination of strengths and weaknesses is what game designer Harvey Smith calls 'orthogonal unit differentiation' (2003), a common design structure in games whether they are digital or not. Like individual class attributes, this form of unit differentiation is a left-over from the MMORPG's historical roots in table-top wargaming, where army units (cavalry, infantry, artillery and so on) each have their own advantages and weaknesses when used in combat. The basic combination of competences in the form of tank/healer/dps has become a "holy trinity" for many role-playing games, and *World of Warcraft* has designed much of its group content around it. A standard normal dungeon is designed for a group of five characters consisting of one

[65] Blizzard itself makes an insider joke about this situation when it lets one of the bosses in the Blackwing Lair instance, Lord Victor Nefarius, call out "You fools! Go after the one in the dress!" to his minions, referring to the fact that the healer class almost always wears robes.

tank, one healer and three dps'ers. Larger so-called raid dungeons are designed for groups of ten, twenty-five and forty characters, requiring a more elaborate setup of tanks, healers and dps'ers. Deviation from this requirement will more often than not lead to failure.

To achieve better results, group composition and skills management become so important that players tend to form groups based on the characters' class and skill setups rather than the actual players behind them, especially when groups are formed spontaneously. This, however, is not true for all forms of instrumental group play. Within hardcore raid guilds, where a greater degree of dependence on each other is needed than in more casually organised forms of group play, a strong emphasis is on trust and proven skill on the battlefield (Taylor 2006c). Even in the raid guilds I have participated in, however, some classes and skill setups are still preferred above others, independent of the players behind the characters. Here, ludic role-playing is no longer a question of choice, but a matter of duty. Especially for tanks and healers, who usually form the minority of the three types, this duty can lead to peer pressure within the group. They play such key roles in the holy trinity of types that, if they do not show up for an evening of raiding, the rest of the players cannot raid either.[66]

The way instrumental group play is enabled and disciplined through design affordances and limitations proves to be a strong mechanism with which to control group behavior in *World of Warcraft* – the larger the group-based challenge players face in the game, the less options players have for deviating from the dominant group strategies designed into the game. For dedicated raiding groups, the emphasis on highly coordinated cooperative ludic role-playing offers substantial appeal – for them, it is what the game is all about. Blizzard seems to think so too, as most of the best known villains of the Warcraft-universe, as well as the rare and powerful items they drop, are found in the most challenging dungeons. For players who wish to organize group action in order to tackle instrumental goals in more diverse ways, the options and rewards tend to be limited.

3.3.3 Facing the other

More emergent forms of instrumental (group) play based on the class system's orthogonal unit differentiation exist in the form of player versus player or PvP combat. Since *World of Warcraft*'s initial release, PvP combat has evolved from a diversion (earning players no reward other than the fun of fighting each other) into a full blown dedicated part of the instrumental game play experience with its own goals and reward structure. Within PvP combat, the

[66] For this reason, many players create several characters with different classes who can jump in when needed. The drawback is that one has to put in considerable amounts of time to raise each characters to the same level of strength – time not everyone has.

strict setup of tank/healer/dps disintegrates; whereas computer-controlled mobs attack only the player with the highest threat, real players will focus their attack on whoever is weakest. PvP combat requires different offensive and defensive strategies, which furthermore rely on other gear setups and (cooperative) skills. In other words, PvP combat is a very different beast altogether. As I show, many of the behavioural rules of PvP are not as much designed by Blizzard as they are socially negotiated by players themselves.

While faction choice does not have much meaning when trying to conquer a dungeon, it plays a huge role in PvP combat, as it automatically defines who your enemy is. The game is not called *World of Warcraft* for nothing: the division of factions is designed to infuse the game with inter-player combat. Whereas one could consider war a dedicated goal of the game, initially PvP combat was a form of free rather than instrumental play. In the first few months after the game's release, attacking players from the other faction did not pursue or serve any particular instrumental goal, nor did it grant any rewards. PvP combat was motivated on a fictional level (the factions are at war after all) or by a personal interest in fighting other players.

In terms of instrumental goals and rewards, the introduction of the Honor System in patch 1.4 (May 2005) changed PvP combat considerably. This system gave players the option to gain military rank for their characters on the basis of their PvP activities, including matching PvP-oriented rewards.[67] PvP was now redesigned as an instrumental goal in and of itself rather than a diversion from performing quests. As no areas were set aside purely for PvP combat, players themselves sought out each other, creating notorious hotspots for spontaneous PvP action.[68] Further patches and expansion packs introduced dedicated PvP areas in the form of "battlegrounds" and "arenas". Battlegrounds support large scale group battles (ranging from ten to forty characters per faction) and are designed around specific goals like capturing the opposing teams flag, or defeating an NPC character that the other faction needs to defend. Arenas are designed for small groups (two to five characters per team) and, like

[67] Design-wise, the Honor System turned out to be one of Blizzard's most controversial implementations due to the sheer amount of time players had to put in, in order to reach the higher Honor ranks. At the height of its popularity, to reach the highest rank ('Grand Marshall' for the Alliance, 'High Warlord' for the Horde) players needed to play weeks, even continuous months of more than ten hours a day, seven days a week. Missing a week or even a day was not on option as the danger of falling back in rank was too high. Acknowledging that such a system would lead to unhealthy situations, Blizzard replaced the old Honor system with a new one in patch 2.0.1 (December 2006), replacing the weekly honor calculation with a simpler points-per-kill system. These points could be exchanged for the same (and new) dedicated PvP rewards.

[68] Good examples are the Hillsbrad Foothills including the almost adjacent towns of Southshore (Alliance) and Tarren Mill (Horde) or the The Barrens zone with the Horde town Crossroads being in the middle of a busy traveling route. Here, large gatherings of characters, often in loosely, usually chaotically organized raids, faced each other trying to improve their honor rank.

the arenas in Roman times, are won by slaying the other team.[69] Both battlegrounds and arenas are grounded in Warcraft's fiction but, like dungeons, they are instanced and thus stand separate from the rest of the game world (MacCallum-Stewart 2008). More similarities with dungeons exist. The often chaotic battlegrounds and the highly skill-based arenas form mini-challenges with true quantitative outcomes (you either win or lose a battle) and allow players to build up and showcase their instrumental prowess.

Whereas battlegrounds and arenas offer dedicated areas for PvP combat, existing outside of the main game world through instancing, the role of PvP in the rest of the game world is organized through other rules. First of all, whether you can actually attack a member of the opposing faction outside of a battleground or arena depends on the choice of realm made during setup. As explained earlier, attacks without mutual consent are, by design, allowed only in dedicated PvP realms.[70] Even on dedicated PvP realms, there are rules dictating which kinds of PvP action are allowed. These rules are socially negotiated and therefore part of the social protocol. In most cases, attacking characters of a considerably lower level (and as such rather defenseless) is seen as improper conduct. The same goes for killing an opponent, waiting for him or her to be resurrected and, killing him or her again and again, exploit the victim's weak state after resurrection (a practice called "corpse camping"). Such acts of "ganking" are seen as the PvP variety of griefing: causing other players harm or discomfort. These are prime examples of individualized group play of the antisocial variety.

Needless to say, what is and is not ganking depends on a particular view of sportsmanship-like behavior between individuals, larger groups, factions or entire realms. Ganking and other forms of griefing are however, as game scholar Jonas Heide Smith calls them, forms of extra-mechanic conflict: the 'consequence of multiplayer games being social spaces', as opposed to intra-mechanic conflict which form the direct consequences of the way the game rules are designed (2). Having created the preconditions for both forms of conflict to exist, Blizzard is not taking a stance against PvP griefing on the level of Game Contract. In fact, the PvP realm policy states that 'actions that would typically be considered "dishonorable actions" are considered PvP mechanics and are not considered harassment' (Blizzard Entertainment 2005). While PvP combat is encouraged by Blizzard on the level of Game Design, it is regulated on a level of Game Contract by players themselves. This situation can lead to

[69] Whereas battlegrounds are all about factions waging war, in arenas, even players within the same faction are allowed to battle each other.

[70] On a PvE realm, players give their consent by enabling the PvP function manually (by typing /pvp in the command window). In this case, the color of the character's name changes to bright red (being "flagged" for combat), alerting members of the other faction that he or she can be attacked.

serious games of stake which will be investigated in a case study on "twinking", creating PvP advantages through controversial practices, in the following chapter.

For some, the built-in possibilities for extra-mechanical conflict through PvP mechanics and the faction division go against the established norms and values of the MMORPG genre. Virtual worlds designer R.V. Kelly 2 for instance calls PvP 'a violent, creepy, ornery, impatient, petulant subculture' (40). A presence or even emphasis on PvP combat does not have to lead to anti-social behaviour. Empirical research has shown that *World of Warcraft*'s PvP realms see more players in group formations than in normal realms (Ducheneaut et al. 2005b). One way of explaining this is that there is simply no better way of protecting one's self against attacks from the opposing faction than by bringing a friend. The possibility of PvP-based extra-mechnical conflict therefore also leads to organized group play, not merely to individualized, antisocial group behaviour.

To conclude this section on instrumental play, we can say that Blizzard has infused the game with dominant play strategies (performing quests, picking the correct group composition for dungeons) and a division of two factions to trigger PvP combat. As I have shown, such design choices define *World of Warcraft*'s "intended" use and world vision, conditioning players into certain forms of behavior. On an individual level, players get hooked on the game by an endless supply of quests and the promises of unlimited goods availability. In group play situations, we see players (peer-) pressured into specific types of collective action or, when dealing with PvP, are left to define their own boundaries of acceptable behaviour. This highlights the way the game's design controls and guides instrumental play, which allows for a better understanding of the players' stakes when they deviate from the intended uses of the game. As I show in the following chapters, players do not just follow the intended instrumental structures but resist, manipulate and/or transform them in order to engage with the game in ways they enjoy most, both individually as well as in groups.

The instrumental rules and structures are not the only parts of *World of Warcraft*'s design which define its intended use. On the level of representation, game design too influences the course of play. The next section will therefore focus on the way *World of Warcraft*'s fictional world is designed, showing that there is, in fact, a large difference between the way this world is represented and the way it is engaged through play.

3.4 Playing with fiction

While discussing the instrumental rules and structures which constitute the game in *World of Warcraft*, I did not shy away from mentioning that which

creates its fiction. After all, in order to explain the mechanics of *World of Warcraft* it does not matter that its factions are called Horde and Alliance: a more abstract "A" and "B" would have sufficed. For most players, the fact that *World of Warcraft* is set in a fantasy world cannot be divorced from play – even with the same instrumental rules and structures, another fictional theme would have meant playing another game. *World of Warcraft*'s fiction is not purely cosmetic either: like the instrumental design discussed above, the fictional design too controls and guides the player's action toward intended uses and, since we are dealing with representation, its intended interpretations.

This section consists of three parts. First, I will introduce *World of Warcraft*'s fictional world in terms of the way the player's characters are introduced and situated in the fiction. The second part will focus on *World of Warcraft*'s fictional world as a spatial experience, where player orientation is constantly guided through design. In the third part, I will look at game time and the way its implementation contradicts the persistency of the fictional world. Ultimately, the goal of this section is to convey that Azeroth, the name of *World of Warcraft*'s fictional world, is a world in which player agency is limited at best.

3.4.1 Representing Azeroth

There are many ways to address a game's fiction. While I discussed *World of Warcraft* as a text in chapter one, enunciating the difference between "passive" interpretation and "active" participation, I do not aim to define *World of Warcraft* as a narrative.[71] A MMORPG is more than just a representation of a fictional world (as is a film or book); as Klastrup points out, it presents 'an *actualised* version of an imaginary universe' (2009, emphasis in original) with an added social dimension:

> We as users of it know that the people we meet and interact with in the world are real people and that our real-time interaction and communication with them is not imagined or scripted by someone else, but actually take place here and now (2009).

MMORPGs form shared fictional universes where players have the chance to, as game critic and historian J.C Herz expresses it, 'not just to press your nose against the window of this universe, but to actually be a living, breathing part of it, and have thousands of people implicitly acknowledge that you are part of it' (2002 119).

[71] In prior work, I did define MMORPGs as 'interactive narratives' using film theory (Glas 2003), which in hindsight did not produce satisfactory results. To use the words of game scholar and designer Gonzalo Frasco, 'I too was a teenage narrativist' (2003).

Like a narrative, a fictional world is never a complete representation. Taking his cues from theories on possible worlds (Ryan 1991, 1992; Pavel), Juul addresses the fact that fictional worlds in games can be nothing *but* incomplete, with players having to fill in the missing pieces by combining knowledge from the real world, knowledge of genre conventions (2005 122-23) and, as I argue below, knowledge of existing source material. Additionally, Juul argues, many games present game worlds that are incoherent, where the world 'contradicts itself or some game events cannot be explained as part of the fictional world', usually due to the fact that they are games first, and fictional worlds second (2005 132). Other games, like many adventure games, offer more coherent worlds where 'nothing prevents us from imagining them in detail' (ibid.). According to Klastrup, MMORPGs 'logically' belong to Juul's category of coherent world games (2009). I prefer to disagree with Klastrup on this point. On many occasions discussed throughout this section, *World of Warcraft*'s Azeroth *does* contain instances of incoherency and contradiction, the reason being that there is a big difference between the fictional world of Azeroth and the fictional world of Azeroth as depicted in *World of Warcraft*. To explain this difference, it is useful to first discuss Azeroth in detail.

Since its conception in the game *Warcraft: Orcs and Humans* (Blizzard Entertainment 1994), Azeroth has grown into a fictional universe with countless dissimilar races on several planets (and, in some cases, other dimensions) and a history spanning back thousands of years. Azeroth is not limited to the Warcraft computer games and their various expansion packs. It forms the fictional grounding for, among other things, a host of novels, comics, board games, a trading card game, a table-top role-playing game and an upcoming Hollywood motion picture. Spanning so many media, Blizzard keeps tight control over the core narratives, events and characters of this world in order to preserve fictional consistency and logical continuity. Chris Metzen, credited as creative director of *World of Warcraft* and vice president for creative development at Blizzard Entertainment, has been in charge of the Azeroth's overall design since the mid 90s, many years before *World of Warcraft*'s release.[72] He remarks about the creation and maintenance of Azeroth's lore:

> We're taking the process of building a world seriously and it wasn't just churned out. It had a strong sense of continuity. […] We are kind of painstakingly anal, about making sure all the details add up; that continuity is held to be sacred. So that no matter in what medium you

[72] While not the sole creator of Warcraft's fictional universe, Chris Metzen is its official keeper. As a consequence, he attracts most of the blame when players' expectations are not met in newly added Warcraft fiction.

> are experiencing Warcraft it all feels like a contiguous experience (Blizzard Entertainment 2004c).

Suggesting that the medium is not an essential element for a contiguous experience, Metzen glosses over an important difference between Azeroth as the fictional world existing on a meta-level, and Azeroth the fictional world as presented within individual media like *World of Warcraft*. In his work on table-top role-playing games, Fine explains that a game has the same relationship to the fictional world it presents 'than a game based upon 'reality' has to do with that reality' (1983 134). *World of Warcraft* does not present the "real" Azeroth. Instead it offers a 'magnification or model of life' on Azeroth (ibid.). The fact that there is no "real" Azeroth in the first place, provides Blizzard's writing staff ample opportunity to control both versions of Azeroth, changing the fiction when they feel it suits the game, or the other way around.

In the form of a model of the "real" Azeroth, *World of Warcraft*'s fictional world is designed with play in mind: it is simplified in order to focus on those elements important to becoming a game. As such, one could replace the term model with simulation. A MMORPG like *World of Warcraft* is what Juul calls a stylized simulation, 'developed not just for fidelity to their source domain, but for aesthetic purposes' (2005 172).

The process of simplification and stylization is already visible in the setup phase, discussed in the first section of this chapter, and shows the large degree of agency Blizzard has over your role within the fictional world. Here, players were able to choose between several classes, each presenting a potential career a person within the "real" Azeroth might have. What players do not get to choose are careers deemed too boring or not heroic enough to play. While one could play one through representational role-playing, in terms of dedicated ludic role-playing you simply cannot choose to be a city guard, a nurse, a salesman or a lumberjack. Similarly, players can only choose fit, strong, young bodies for their characters during setup, not ugly, fat, old, crippled or in any other way less than "perfect" physiques. Players are to be heroic, with all other less heroic characters being computer-controlled.

Within this simplified version of Azeroth, Blizzard has chosen the quest system as the main driver of the player's character story. In the previous section, I introduced the very first quest that a Horde troll encounters upon entering the world. Then, I only discussed this quest as a pointer to the next quest, in order to explain how the quest system works in terms of instrumental progress. Quests, however, also function to give a player's character purpose on a fictional level, providing the freshly created character with a personal story. What follows is the quest text from the first quest, called 'Your place in the world':

Finally, you are of age, <name>... of age to battle in the name of the Horde. To conquer for the glory of the Warchief.

Yes...

<Kaltunk looks you over.>

You will do nicely.

No doubt you wish to find a great dragon or demon and strangle it with your bare hands, but perhaps it would be wise to start on something less... dangerous.

<Kaltunk laughs.>

Report to Gornek, he should be able to assign a task better suited to a young <class>. You will find Gornek in the Den, to the west (Blizzard Entertainment 2004a).

Obviously, the parts <name> and <class> are replaced in-game with the name chosen for one's character, as well as his chosen class. Throughout the game, quests are individualized for each player's character engaging with them, ensuring that players undergo a personalized experience. Even though all players do the same quests, this system ensures that the quests represent *their* character's story. This suggests that quests present a immersive, narrative experience, not just a system of instrumental progress. In terms of narrative progress, quests nevertheless adhere to roughly the same principles. In the same way that quests force players to follow a fixed objective, quests also do not allow players to change their stories. As Aarseth argues, the story as told through quests is only 'uncovered and observed' by players, essentially arriving at a situation where we do not have a 'gamer-as-author, but (at best) gamer-as-archaeologist' (2005 9). In the case of *World of Warcraft*, quests almost always have only one story outcome and reaching this outcome is a straightforward affair of searching, killing and collecting.[73] By carrying out quests, players piece a series of pre-written texts together into something resembling a personal story for one's character.

[73] Rare examples of choice within quests do actually exist. In the case of The Burning Crusade's Aldor and Scryer factions, players must choose between quest-routes. Following quests from one of these factions, blocks access to the other, and the other way around.

Players may not have much agency over the outcome of the stories within quests, however they are allowed to choose which quests to do, and in what order. Due to the way the quest system is set up, quests can be done serially, in parallel, mixed together or skipped. Players can also decide how (choosing an instrumental strategy), when (postponing a quests to return to it after a character has grown stronger) and if to finish a quest (sometimes, quests turn out to be not worth the effort halfway through). Furthermore, many quests require groups, creating shared and overlapping storylines between different players. This means we should not think of gamers-as-archeologist but of *gamers-as-bricoleurs*; players are in a constant process of cobbling together story elements through deliberate, spontaneous and/or random engagements with quests. Rigid as individual quests' stories may be, players can thus still create personalized stories for their characters.

The way the Horde and Alliance factions are designed to be eternally at war leaves players with less options for manipulation. On an instrumental level, the strict faction division provides players with an enemy to defeat through PvP combat. On a fictional level, the faction division makes one of the most impactful simplifications of the "real" Azeroth possible. To understand why, it is best to explain how both factions have been represented over the years in various games and other media.

The war between the Alliance and Horde has been a key element in the fictional world of Azeroth since the release of *Warcraft: Orcs and Humans*. The following text comes from the introduction of this game and presents the first introduction to the Warcraft-series' fictional world:

> In the Age of Chaos, two factions battled for dominance. The Kingdom of Azeroth was a prosperous one. The humans who dwelled there turned the land into a paradise. The Knights of Stormwind, and the Clerics of Northshire Abbey roamed far and wide, serving the king's people with honour and justice. The well-trained armies of the King maintained a lasting peace for many generations. Then came the Orcish Hordes.
>
> No-one knew where these creatures came from, and none were prepared for the terror that they spawned. Their warriors wielded axe and spear with deadly proficiency, while others rode Darkwolves as black as the moonless night. Unimagined were the destructive powers of their evil magicks, derived from the fires of the underworld. With an ingenious arsenal of weaponry and powerful magick, these two forces collide in a contest of cunning, intellect, and brute strength, with the

> victor claiming dominance over the whole of Azeroth. Welcome to the *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 1994).

The sharp opposition between the Alliance (described in terms of 'honour' and 'justice'), and the Horde (spreading 'terror' and wielding 'destructive powers') is closely linked to the conceptualisation of fictional worlds Fine identifies in fantasy culture in general. Fantasy worlds form a 'battleground between good and evil with no middle ground' and even if neutral characters and settings would exist, they 'are to be used by the forces of good or evil to achieve their ends' (1983 76-77). Over the years, the sharp bifurcation between good and evil began to disappear in the Warcraft games and other media. Both factions received histories filled with both heroism and villainy, making none of the two more "good" or "evil" than the other. As game scholar Esther MacCallum-Stewart, who analyzed the notions of war in *World of Warcraft*, points out, the Alliance is rather portrayed as a warmongering colonizer, while the Horde can be seen as living in harmony with the lands around them (43). In many of the games and books, the Horde and Alliance are given shared foes like the undead Scourge or the demonic Burning Legion, leading to temporally, uneasy truces and to characters of both factions fighting shoulder to shoulder. According to MacCallum-Stewart, *World of Warcraft* even 'questions the discrepancy between good and evil', and by doing so ties 'directly into the modern unease with warfare and the question of who, if anyone, is on the right side' (58-59).

While the lack of truly "good" and "bad" sides might sound like a far less rigid approach to the sharply defined classical oppositions in fantasy culture, suggesting far more cooperation and other faction-bridging activities, in the reality of *World of Warcraft*'s simulation of Azeroth the opposite is true. As explained earlier, Blizzard Entertainment has implemented the player factions in such a way that strife between them is unavoidable, especially in PvP realms.[74] The way the factions are played out against each other through design, however, extends to communication between players within the different factions. While characters in other Warcraft media forms (like the books or, weirdly enough, *World of Warcraft*'s own promotional videos) do not have many problems understanding each other. While for some races sharing a common language across the faction-divide makes sense historically (like the Alliance's Night Elf and the Horde's Blood Elf races), within *World of Warcraft*'s version of Azeroth communication between factions is limited to gestures only. Even though it makes no sense on a fictional level, Blizzard simplified the

[74] According to the official *World of Warcraft* web site, the Horde and Alliance are actually in a state of "truce" on Normal realms, explaining on a fictional level why players from different factions cannot simply attack each other. On PvP Realms, where both factions are allowed to attack each other without warning, the website notes that the factions are "at war".

faction divide into a very strict "us" and "them" scenario, making cooperation nearly impossible. In the "real" Azeroth, the factions have grown to become increasingly equal – though 'equal in being wrong' in terms of militarism and warmongering (MacCallum-Stewart 58-59). In *World of Warcraft*'s simulation of Azeroth, players are forced to position members of the opposing factions as different, dangerous and hostile. This situation does not mean players do not have ways to interact peacefully with members of the opposing factions (through representational role-playing, or on forums outside of the fictional world). It does emphasize that the game is designed for inter-faction struggle, not friendship. As I will show next, the same can be said about the spatial experience of *World of Warcraft*'s Azeroth.

3.4.2 The space of play

In a discussion on *World of Warcraft* as a spatial practice, Aarseth argues that 'compared to a fictional world, the ultimate example of which is Tolkien's Middle-earth in *The Lord of the Rings* (1954), Azeroth is small and compartmental' (2008 118). He goes on to literally compare the two in terms of geographical size. According to the map Tolkien included in his work, he explains, there are hundreds of miles traversed by the main characters to get from one city to another, while the calculated length of an entire continent in *World of Warcraft*'s Azeroth is less than ten miles (2008 116-18). He however misses the point that, when comparing Tolkien's Middle-earth with the game's version of Azeroth instead of the "real" Azeroth as it exists on a meta-level across a wide variety of media, he is comparing apples with pears. In the "real" Azeroth, cities are also hundreds of miles apart.[75] His argument is, however, that *World of Warcraft*'s Azeroth is small and compartmental making it functional as a gameworld, which shows that simplification as a result of transfering a fictional world into a game has an impact on a spatial level (2008 118-19).

I am not as much interested in the differences in size between different versions of various fictional worlds; instead, I aim to show how the simplification of space to create a functional game influences the way the fictional space is traversed. According to Aarseth, *World of Warcraft*'s Azeroth is more akin to a theme park than to a fictional world, a 'conglomerate or parkland quilt of connected playgrounds built around a common theme' (2008 121). It is a somewhat exaggerated way to say that spatially, *World of Warcraft*'s Azeroth in many ways is designed for play only, not to live a virtual life in.

[75] Similarly, the Middle-earth as presented in the MMORPG *The Lord of the Rings Online: Shadows of Angmar* (Turbine Entertainment. 2007-) is, when measured, likely as small and compartmental as *World of Warcraft*'s version of Azeroth.

In contrast to most other digital games, movement through the fictional world is continuous, suggesting that it is a whole rather than a series of dislocated levels. *World of Warcraft*'s Azeroth is nevertheless sectioned into zones, each with its own name, theme and difficulty level. These zones, roughly based on the different fictional lands in the "real" Azeroth, are designed to guide players through the game. The Valley of Trials-example, the first area encountered when creating a troll, is part of a dusty, mountainous zone called Durotar on the continent Kalimdor. There is nothing preventing a character from walking through the gates which forms the exit from the valley, but, by design, your character cannot climb the mountainous hills which enclose the rest of the valley. They are "natural" barriers limiting spatial movement. Many zones in Azeroth are surrounded with such barriers with only a few mountain passes, tunnels or gates allowing egress and exit. These barriers keep players within and in some cases keep players outside a zone as desired by the design team, allowing the game to unfold as intended.[76] Additionally, the level system ensures that you are where you are supposed to be according to the game's design. Each zone's hostile mobs (wildlife, monsters, NPCs of the opposing factions, etc.) have specific level ranges; walking a low level character into higher level zones is dangerous: mobs are programmed to attack weaker player characters, usually resulting in a quick death. This means that when you begin playing *World of Warcraft*, only a few zones are accessible to your character: you need to level up to visit the other zones.

Unscalable barriers and level differences result in the distribution of players over the game's world into zones where the relation between effort and reward is optimal for their character's level.[77] Following the quest system guides players through the different zones, for instance by directing them to NPCs in other zones who offer new quests, which slowly expands the players' spatial experience of the game. This process of "unlocking" Azeroth zone-by-zone is visualized within the map system in the UI. Zones and areas within zones which your character has not visited yet, remain unrendered on maps. Whether these limitations make sense or not on a fictional level is arguable, in

[76] In the zones which were added through the expansion pack The Burning Crusade, the players on the highest level and with enough money could buy a mount which enables flight. Suddenly it was possible to fly over all barriers and see what lies behind or on top. Flight was nevertheless restricted to the new zones; "old" Azeroth was never designed as a fly-over zone. Hidden behind the barriers are temporary, test and/or abandoned geographical content and other environmental design work never meant to be seen by the players, proof of which came out after dedicated explorers/exploiters found ways to reach it anyway. Movies showing the hidden content are still around, some of them banned by Blizzard like the infamous *Exploration: The Movie* (Dopefish 2005), showing early designs from the expansion pack years before it came out. Exploits enabling "wallwalking" or other ways to get over, though or past the barriers are constantly being fixed by Blizzard. More about wallwalking as design exploitation will follow in chapter five.

[77] Slaying mobs of a lower level will not provide much experience points or worthwhile items, while attacking mobs of a higher level might get you killed.

terms of game design they control player movement and discovery in such a way that if you want to visit all of *World of Warcraft*, prolonged play (and thus subscription fees) is required.

Even after reaching the highest level for your character, the fictional world is not freely traversable. As a result of the faction division, you can only use the transportation system and visit the cities which belong to your character's faction.[78] In real life, cities are interconnected through a distributed network of roads between settlements: you can travel everywhere using this network, via the route you desire. Imagine now that two such networks exist within a country, each connecting different cities with hardly any overlap (only a handful of highways and cities connect with both networks). Travelling through this country would result into a fundamentally different experience of the country's spatial configuration. This is the situation in *World of Warcraft*; while there are some faction neutral towns and transportation means, the Horde and Alliance have their own strict network of cities and transportation routes. Navigation and thus the experience of space by both factions is strongly disconnected. If you want to see how members of the other faction experience the game spatially, the only option is to initiate a character on the other side of the faction divide. Taking into account the amount of time needed to create a new character, and keeping in mind that most players like to keep playing with the friends they have made within the game, this results in a fictional world which, for most players, is only experienced from the viewpoint of one faction and seldomly both.[79]

While the shape of the "real" Azeroth can be as large as the players' imagination allows it to be, the shrunken, simplified and sectioned nature of *World of Warcraft*'s version of Azeroth is very much limited and controlled by design. As I will show next when discussing time and persistency in *World of Warcraft*, the players' imagination is kept at bay when it comes to manipulating the fictional world by adding new content. Players are not granted many measures which have a lasting effect on the fictional world, creating situations which seriously affect fictional coherency.

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[78] Azeroth's transportation system is for a large part dependent on inter-city flights (with characters sitting on the backs of flying fantasy creatures like wyvern or giant eagles). Other means of transportation also exist. Between continents and other particularly large distances there are boats and zeppelins, some classes and professions enable characters to instantly zap themselves elsewhere and characters are always able to use their own mount (if they have bought one) to speed up travel.

[79] As my main character, a troll hunter, was on the Horde side and, subsequently, most other characters wound up there too, my experience of Azeroth and thus *World of Warcraft* as a whole is also slanted to one side. Aiming for any holistic description of the virtual is problematic from the start (see Chapter two), but the balance Blizzard has struck (or aims for) between factions leads me to believe that my experience can easily be mirrored by a typical Alliance experience in a general sense.

3.4.3 Stuck in time

According to the fictional timeline of the Warcraft universe, the events of *World of Warcraft* are situated twenty-five years after the Horde's invasion of Azeroth as understood in the first *Warcraft* game, a moment deemed so important that it has become the year zero of Azerothian time.[80] As such, *World of Warcraft* does not present all of the Warcraft fictional world, but presents a particular moment within it. While playing *World of Warcraft*, players are constantly reminded of the diachronic, of playing in a constantly changing world with a tangible past. Azeroth's history is not just told by NPCs through quests. Blizzard also engages in environmental storytelling by embedding narrative elements in geographical landmarks and other objects scattered throughout the gameworld.[81] For instance, the partly destroyed capital city of the blood elves, Silvermoon City, fell victim to a large-scale Scourge attack during the Third War, an event depicted in *Warcraft III: Reign of Chaos* (Blizzard Entertainment 2002). Even to those players who have not played this earlier game, read the novels or are simply not interested in the how and why of Azeroth's past, the fact that this war took place has been made obvious in *World of Warcraft*. While the war has been long over, the city ruins are still existant in *World of Warcraft*, as well as the gigantic "scar" through the countryside surrounding the city caused by a marching army of demons. Many of the quest givers in this area refer to past events and ask the player to help remove of the remaining demonic presence.

Even though the richness of Azeroth's past is told, felt and seen throughout *World of Warcraft*, I argue that playing the game is a wholly synchronous experience, with hardly any influence on the past or future of the fictional world. You are very much playing in the 'here and now' of the fictional world as Klastrup puts it, but, at the same time, you are stuck there (2009). The issue I want to address in the section however is not how the diachronic is represented in the fictional world, but how the synchronic experience of play influences, or rather does not influence *World of Warcraft*'s fictional evolution.

Before adressing the design choices which impact the diachronic and/or synchronic experience of time, I will introduce some general

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[80] A full timeline including the location of all the games and related reading matter (novels, manga comics) can be found on the official site at:
http://www.wow-europe.com/en/info/story/timeline.html (accessed June 2009).

[81] The term "environmental storytelling" was coined by amusement park show designer Don Carson. He argues that, 'by manipulating an audience's expectations, which they have based on their own experiences of the physical world', storytellers can infuse a physical space with story elements in such a way that it 'does much of the work of conveying the story the designers are trying to tell' (1). As Jenkins notes, this form of spatial storytelling, present in many digital games, suggests that we should think of game designers 'less as storytellers than as narrative architects' (2004 129).

observations on the experience of time when engaging with fictional worlds in games. When talking about time in a game's fictional world, there is a difference between the time played by the player and the time his or her characters spend inside the fictional world. Film theorist Seymour Chatman's commonly used terms discourse time ('the time it takes to peruse the discourse') and story time ('the duration of the purported events in the narrative') could be used to describe this difference (62). Juul, however, points out that not all games have a narrative, and some games' fictional worlds are so incoherent that they defy an understandable story time. To address the often non-narrative nature of games, he therefore suggests the alternative terms 'play time' and 'fictional time' (2004, 2005). Another issue worth addressing is that, in games, the player is not an observer but he is more often than not in control of the protagonist. As Juul argues, 'the player's time and actions are projected onto the game world where they take on a fictional meaning' (2005 143). The idea of projection onto a game world fits well with the being in the here and now of a game's fictional world. The amount of fictional meaning a player's time and actions are allowed to make is controlled through design.

There are two main design choices I link to the experience of time, and which play key roles in the level of influence players have over Azeroth. First, there is the amount of impact players are allowed to have on their fictional surroundings: are they allowed to build objects, extend the geography, or implement their own stories into formal quests? Secondly, there is the amount of persistency the game world has: do players' actions have a lasting impact, do the changes they bring about become part of the game world? As game designers Raph Koster and Rich Vogel point out, all online virtual worlds and communities can be ranked along the two axes of impact and persistency (2001). When a player/user is allowed full access to change their surroundings in a fully persistent environment, we arrive at free-building MOOs like *Second Life* (which is entirety user-constructed).[82] Online chat systems however do not create or change a fictional world, and do not include many persistent elements. Between these extremes we find MMORPGs, where, depending on the amount of freedom the design allows, players have some influence on the fictional world, which persists to some degree (ibid.).

As I mentioned earlier, the level of impact and persistency influence the experience of time when engaging with the fictional world of *World of Warcraft*. At first glance, time in Azeroth conforms to our own experience of time; an

[82] In a discussion on the size of *Second Life*, a virtual world growing continuously by virtue of the fact that users have no restraints in terms of their impact on the virtual environment, game designer Mike Sellers argues that unbridled spatial growth can lead to very barren landscapes. Due to its enormous size, Sellers points out, 'the average population density in [*Second Life*] is like playing in a world the size of WoW's Azeroth – but containing only nine other people' (2007).

Azeroth day has twenty-four hours and it becomes dark in the virtual world when it becomes dark in the real world. Here, fictional time and play time resemble each other. The difference becomes apparent when you start interacting with the environment. Every time you kill a mob within Azeroth, from the smallest nondescript farm animal to the monstrous bosses in instances with a well-known legacy from Azeroth's history, they simply reappear (or "respawn") some time later. It is simply not possible to eradicate a mob permanently – the game is set up in such a way that every player should have a chance to kill a particular target as well as everyone should be able to become *the* hero. The actual impact on the fictional world by killing a mob is thus nihil, as the game is not designed for death to persist. Like the players' characters, *World of Warcraft* computer-controlled characters are immortal; only Blizzard can kill them eternally when they think the time is right for a fictional character to die. The world's fictional time is caught in a loop: whatever players are allowed to do within it, it will reset again to allow other players to do the same thing.

While leading to a rather incoherent fictional world full of immortal beings, the repetitive killing of mobs is rewarded by the game on an instrumental level. As explained earlier, mobs "drop" loot. The more famous or important a mob is in *World of Warcraft*'s fiction, the higher the chance their loot includes rare and thus highly sought after items. These mobs, including the bosses in dungeons, are "farmed" – killed repeatedly – for their loot. This results in what Juul calls 'dead time'; unchallenging, mundane activities for the sake of a higher goal (2004 138). Players are furthermore not able to build objects which add to the game world, like houses or geographical features. From the perspective of Game Design, players are allowed to play within *World of Warcraft*'s fictional world, but not with it.

While players are not permitted to have a lasting impact on the their characters' surroundings, they are however able to manipulate the characters themselves. The many thousands of different items like clothing and weaponry players can earn, buy or make (by taking up a profession like leatherworking or blacksmithing) can be worn visibly by characters. This enables players to, for instance, create a unique look for their character for (representational) role-playing purposes, or, when wearing rare items, to showcase their past victories in difficult dungeons. This way, a character's look tells the story of where a character has been, or what he or she has done to obtain the items they wear. The persistency of a character is furthermore tracked and represented by their level and stats: the higher they are, the longer the character has been part of the fictional world. Quests too attribute to the feeling of persistency and making an impact on the fictional world. Exceptions aside, usually, as soon as a quest is finished, a character may not do the quest again. This suggests progress both

instrumentally and temporally, providing a player with the feeling of having "been there, done that". Obtaining and wearing items, leveling up and finishing quests allows players to infuse their play with fictional meaning, but these actions do not have a lasting influence on the fictional world itself, only on the players' characters.

Returning to the notion of play time and fictional time, we can observe that in *World of Warcraft*, play time is continuous and chronological while fictional time is forced into a divide between the fictional time of the players' individual characters and the fictional time of the world surrounding these characters. This results in having a persistent character which players develop over time (within the boundaries of the design) that exists in a fictional world stuck in time – a world which only moves on when Blizzard decides it is time to move on. Blizzard does so regularly through patches, creating world events like a war against an insect empire (patch 1.9, called 'The Gates of Ahn'Qiraj', January 2006), or the mysterious appearance of floating necropolises throughout Azeroth (Patch 1.11, called 'Shadow of the Necropolis', June 2006). Through these moments, Blizzard adds to the diachronic story, developing and implementing additional back story with which the players can interact. On a synchronic level, the players did not cause the events to happen, nor will they truly influence their resolution.

Game critic Steven Poole once suggested that in games, 'the drama is provided by the pre-scripted story, the virtual exploration is interactive, and never the twain shall meet' (114). Whether or not this observation is valid for all games is arguable, for *World of Warcraft* it is rather fitting. Players do get to interact with Azeroth's fiction to the degree that they can give their personal actions fictional meaning but, in terms of having a persistent impact, *World of Warcraft*'s Azeroth remains out of the players' reach, independent of the amount of play time they put into it.

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter has dealt with *World of Warcraft* as a network and computer technology, as a series of rules and structures in the form of a game, and as a fictional world. I have discussed *World of Warcraft* not just in terms of *how* it has been designed and presented to the players, but also *why* and *by whom*. I have done so by looking at three separate control spheres: the technological and configurational aspects preceding and underlying play; the rules that govern instrumental progress; and the fiction in which all play is embedded. From the perspectives of Game Design and Game Contract I have tried to show how Blizzard functions as a force disciplining play into dominant strategies through a series of affordances and limitations, both in terms of individual, individualized group and group play situations. Additionally, I have shown how

Blizzard, through Game Design and Game Contract decisions, have put forward their stakes in the game by defining the boundaries of play.

With this chapter, I hope to have created a thorough introduction to *World of Warcraft* from the viewpoint of its most powerful stakeholder, Blizzard Entertainment. I have not only shown how the game works but why it works as it does in terms of Game Design and, to some degree, in terms of Game Contract. Without having had direct access to Blizzard itself, it remains challenging to make hard claims about its corporate, ideological and/or aesthetic design philosophies. Additionally, we must be cautious to think about game companies as one entity. Instead, notes Taylor, we should regard games as 'emerging from a tangled mix of individual personalities, organizational structures, design imperatives, and economic considerations' (2003 26). I attempted to try to lay bare dominant design structures, imperatives and considerations as thoroughly as possible, not by interviewing different Blizzard employees, but through a close analysis of the game's technology, rules and fiction as it is presented to the players.

World of Warcraft features elaborate mechanisms of control and guidance; disciplining and propelling the player through the game. These mechanisms present themselves both in limitations as well as in affordances, which means we should not immediately reject them as being oppressive. One can easily argue that *World of Warcraft* is a multiplayer game in which people invest a considerable amount of their (leisure) time, and as such needs to be protected from devious misuse by some in order to keep it fun for others. The tight control Blizzard has over the game in terms of Game Design and Game Contract is appreciated by most players for this very reason. On the other hand, the affordances and limitations are not negotiated between all stakeholders but forced on players by Blizzard. What is considered constructive or destructive manipulation of the technology, rules or fiction is not open for debate, but a coded and/or contractually binding given. In a way, *World of Warcraft* does not ask the player what they would like it to be, but tries to define it for them. Again, for most players this is not an issue, at least not one needing constant attention. Play, however, does not always abide by set rules, and sometimes players knowingly or unknowingly deviate from them.

As I will show in the following chapters, players play the games on their own terms as much as they follow those set by Blizzard. As Taylor has shown in her work on the MMORPG *Everquest*, 'play is situational and reliant not simply on abstract rules but also on social networks, attitudes, or events in one's non/game life, technological abilities or limits, structural affordances or limits, local cultures, and personal understanding of leisure' (2006c 156). That such a diversity of play forms and preferences exist within the tightly designed structure set by Blizzard, leading to potentially endless numbers of games of

stake on technological, rule-based and fictional levels, is what forms the focus of the following chapters, and this dissertation in general.

CHAPTER 4 – GAMING THE GAME

4.1 Introduction

Whereas the previous chapter focused primarily on the Game Design and, to a lesser extent, Game Contract perspectives, showing how Blizzard has infused *World of Warcraft* with a range of control and guidance mechanisms creating dominant play strategies, this chapter will view the game from the Game Play and Game Culture perspectives, showing how players address strategies and limitations imposed on them as well as the fact that they share the game with others. Players do not always agree with the ways *World of Warcraft* asks them to play according to certain patterns, nor do they always agree with the ways other players engage with "their" game. These moments of tension can turn into games of stake; negotiations between different stakeholders about the rules of play. The main questions of this chapter are: which tactics do players use to gain agency over the game's design through these games of stake; how are these tactics supported, reinforced and sometimes contested on the level of Game Culture; and in which ways do their play practices inform the experience of the game in terms of its rules and fiction, both for themselves and other stakeholders?

This chapter introduces three case studies in which *World of Warcraft*'s intended use as analyzed in the previous chapter will be challenged through player practices. With these case studies, I do not claim to provide a full overview of all forms of play which deviate from the intended path set out by Blizzard. While dominant play strategies can be studied through an analysis of the game's design; play practices diverging, countering or foregoing these strategies can only be studied through participant observation. The case studies in this chapter then describe *examples* of transformative and transgressive play, stemming from my own experiences and encounters as a player/researcher. They nevertheless describe widespread and often very popular play practices, which allowed me to tap into and use an extensive body of websites, strategy guides, modifications, and other participatory cultural productions dedicated to them.

Each study in this chapter is dedicated to one of the three forms of social play introduced in chapter one – individual play, individualized group play and group play – each of them showcasing a different game of stake concerning player agency. First, I focus on the use of walkthroughs and strategy guides as tools to transform the individual play experience. For this case study, I ventured into play practices some players would consider cheating. The second case study also involves controversial play: the practice of boosting a character through the game by giving it an "unfair" advantage over other players' characters. The third and final case study offers a discussion on the

group play form of raiding, and tackles social surveillance through player-created UI modifications.

Through these three case studies, I show that players, as stakeholders with their own particular view on the rules of play, are exceedingly creative in their ways to avoid, transform or surpass the intended use of *World of Warcraft* as designed by Blizzard.

4.2 It's about time

In the first case study of this chapter, my aim is to show how players contend with the enormous amount of time and effort needed to play *World of Warcraft*. This game asks for a serious time investment from players; just getting to the higher levels, where most of the social activities take place, requires hundreds of hours of play. A 2006 data-mining project by game researchers Nicholas Ducheneaut, Nick Yee, Eric Nickell and Robert Moore showed that the average player had accumulated fifteen-and-a-half days, or forty-seven full eight-hour work days, to reach level sixty, excluding all the time played after reaching this level (2006 409).[83] Most time in *World of Warcraft* is spent beyond the moment of reaching the highest level. My main character became level sixty during Christmas 2005, but when I last logged out three years later, I had accumulated a total of 1483 hours playing with him. For most players, the fun starts when reaching the highest level, as at this point social play – or at least group play – is most enjoyable and/or challenging. Some even feel leveling up is just a means to an end, an obstacle preceding the real fun. The question this case study asks is how players who cannot or do not want to invest so much time, negotiate the time-consuming leveling process. In the game of stake investigated here, players are facing Blizzard's leveling design, with their leisure time at stake.

With leveling being an obstacle that can take months to overcome without unlimited free play time, some players look for external means to limit the demands of leveling with the use of strategy guides available online.[84] Using strategy guides for assistance in getting through the game as efficiently as possible has become an important part of the culture of digital games, and *World of Warcraft*'s subculture forms no exception. Strategy guides offer a wide range of different help topics for every imaginable play situation, and are

[83] The average amount of time it takes to get to the highest level has decreased over time due to official patches which increased the amount of experience points earned during quests, as well as the increased knowledge about the leveling process among the player base, both of which make leveling easier and thus less time consuming. The "level cap" (the highest reachable level) has however increased with each expansion pack, keeping the time investment to get to the highest level nevertheless quite high.

[84] Guides are not the only alternative in this case, the other being much more controversial. Commercial parties can be "hired" to power-level your character to the highest level, often using people in low wage countries to actually do the playing. More on these practices can be found in chapter four.

created both by professionals (like commercial strategy guide publishers) and amateurs (players writing their own strategy guides and posting them online), the latter of which bring strategy guides into the realm of participatory culture. Using strategy guides therefore does not just bring external help to play; it also presents a very direct overlap between Game Culture, Game Play and Game Design. Games of stake about strategy guides which result from this overlap concern both its actual use (using an element of Game Culture to overcome challenges within Game Design) and the perception of this use (using external means from Game Culture can be considered cheating in terms of Game Play). Throughout this case study, I will deal with both forms.

One particular type of strategy guide will feature here: the walkthrough. Where strategy guides offer a general approach to problems, walkthroughs take a player by the hand in a step-by-step fashion, showing them the quickest and/or most efficient way to get through a game.[85] I will investigate how the use of walkthroughs in combination with *World of Warcraft* affect the ways the game and its fictional world are played and experienced. I examine a play practice called powerleveling, which makes extensive use of walkthroughs, from the viewpoint of the individual play experience which, in this case, is my own.

First, I introduce the notion of walkthroughs and strategy guides as paratexts and consider the implications of such paratexts in terms of cheating. In the next part, I will compare two very different kinds of walkthroughs that I used, and the way these walkthroughs handle the same game content. Lastly, I show how using one of these two walkthroughs, a dedicated powerleveling guide, transforms the gameplaying experience into a game of stake which aims to ignore the game's intended design as much as possible in order to increase the speed of play.

4.2.1 Paratexts as cheating tools

As game researcher Mia Consalvo argues, strategy guides can be seen as part of a game's paratext, a term coined by literary theorist Gérard Genette to give meaning to all the information accompanying the main text of a book, like the preface, table of contents and index. Paratexts form 'thresholds of interpretation', pieces of information standing in between text, the inside, and off-text, the outside (Genette 1-2). Paratexts do more than just provide additional information for the main text, they control one's reading of it (2). Including the paratexts in one's reading therefore has the ability to change how the original, main text is perceived. Consalvo takes the concept of paratext into

[85] One could argue that walkthroughs and strategy guides are separate types of guides, as they both aim to provide different approaches to a game. Walkthroughs are often found as parts of strategy guides, I however see walkthroughs as a form of strategy guide.

the realm of digital games by situating strategy guides as paratextual to the games they describe (2007 21). As paratexts, strategy guides do not just control one's reading but potentially one's playing too. In her work, Consalvo points out that paratexts are 'anything but peripheral, and they grow more integral to the digital game industry and player community with every year' (2007 182). Consalvo's focus is on the rise and subsequent influence of the 'paratextual industries' as developed by the game industry (2007 9). I pursue the question about how paratexts created by players themselves function as mechanisms of control, and therefore change the reading and playing of the game.

While nobody will object to a reader referring to a book's index, there is no consensus among players about the ethicality of using walkthroughs and strategy guides for playing a game. While for some, using these paratexts are a perfectly acceptable practice, for others it is a form of cheating. The lack of consensus results from the lack of a generally accepted definition of cheating among players. According to game designers Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, there is a hypothetical "standard player" who only plays the game as intended by the designers, forming a 'test case against which all other types of players are contrasted' (269). Such players would be "cheat-free": employing no external help in order to play a game. Whether such a player exists or not, for purists the idea of being cheat-free is something to aspire. According to Consalvo, who investigated the social practices of cheating, this purist group believes that 'anything other than a solo effort in completing a game is cheating' (2007 88). This means that all external information, including asking friends for tips or advice, or going online to look up some information about a quest or an item, is considered to be breaking the magic circle of play and is hence labeled cheating. A purist player in *World of Warcraft* would never allow himself or herself to use web forums or information databases, only using what the game's design offers as guidance. In terms of games of stake, such a player positions him or herself close to Blizzard, as they conform almost religiously to the game's core design.

As the purist definition shows, cheating is not simply breaking the rules of a game, it is a term used to define what purists believe create unfair advantages over other players by using external help. Simply bending or reinterpreting the rules can be enough to be labeled a cheater (Consalvo 2007 87). In multiplayer games, conflicts about definitions of cheating are what media scholar Jonas Heide Smith calls extra-mechanic, as it is not the game rules per se which are the cause of the conflict (intra-mechanic conflict) but the fact that multiplayer games are social spaces (Smith 2004 ; Nielsen, Smith and Tosca 155). The activities of players Salen and Zimmerman define as being cheats – violating the formal rules of the game in order to win – can be deemed completely acceptable by players who see cheating as something only existing

in social settings (269). For these players, Consalvo points out, 'the use of items such as walkthroughs or code devices in a single player game is acceptable because, by [their] definition, one cannot cheat a machine or oneself' (2007 92). In a game like *World of Warcraft*, these lenient players coexist with purists and everyone in between, making any socially negotiated fixed definition of cheating nearly impossible.

The term deviance is closely linked to cheating in the sense that it involves defying norms and/or rules, but is arguably less accusatory in nature. Game researcher Torill Mortensen defines deviance as diverging from the plans of the game designers. She posits two types of deviance: 'counterproductive, that which hinders personal progress, and destructive, that which ruins the progress of other players' (2008 208). As *World of Warcraft* is designed as a game of emergence with some elements of progression, turning it into a game of progression through a step-by-step walkthrough certainly constitutes deviance. In terms of progress however, using a walkthrough is all *but* counterproductive. I would argue that Mortensen's distinction between counterproductive and destructive deviance could benefit from the addition of what I would call *hyperproductive* deviance: that which deviates from the game's intended design by looking for ways to excel beyond the core challenges. One of the two walkthroughs under discussion in this case study is dedicated to hyperproductive deviance, whose main aim is to get through the game as quickly as possible by whichever means are necessary. As I show in this case study, hyperproductive deviance can increase a player's sense of agency over a game.

How hyperproductive deviance affects the experience of the game and its fictional world, and which role player agency plays within this process, will form an important part of this case study. Using paratextual assistance like a strategy guide can create situations among players where, as game scholar Julian Kücklich observes, 'one player's increase in agency is another player's loss of immersion' (2004 9). As one would expect, this situation can create tension and thus games of stake between players, and between players and Blizzard (who does not want to see players unhappy due to other player's divergent behavior). The other case studies in this chapter, which address individualized group play and group play practices, involve such games of stake. Here, however, I will primarily focus on the individual play experience, so I will necessarily limit myself to investigating social negotiations surrounding the use of walkthroughs.

Two *World of Warcraft* walkthroughs will be analyzed to show how different translations of *WoW* into a strategy guide format leads not just to different play practices but additionally influences a player's perception of the game as a whole. The first walkthrough is part of the the official strategy guide

published by commercial strategy guide publisher Bradygames (Lummis and Vanderlip), the second is a powerleveling guide created by a player calling himself Joana, who also sells his guide commercially through his own website (Joana 2007).[86] For this case study, I have made use of both guides extensively in my own play.

While *what* is considered to be cheating or deviation is socially negotiated, *why* players cheat or deviate is a more personal affair. After countless interviews with players as well as game designers about why people cheat, Consalvo concludes that 'perhaps the only constant is the lack of a constant factor' (2007 94). People cheat and deviate to win a game, out of boredom, because a game is too difficult, to annoy others, or simply because they are stuck. Or, as in this case study, to lessen the amount of time it takes to go through a game. Instead of trying to provide a top-down overview of the reasons why people turn to walkthroughs and strategy guides like these, I will take a bottom-up approach by describing my own reasons for using them, reasons I have seen reoccur many times with other players throughout my time on web forums and during play.

When you start out playing *World of Warcraft* without prior experience with MMORPGs or RPGs in general, the game is dauntingly complex. As the official strategy guide offers a broad and general introduction to playing *WoW*, its attraction lies mainly with newcomers to the game and/or MMORPG genre.[87] The dedicated powerleveling guide, however, requires players to have solid knowledge of the inner mechanics of the game a priori, and most of its users are therefore experienced players with one or more characters on the highest levels. It is mostly aimed at players who want to level up additional characters as quick as possible. Both guides offer walkthroughs aimed at different types of players and offer a very different take on the walkthrough process. As I will show in the next section, the two guides form paratexts which do not just change the way the game is interpreted, but the way it is played. They both

[86] Joana sells his guide through his website, Joanasworld.com. I bought my copy for thirty-seven dollars in 2007, almost twice the price of *World of Warcraft* itself, showing that not all of the production of participatory culture is distributed through a gift economy, and that players are not always victims of the industry which capitalizes on player-created content (see also Sun, Lin and Ho).

[87] The need for strategy guides like Bradygames' product has diminished over time. Since *World of Warcraft*'s release, an extensive array of information databases and guides has popped up online for free, most of them far more comprehensive and advanced than commercial print guides. I should also add that Blizzard includes a mini strategy guide to the box in which the software is sold. This booklet, thicker than the usual instruction manual included with most videogames, includes some basic information about initial choices (classes, professions, etc.) and gameplay. Additionally, the official web site offers an extensive database of information and is constantly expanded. Naturally, these too form important starting points for many players. As these paratexts do not present themselves as strategy guides or walkthroughs – instead opting for the more neutral "game manual" and "game guide" – I did not include them here.

allow players to gain agency over the game's intended use by actively bending, circumventing or flat-out ignoring it.

4.2.2 From emergence to progression

Strategy guides do not just offer paratextual assistance and guidance, they also convey much about the game itself. Game scholar Jesper Juul offers a simple test to see what the main structure of a game is using only paratextual information:

> Search for a guide to the game on the Internet. If the game guide is a walkthrough (describing step-by-step what to do), it is a game of progression. If the game guide is a strategy guide (describing the rules of thumb for how to play), it is a game of emergence (2005 71).

When reading through Bradygames' official guide for *World of Warcraft* (the first of the two guides I discuss in this section) it is instantly obvious that *World of Warcraft* is primarily a game of emergence. Take for example this excerpt from the guide's introduction:

> This guide explains the terms that appear in the community, the methods of creating and building a character, and how to handle yourself in various situations.
> For those with greater MORG experience, the guide brings you up to speed with class explanations, tactics, long-term strategies for increasing your power and getting the most out of your Talent specializations. Those switching to *World of Warcraft* from other MORG's should find these chapters of tremendous value while looking at long-term options for play and mastery (Lummis and Vanderlip 6).

The guide goes on to offer tips and tricks for a large variety of subjects, like naming your character, death and rebirth ("spawning"), keyboard layouts, general etiquette and, playing ahead, information on party dynamics (the "holy trinity"), talents and professions.

Even though there is a strong emphasis on the emergent aspect of the game, there is however a chapter dedicated to progression in the form of a walkthrough. Under the heading 'Your first day', a step-by-step description of what to do, which quests to take and in what order is provided for each of the six starter zones of the game world, explaining everything a character needs to do to reach level ten. For experienced players, knowing that reaching level ten only takes approximately a few hours to achieve in a game which offers many hundreds of hours of content (which for a large part is also repeatable); such

information looks almost superfluous. The walkthrough sections of the official strategy guide may not then be very useful for the long-term players, for the newcomer they can be a key which unlocks the workings of the game and its fantasy world.

How a walkthrough is presented can dictate how the game should be experienced in play. In the previous chapter I introduced both the instrumental as well as fictional sides of *World of Warcraft* by entering the game as a troll hunter in the Valley of Trials. You might recall the way I described seeing the first NPC with a question mark above its head, while at the same time discovering that executing quests and killing boars led to level increases and more power. Here, I present the way the official strategy guide translates is exact moment into walkthrough form:

> The Valley of Trials is the starting point for all new orcs and trolls. It sits nestled within a valley in the southwestern region of Durotar. The beginning trainers and a small few vendors are located here.
>
> The Valley of Trials is a great starting place for Orcs and Trolls. There are minimal amounts of running involved at this point and the quests all revolve around the same contained area.
>
> When you first come into the world, you'll find yourself face-to-face with Eitrigg. He is your introduction into the *New Horde* and directs you to seek out Gornak to begin your journey. Gornak wants to help you to gain strength, albeit a bit reluctantly. He tasks you with killing 10 Mottled Boars (*Cutting Teeth*).
>
> Galgar is nearby and has another quest for you as well. He want you to collect 10 cactus apples for him so he can make his *Cactus Apple Surprise*. He claims that Cactus Apple Surprise can do wonders and cool you down. Both of these quests are a fairly easy way to start your time as a Orc or Troll.
>
> Right in the beginning part of the Valley of Trials you'll see plenty of Mottled Boars roaming around. They're not aggressive. Also sprinkled around the area are cactus and cactus apples. You'll know them by the rosy blooms on the cacti. Right-click on them to gather the apples; they respawn relatively quickly.
>
> Once you've killed all the boars and gather the apples, return to the Valley of Trials and complete the quest by speaking to the appropriate

> NPC's. Gornak will want you to prove your prowess further by killing Scorpids and collecting 8 of their tails. It seems anti-venom is created from an extraction of venom from their stingers. Fortunately, Scorpids are not aggressive here (Lummis and Vanderlip 65, emphasis in original).

As a walkthrough, this style of translation of gameplay is aimed at a narrative telling of events. While several references are made to the instrumental, highly controlled spine of the fictional world (a 'contained area', NPC's, right-clicking, respawning), pure instrumental matters like experience points, equipment attributes and levels are not mentioned. The quest system is brought forward by the authors as a narrative tool, a system of narrative guidance. Additionally, it might tell you what to do with quest objectives ('right-click on them to gather the apples'), though it does not directly tell you where they are (they are 'sprinkled around the area'). Still, in terms of immersion, this walkthrough addresses you as a character first, and as a player second.

For most new players, unaccustomed to the way *World of Warcraft* works, the narrative of the quest system forms the backbone of the initial play experience. A careful reading of the description which accompanies a quest, written in a style fitting the NPC's race, class or rank, usually offers enough information about how and where to fulfill a task.[88] In these earliest stages of the game, most quest goals are not far away from the quest givers, resulting in a conveniently arranged initial play arena. Playing through these early levels then was never meant to be hard and the walkthrough makes it even easier by guiding players through the first levels with a step-by-step process. Being an official guide, the writer's do not stray far from Blizzard's intended design, making a player's perceived agency over the game through this walkthrough limited.

As a character progresses in level, the simplicity of the early quests is replaced by a multiplicity of quest series to follow in different zones of the world, and a mostly linear narrative experience changes into a forking path structure in which the player must make choices. In *World of Warcraft*, this happens at the moment the players leave their starting zone and after having finished all the quests there. The point at which the fictional world starts to open up to the player with many choices is also the point where narrative-

[88] For example, the description of the quest 'Cutting Teeth' mentioned in the excerpt is as follows: 'The first order of business will be to put a little strength in your backbone. I could send you out to the Barrens to hunt kodo, but well, in all honesty, you're more useful to us alive than dead. I believe you would find a good match with the mottled boars you'll find to the north of here' (Blizzard Entertainment 2004a). The writing style here signals the higher status this NPC has in comparison to your new, low level character and also hints at the larger fictional world which will be explored and your part in it.

driven walkthroughs begin to fall short. While quests, especially those linked to each other as a series of follow-ups, still offer linear progression within the game, the large amounts of parallel quest lines prohibit all-encompassing walkthroughs. It is simply impossible to offer a coherent narrative of progression through a fictional world with many layers and paths without excluding some or most of such paths. This might be the reason why the official *World of Warcraft* strategy guide stops its walkthroughs at the point of leaving the starting zone. From here onwards, players have to follow their own paths, consisting of a mix of quests from various zones not necessarily related to each other, instead of the singular narrative provided by the early quests and the accompanying official walkthrough. It becomes clear that *World of Warcraft* is not a game of linear progression but a game of emergence where a strategy guide, instead of a walkthrough is the paratext of both choice and necessity.

There are, however, ways of bringing back the linear progression of a walkthrough, even when a game's emergent structure defies such an approach. Instead of trying to provide a broad, incoherent narrative recounting all *World of Warcraft*'s quests, another option is to create an in-depth walkthrough which focuses on a specific play form or experience – getting to the highest level as quick as possible for instance. Singling out what is important for speed becomes more important than, say, an interesting quest storyline, or a quest which grants useless rewards. This is what Joana did with his powerleveling walkthrough. As soon as such a specific, dedicated approach is taken, the narrative underpinning the walkthrough provided by the official strategy guide is replaced by instrumental concerns. Not the most narratively pleasing succession of quests is chosen, but the most useful. Following such a walkthrough means players actively circumvent and even ignore *World of Warcraft*'s dominant strategies in terms of fictional and spatial exposition.

A walkthrough aimed at fast leveling is not just organized as a simple collection of tips and tricks for easier progress, but offers an ideal singular path through a game. Joana's guide for instance is based on the author's claims to be the fastest player ever to reach level sixty (he did it in four days and twenty hours, which, at the time of the record, was less than a quarter of the average leveling time). His powerleveling guide functions both as proof that he did so – buyers get access to a video recording of Joana's record-breaking run through the game – and as a step-by-step manual allowing other players to do the same.

The process of advancing through a game as fast as possible and recording it as proof, is part of the gaming subculture of "speedrunning". The practice of speedrunning has been around since the early days of online gaming and has evolved. Through experiment with recording gameplay and editing the material into video's, the speedrunning community also spawned machinima filmmaking – making films using game engines as cinematic tools (see also

Salen 2002 ; Lowood 2006, 2007). The practices around machinima filmmaking will be investigated in the next chapter – here I want to keep the focus on speedrunning and the way it affects the experience of the game for those who follow speedrunners' leads.

While speedrunning traditionally involves single player games, players like Joana have extended the practice to MMORPGs.[89] Speedrunning through a MMORPG looks different from "regular" speedrunning. In terms of sheer time investment, Joana's nearly five day record is far removed from beating *Quake* in twelve and a half minutes, or *Zelda: Ocarina of Time* in two hours and thirty-three minutes.[90] The way *World of Warcraft* is designed – a game of emergence with a quest system offering elements of progression – also differs from the linear games of progression on which speedrunners usually focus. Nevertheless, Joana's guide shows that tactics similar to regular speedrunning were used to achieve his record run. As game designer and writer Simon Carless explains, route planning, sequence breaking and tricks form the core tactics of any speedrunner (258). Route planning forms the basis; advancing through a game as fast as possible means planning ahead. The only way to do so is to know the game extensively – study its spatial design, solve all its puzzles or other challenges, achieve a high level of skill in moving around, shooting, and so forth. Sequence breaking, or 'tackling the levels of a game in an unintended order or skipping entire sections the designers intended you to play', is needed to further optimize the chosen route through the game (262). Lastly, tricks (of which some can be exploitations, or "exploits", of game design flaws) are used to achieve such breaks. This is what hyperproductive deviation is all about: speedrunners internalize the game's instrumental rules, strategies and mechanics to go beyond the intended design.

Whether or not the hyperproductive deviance of speedrunning or powerleveling is actually cheating is arguable. As Consalvo points out, superior players do not consider themselves as potential cheaters anymore: 'such players often see themselves as elite gamers that have already surpassed the challenges offered by a game, and so turn to gaming the game itself' (2005 6). By gaming the game, speedrunners achieve their own desired form of agency over the intended design of a game.

By analyzing Joana's walkthrough guide and watching the accompanying video recordings we can see how speedrunning tactics

[89] One particularly flamboyant speedrunner playing under the pseudonym of Athene, gained notoriety among the *World of Warcraft* player community and beyond for being quite brash about his activities (including claiming most if not all world records), by creating a "reality web-series" and a DVD showing his and his friends' endeavors.

[90] For more speedrunning records, see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Speedrunning (accessed August, 2009)

deconstruct *World of Warcraft*'s intended design. It also showcases the difference between this guide and the official, narrative-oriented walkthrough. As explained above, the latter stopped at the moment *World of Warcraft*'s design structure becomes too emergent to put into one coherent step-by-step guide. By using speedrunning's route planning, sequence breaking and tricks, Joana's walkthrough turns the game into a non-emergent, highly linear experience. As the introduction to his guide points out, for Joana, the creation of the guide involved a less linear approach to the game:

> The first time I went through the game, I attempted virtually EVERY quest, by doing this I learned what quests are worth doing, and which quests should be avoided (because some of the quests are not good enough for the time/XP reward, and so quests are just down right to hard to solo at certain levels). […] I read EVERY quest description and took my time REAL slowly, learning everything I can about the game, I tried every profession, I did every instance like at least 5 times, and (with my dedication) I studied websites on every instance, about the loot from the mobs, all the quests for them, and the correct way to do each one (2007 1).

Here, Joana claims to have played through and analysed *all* the game has to offer for route planning purposes. The goals are obvious: to lay the groundwork for the perfect speedrun, and to subsequently write the best powerleveling walkthrough to expose how he did it. Hyperbole notwithstanding, the result of Joana's efforts offer us an explanation of speedrunning tactics through which other, less "elite" players are given the chance to experience similar agency over the game.

Joana's densely written walkthrough looks very different from the official walkthrough in terms of form and goal. Below is Joana's rendition of the Valley of Trials, the area I took as an example for the official walkthrough:

> 01) I do every single quest in Durotar! Here's the fastest way to do em:
> 02) Start off doing "*Cutting Teeth*"
> 03) Then once you hit level 2, go accept "*Sarkoth*" (at 40.62) and do "*Sarkoth*" (at 40.66). Then turn it in and accept "*Sarkoth*" pt.2
> 04) Go turn in "*Sarkoth*" pt.2 and "*Cutting Teeth*" ... accept and do the following...
> 05) "*Sting of the Scorpid*" "*Vile Familiars*" "*Galgar's Cactus Apple Surprise*" and "*Lazy Peons*"
> 06) Turn those quests in, then accept and go do...

07) "Burning Blade Medallion" and "*Thazz'ril's Pick*" (these are done in the cave at 44.56)
08) Once those two are done use your hearthstone.
09) Turn those quests in, then..
10) Accept "*Report to Sen'jin Village*"
11) Leave starting noob zone... (2007 2, emphasis in original).[91]

This excerpt describes the entire process of getting from level one until leaving the Valley. For comparison: the excerpt from the official strategy guide shown earlier barely describes half of it (it ends halfway through step five of Joana's guide). Before analyzing the differences between both walkthroughs in terms of its paratextual impact on the experience of play, which forms the topic of the next section, I will take a closer look at how this walkthrough of the same area takes a player through the game.

Being the product of speedrunning practices, the presence of instrumental tactics in Joana's walkthrough is far more pronounced than in the official walkthrough. The excerpt above immediately announces that there is a "fastest way" to complete the quests in this area, presenting them in a numbered to-do style. Step-by-step, the player is taken through the game world, a process Joana even highlights with the use of maps showing the location of each quest-object and the "correct" routes to travel between them. Should it still be unclear where a player using the walkthrough should go, there is also a video recording of Joana progressing through the same steps. Sequence breaking and the use of tricks, the other two hallmarks of speedrunning, are also present in the excerpt. In step eight, 'using the hearthstone' is mentioned. The hearthstone is a game mechanism that offers the player a fixed location to which he can return this character once every hour, independent of the location of the character. Usually, players link their hearthstone to a major city or travel hub in order to have quick access to banks, auction houses and the transport system. In this case, it is used to eliminate the time walking back from the cave (from step seven) to where the quest givers are located. Here, the hearthstone mechanism is used as a trick to break the normal sequence of walking back and forth between quest givers and quest objects. An additional trick which Joana refers to is the use of geographical coordinates for the location of certain NPCs (in step three) or destinations (the cave in step seven). As such coordinates are not part of the core game's UI, players need to install UI modifications to be able to see them on the in-game maps.

[91] More background information about individual quests is available through hyperlinks (the italicized fragments are pointers to the information database allakhazam.com), but the walkthrough itself focuses on one thing alone: the most desired route.

The strategies and tricks mentioned above might provide players with the feeling that they are speedrunning through the game in the same way the original author did, although their agency over the game is not necessarily heightened in the same way. Using Joana's walkthrough certainly sped up play considerably for me; using the walkthrough, it took me a third of the time to get to the highest level with a new character than with my first character. It granted me the feeling of conquering the game in ways far beyond standard play; it made me feel powerful in a game of stake with Blizzard's design as my opponent and it made me feel as if I was gaming the game. Whereas Joana internalized the game's core design through extensive play and research, I however was busy *skipping* a considerable amount of content. Following someone else's path through a game which is built to offer thousands of different paths, limits rather than expands your agency in and over the game. It is as if you are participating in someone else's game of stake rather than your own. Hyperproductive agency acquired by the use of walkthroughs rather than your own experience is therefore at least partly an illusion. In the final section of this case study I answer the question about what the duality between gaining and loosing agency mentioned above means in terms of a walkthrough's paratextual power over the reading/playing of the game.

4.2.3 Hyperproductive demystification

As a paratext, a walkthrough influences the way you experience a game and the more dedicated a walkthrough is to a particular goal, the bigger this influence can be. The two walkthroughs discussed above have different goals; the official strategy guide means to introduce the game to the player while the powerleveling guide means to deconstruct it. This difference is felt most strongly in the way the walkthroughs treat the fictional world in which play is situated. After a brief comparison of the way each of the two walkthroughs (re)present the fictional world, I will focus on Joana's guide which, having been created by a speedrunner rather than a professional strategy guide publisher, differs most from the game's indented use as implemented by Blizzard.

When comparing the excerpts from the official strategy guide and Joana's guide, the de-emphasizing of *World of Warcraft*'s fiction is immediately apparent. As we can see in the excerpt above, Joana ignores the fictional aspects of the quests entirely, focusing only on those which had to be done, and in which sequence, in order to traverse through the Valley of Trials as fast as possible. While the official strategy guide's walkthrough exhibits an elaborate writing style in tune with *World of Warcraft*'s fantasy history and setting, Joana's approach reads like a list of declarative orders ("go there!" "do this!"). As both walkthroughs clearly explain what you need to do step-by-step, they also both contribute to what Consalvo considers a demystification of the game's

challenges (2007 45).[92] The powerleveling guide, however, goes on to demystify the fictional embedding of quests within the fictional worlds. To use examples from the Valley of Trials excerpts; the question of why you need to collect cactus apples for a quest is no longer motivated on a fictional level (because a character wants to make you some refreshing cactus apple surprise) but on an instrumental level (because it is the most efficient way to progress). The demystification of quests in Joana's guide lays bare their instrumental purposes in ways the official guide refuses to do.

The demystification of the game's quests has an impact on players' spatial orientation. The step-by-step approaches in the walkthroughs prompted me to only pick up the quests they told me to pick up, and, subsequently, to only go where the walkthroughs told me the quests' goals were to be found. To improve speed by avoiding unnecessary travel, Joana's guide especially limited spatial exploration. It bundles groups of quests together when their goals are roughly in the same area. Any coherence between quests on a fictional level – going where the story goes – is replaced with a coherence of quests on the spatial level. That is, going where the other quests go. Linking quests together like this makes reading the quest descriptions – which include most of the fictional reasons for doing the quest – superfluous to progress. Reading the descriptions becomes an obstacle which hinders speedy progress and reading it for clues to finish a quest (which usually is part of the challenge of doing a quest) is not needed, as a pre-planned route is followed. What we find here is a case of hyperproductive demystification: instrumental progress going above and beyond the game's own challenges and fiction, both of which are deconstructed in the process.

While *World of Warcraft*'s version of Azeroth already is a miniature version of the "real" Azeroth, following a singular path through the game by skipping and ignoring large amounts of quests provides an even more radical condensation of space. Large swaths of the game's geography, including entire zones and all the quests that lie within them, were skipped completely by simply ignoring every quest that lead to them. This meant skipping hours and hours of content of both fictional and instrumental nature, all intended to reduce time.[93] The only actions which matter are those on the planned route,

[92] Consalvo actually uses the term 'de-*Myst*-ification', referring to *Myst* (Brøderbund Software Inc. 1993), the classic puzzle game (2007 45, emphasis in original).

[93] The most profound moment I encountered related to this form of sequence breaking came when nearing level sixty. Prior to the release of the first expansion pack, level sixty was the maximum level your character could achieve. The expansion pack added an entirely new landmass to the game world, the so-called Outlands, as well as ten extra levels. To gain access to this new content, a player must have reached level fifty-eight. While the first version of Joana's guide provides a walkthrough all the way to level sixty and doing quests on the old continents, the updated version simply commands the player to leave the old world at level fifty-nine immediately and start "grinding" easy mobs (killing them for experience points) on the new continent until level sixty is

with exploration being both unnecessary and, even worse, a waste of time. Here, we see dual levels of player agency at work. On the one hand a player's agency over the game is increased, as he or she does not need to look for the how and where of quests. On the other hand it is decreased as his or her ability to read and understand quest goals is potentially diminished. A player learns to navigate the world (and the quests within it) by having it explained to them by an external source, and not by letting the game's design "explain" it to them through discovery, trial and error.

Naturally, the level of demystification, both in terms of challenges and fiction, depends on your prior exposure to the game and its fictional world. Most players using Joana's guide will have played through the game at least once before attempting to powerlevel a character. For them, skipping or grouping quests is less demystifying as they have probably experienced many of the quests with other characters, and in a sequence which makes more sense on a fictional level.

As a paratext – a threshold of interpretation – the influence of a powerleveling guide like Joana's and, to a lesser extent, a walkthrough like the one from the official guide, is nevertheless noticeable for both experienced and novice players alike. The more loyal you are to following a walkthrough, the more you diverge from the intended flow of the game in terms of instrumental and fictional exposition. This divergence might be hyperproductive for the cause of speedrunning, it might be counterproductive to other practices of play. I actually did try to combine powerleveling with activities that Joana's guide explicitly advised against for being too time consuming. I tried to build up my character's professions during the speedrun. One profession, mining, involved gathering all kinds of metal ore and gems hidden in the hills and mountains of Azeroth. I even used a dedicated mining strategy guide alongside the powerleveling guide to see if they could function together. As particular types of metal ore are only found in particular areas, the problem with combining professions and powerleveling became instantaneously obvious when the walkthrough ordered me to move on to the next zone while I still had not collected all the metal needed from the current zone. My powerleveling walkthrough was interfering with my mining strategy, and the other way around. This situation also underscores that the concept of an "ideal" path through *World of Warcraft* offered by the powerleveling walkthrough is limited to its specific purpose only.

While I have limited myself to individual play throughout this case study, I would like to add that, as a threshold of interpretation, walkthroughs

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reached. The reason the guide stated for moving to the Outlands so abruptly could not be more instrumental: 'Because you earn about twice as much XP per mob kill than you do in Azeroth' (2007 33).

can influence a player's preferences for group play also. Free group play situations like (representational) role-playing are counterproductive for powerleveling. Joana's guide even warns players about the potential dangers of instrumental group play. Clearing dungeons might lead to large amounts of experience points (and thus faster leveling) but getting a good group together with a proper class combination might take too much time. Visiting a dungeon with an unorganized, random group means risking death and is better avoided. This does not mean powerlevelers and speedrunners do not have social contact during their activities. The in-game communication system lets players chat with each other even if their characters are not physically close to each other within the game world. In fact, most individual play practices are still social by the way of these communication options. Dedicated group play however is something else than chatting with in-game friends while playing individually; it requires characters to actively work together in organized forms of ludic role-playing. Walkthroughs aimed at highly individualized play forms can influence the way players perceive such forms of collective social action, seeing them as potentially harmful for progress rather than a productive challenge. As I predominantly focused on the individual experience, more research is needed in order to investigate such social effects.

To conclude this case study, we can safely say that, due to the omnipresence of these paratexts for *World of Warcraft* – produced both by amateurs and professional paratextual industries – the use of strategy guides informs and influences a substantial part of the player community. It shows that when time is at stake from the perspective of Game Play, there is a large demand for increased agency over the way the game is supposed to be played from the perspective of Game Design. This demand is for a substantial part fulfilled through participatory activities (ie. the creation of strategy guides) from the perspective of Game Culture. The use of walkthroughs like Joana's powerleveling guide creates games of stake between these three levels, with players actively negotiating Blizzard's design structures through hyperproductive deviation. As Mortensen observes: 'mastering the game is not submitting to the game: it is to know it so well that the game no longer controls the player' (2008 220). Walkthroughs are used to achieve a new control balance between player and game, suggesting increased agency for the player. As I have shown in this case study, walkthroughs nevertheless present their own levels of control over player action, potentially transforming the emergent, largely narrative-oriented progress of the game's core design into pure, linear progression, with less rather than more options for divergence.

In the next case study, which centers around individualized group play, another form of hyperproductive deviance is discussed. This time, however, the play practices deviating from the intended design to grant the player more

agency do directly influence other players. As such, the form of deviance discussed next is as hyperproductive as it is destructive.

4.3 Twinking, or playing another game

In this case study, the notion of playing 'alone together' is investigated by focusing on individualized group play. As game researchers Nicolas Ducheneaust, Eric Nickell, Robert Moore and Nick Yee point out, many players prefer to be surrounded by other players rather than actually playing with them (4). Here, I want to extend the notion of playing alone together to include playing *against* other players in ways which are not universally accepted and can even be considered anti-social.[94] In the games of stake discussed here, power between players is at stake. The main question this case study asks is which tactics do players employ to achieve the upper hand over other players using or even exploiting the game's mechanics, and how do these tactics influence playing *World of Warcraft* for the stakeholders involved?

The form of individualized group play under investigation here is called "twinking". While a more detailed description will follow, the practice of twinking in its most basic form involves using accumulated wealth and/or power of a high-level character to boost performance of a low-level character. Battleground twinking is a variation on this practice, where the accumulated wealth and/or power of a higher-level characters helps to boost the performance of a lower-level character against other players' low-level characters in a dedicated PvP setting. In other words, battleground twinking creates an unfair advantage over players who do not have access to such wealth and/or power – or over those who consider twinking a form of cheating.

The best way to understand the practice of twinking is by doing it yourself. Over a period of several months I built and actively played a twinked character in PvP battlegrounds. Like the previous case study, where I used walkthroughs to level up a character, battleground twinking involves much research and planning in order to do it successfully. As with most deviant play practices, we can argue if this process can be considered cheating. As explained in chapter two, actively pursueing such controversial cheating allowed me to understand both the game and play within it from an entirely new perspective. It allowed to me to recognize and examine four different interpretations of twinking: (i) twinking as a form of luxury play, (ii) twinking as a form of dominance play, (iii) as a form of transformative play and finally, (iv) twinking as a form of standardized play. Each of these play forms exist on different levels of instrumental and social behavior and additionally revolve around different

[94] A previous version of this case study was published in the *DiGRA 2007: Situated Play* conference proceedings (Glas 2007).

stakes. All forms of twinking discussed here however grant players greater agency over both the game and other players. As I show, the practice of twinking is a rich topic for the study of games of stake, with a range of stakeholders (twinkers, their opponents, Blizzard, etc.) staking their claims around all four main perspectives, exhibiting *World of Warcraft*'s potential as a battlefield of negotiation.

4.3.1 The luxury of twinking

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* a twink is, among other things, an effeminate young man or, in more commonly used terms a sissy, pansy-ass or weenie. Twinking as a verb in the sense of creating a twink has no dictionary entry. Twinking, is nevertheless a notable term in the culture of MUDs and MMORPGs. Here, a twink is defined as something somewhat different. On Wikipedia we can read: 'In its most basic definition, a twink is a character with better gear than they could have easily gotten on their own'.[95] A similar definition comes from the official *World of Warcraft* strategy guide, where a twink is 'a character that owns items that are normally above their capability of obtaining on their own' (2005 9). All definitions hint to the fact that twinks, or actually the players controlling them, are in fact less capable than regular players as they do not seem to be able to manage acquiring certain items on their own. In the reality of the game, they are not lesser characters but actually more capable of defeating regular players. Twinks, also known as powergamers or munchkins in the RPG genre, are the strongest characters among their own kind, certainly not the weakest.[96] In gamers jargon: they "own" the game in ways they should not by any normal means. As a result, twinking has been seen as an unwanted, manipulative form of playing an RPG, and has been under much (largely negative) discussion since the genre's earliest games.

In real life, transferring power by preferential treatment, for instance through hereditary succession, involves at least two separate people. While in a game like *World of Warcraft* the benefactor – a rich and powerful high-level character – and beneficiary – a newly initiated low-level character – are often controlled by the same person. Using the power and influence of an existing character to make progress easier for your own new character is a relatively easy step to make. For instance, by levering virtual money from an established to a newly initiated character, the new character's virtual life will have an easier start.

Like in real life, potentially unfair wealth and power distribution in *World of Warcraft* is not always perceived positively. Twinking could be

[95] Available at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twinking (accessed April, 2007).
[96] An often used term in role-playing games, the term munchkin also refers to being silly or immature. For a satirical discussion of munchkins, see Desborough and Mortimer.

considered unfair as successful progress is suddenly based on who has the greatest resources instead of the best skills; making competition-based playing like PvP nearly impossible when twinks are involved. One could even argue whether distributing power and wealth between characters is simply clever use of game mechanics, or an exploitation of them. There is nothing in *World of Warcraft*'s design or contract which prohibits it. Like most speedrunning tactics, many twinking tactics involve what Consalvo calls "found" actions or items, which 'accelerate or improve the player's skills, actions, or abilities in some way the designer did not originally intend, yet in a manner that does not actively change code or involve deceiving others' (2007 114). These tactics allow for hyperproductive deviance; they discard the intended design, where a character has to fight for its own place in the fictional world by accomplishing quests, acquiring skill and gathering items, by having other characters do it for them. Like powerleveling, twinking makes the parts of the game's design often considered boring – grinding your way through the lower levels to get to the end game content – more bearable, especially for those who have leveled up characters several times before. Moreover, there is little difference between helping a friend with a lower-level character who is stuck in some quest, or giving this character some better gear you had laying around – both totally acceptable forms of "social" behavior – and fully twinking your own character with the very best gear, and running them through otherwise non-reachable game situations with the help of higher-level friends. Both are forms of luxury bestowed on low-level characters by higher-level characters. Actually having luxury (ie. wealth) is actually a requirement in order to create dedicated battleground twinks and is best illustrated by explaining the origin of this case study.

The decision to start my own twink was made more by accident than on purpose. At one point I had just created a new character, an orc shaman called Brikk, and during the lower levels of Brikk's life, I arranged for him to get some help from a friend with a high-level character. Essentially, I was asking to be twinked. Without many problems she helped me to finish a quest in a dungeon called Shadowfang Keep. As explained in the previous chapter, a dungeon like this one normally requires a balanced group of five characters (in this case between levels twenty to twenty-five) to successfully complete. Because Brikk, at this point only level twenty, received help from a character on level sixty (and therefore strong enough to complete the dungeon on her own) no group was needed. The level sixty helper fought its way through the monsters like a warm knife through butter while Brikk looked on and reaped the rewards. While there was certainly twinking involved, it was one of the rewards I received which made me want to pursue twinking as a case study. Not only did I walk away with the quest rewards and some other nice pieces of

gear I could use, but I also picked up a pair of rare cloth bracers called Mindthrust Bracers. With Brikk himself having no use for them, I knew I could sell them through the in-game auction house. Before I put them up for auction, I decided to read up on them in one of *World of Warcraft*'s many online information databases where I encountered a new side of twinking about which I was not fully aware. On the Mindthrust Bracers page I found the following user remarks: 'If you are lucky enuf to get them to drop, congratz. But, if you are a twink who has to buy em, do it cuz these things OWN!' (posted by "Zarlyn"); 'Twinks rejoice. More twink caster gear' (posted by "Draw7Seven"); 'Ok i will pay 25-30g for these if u have them' (posted by "Blackwidowers"); 'I'm offering a 65 gold reward to whoever fetches me these' (posted by "Gahnrael").[97] To put all these comments in perspective: the bracers had a value of four silver and sixty-four copper coins when sold to an NPC vendor, and the accumulated wealth of most regular characters at Brikk's level was still well below one gold coin which is equivalent to one-hundred silver coins. In other words, the bracers alone were worth several times more than the "normal" total wealth of a character at Brikk's level. I eventually sold the bracers for just under twenty gold coins within two days time.

My first encounter with this "other" side of twinking touches on twinking's relationship to (virtual) money. When players do not want to invest too much time in a new character, they can use a walkthrough, or they may simply buy the best gear available from the in-game auction house to ease and accelerate the leveling process (or, even better, both). The second option of buying useful gear takes advantage of the fact that another player invested time in attaining a certain item, time you do not have to spend. Taking into account the often outrageous prices charged for the best twink gear, twinking is a form of luxury play, an activity made possible by having enough money to spend within the game world.

A direct result from extreme examples of luxury play is hyperinflation within the in-game economy, most notably on the lower levels. Because of high demand, many of the superior low-level items are sold for many times their formal worth as quoted by Blizzard. This especially applies to rare items like the Mindthrust Bracers mentioned above, making such gear nearly impossible to obtain for players who do not have wealthy high-level characters as sugar daddies for their low-level characters. The high prices are one of the reasons why players try to acquire more virtual money through illicit channels which enables them to compete, including the so-called Real-Money Trade (RMT) – buying virtual money with real money. Injecting virtual money bought from

[97] Quotes retrieved from *Thottbot.com* (http://www.thottbott.com/?i=11136, accessed April, 2007).

external sources into the game world makes competition with twinkers even more difficult for newcomers. Hyperinflation caused by high-level characters using their fairly earned (as in: earned through play) in-game money to buy low-level items for their low-level characters is an unavoidable result of the MMORPG's design – there are no rules preventing players from bestowing luxuries on their low-level characters. External causes of hyperinflation, like the Real-Money Trade, however results in game balancing issues unwanted by the game's design team, providing them with enough reasons to fight RMT activities on the level of Game Contract. Throughout the years, Blizzard closed thousands of accounts and removed many millions worth of gold from *WoW*'s realms, all the while reminding the player community that 'selling *World of Warcraft* content, such as gold, items, and characters, can result in a permanent ban' (2006a). More on the effects of RMT, as well as an analysis of RMT-related breaches of Game Contract will feature in the next chapter.

A fascination for those players wanting to spend so much money on such a low-level item urged me not only to investigate twinking further but eventually to become one myself. Much of the money (be it virtual and/or real) spent on rare twink items appeared to be targeted at a very particular kind of twinking dedicated to PvP. Battleground twinks are exclusively designed to be used in *World of Warcraft*'s battlegrounds, one of the main venues for dedicated PvP competition and thus group play activities. I call them battleground twinks in this case study in order to make the distinction between them and regular twinks clear. Among *World of Warcraft* players, the battleground twink has become the defining form of twinking due to its popularity and notoriety. I decided Brikk should become a battleground twink too, because I wanted to know why players injected so much virtual money into these twinks, what the perceived and actual rewards are for twinkers, and how the practices of twinking allow players to gain agency over the game and other players in ways normal play would not.

4.3.2 Going for the easy kill

Untill this point, I have described twinking primarily as a form of hyperproductive deviance, a way to increase agency with a low-level character using the possibilities of the game's design. Battleground twinking however, is far more counterproductive and destructive in its deviance. To understand why this form of twinking has become so popular, and where the counterproductive and destructive tendencies come from, I will first explain some of the basic battleground mechanics within Blizzard's design, as well as the main tactics of battleground twinking. By doing so, I will make clear how battleground twinking allows players to take control over the game's design, and over other players.

In battlegrounds, groups of loosely organized players face each other in short matches to prevent high-level characters from facing (less powerful) low-level characters in a such a match, all battlegrounds are subdivided into level groups. For instance, all players between levels twenty and twenty-nine are grouped to face only opponents of those same levels. As soon as you reach level thirty, you must fight in the thirty-to-thirty-nine group, also called a "bracket". The players who have reached the highest level have their own top-level brackets, preventing these strong characters from playing against "younger" characters who are still in the process of leveling up. *World of Warcraft* is designed as a system to prevent destructive deviance like ganking easy to kill low-level characters, and to make sure most players will be active in the higher level brackets, using their highest-level characters.

Another game design element important to the battleground twinking discussion is the idea that you need to put in some effort to get the best rewards. In *World of Warcraft*, the best gear is only attainable through highly demanding group play forms such as raiding or Arena PvP. For many players who do not have the time or interest in such play forms, the best gear in the game remains out of their reach. Such players have no chance against the players who wear a full set of "epic" gear. For some players, especially those who enjoy dominating other players in combat, this is frustrating and unfair. Even if they would have the same skills as those players with top-notch gear, they would in many cases still loose due to the immense increase of attributes like health, agility and resilience which comes with epic gear. It becomes a situation of stats over skills which is difficult if not impossible to overcome without investing a considerable amount of time. At this level even RMT cannot help as most of the best gear is not available through the auction house – you *must* earn it through regular play.

Like most forms of deviance, player agency is at stake; only with battleground twinking it is not about taking back control on the level of Game Design, but achieving more agency on the level of Game Play. Frustrated players looking for ways to be more successful in PvP combat without having to compete with the best of the best high-level players can look down to the lower-level battleground brackets. Players can start a new character which they level up to the maximum level within a such a bracket (for instance level nineteen within the ten-to-nineteen bracket). They should, however, be careful not to engage in any play practices which might earn their newly created battleground twink experience points. This might result in the twink leveling up to the next bracket, where they would once more be the weakest character on the battleground. Next comes the actual twinking, which is accomplished by outfitting the characters with the finest gear and magical enhancements achievable at that level, for example by using the money from their higher-level

"sugar daddies". Often, the twinked characters are rogues or hunters; highly popular twink classes due to their ability to inflict abundant amounts of damage in quick succession. The result is a character which not only out-levels the lower-level characters in the bracket but also out-gears characters of the same level.

Battleground twinks are both hard to kill and lethal for non-twinks, which means they are vastly superior to non-twinks. Admittedly, the sensation of dominating the battlefield was highly enjoyable, even though I could often sense the frustration with non-twink players present. Sometimes players from the opposing team would use "emotes" to make clear they did not like my presence. During some matches, entire groups of non-twinks chased me down to kill me after I killed them several times. However, I did not only face non-twinks. To the contrary: in the many battlegrounds in which Brikk took part, I seldom if ever encountered a situation where I was the only twink. Usually, both sides had several twinks among their ranks, and at the end of each round twinks usually scored the highest (most kills, most flags captured, etc.).

The ambiguous nature of twinking has led many players, including those who have twinks themselves, to label it a condemnable activity; many players will not admit they twinked a character and if they do, they tend to use a defensive tone. Take for instance this "coming out" posting on from the official forums calling out to "lay off the twinks":

> I have no shame whatsoever in admitting that I have a twink alt, but I would like to ask the WoW community to stop automatically assuming all twinks are selfish b@stards. I twink FOR FUN, and because it's the only way to survive in [battlegrounds]. […] Please at least stop to ask yourself what kind of player I am before you automatically assume I'm some heartless demon-spawn (posted by "Peregrine", January 13, 2007).

Other players respond with everything ranging from anger 'Twinks are losers who were picked last in gym class and cheating to win a video game makes them feel superior for once in their lives' (posted by "Browny"), to qualification 'Hardly cheating... just not playing fair' (posted by "Marlae"), to support 'I don't twink myself, but I don't think it's wrong to twink either. It's about trying to get an upper hand in things' (posted by "Selmack"). Remarkably but not unexpectedly, many players entering the more heated twinking discussions in defense of the practice do so anonymously rather than with their main characters – they want to have their say on these battlefields of negotiation, but seem to shy away from potential repercussions.

From my experience, dealing with twinks on a battlefield involves a certain degree of hypocrisy. While I could feel the irritation from opposing players during play, and read many angry chats among my team members about twinks on the other team, I seldomly received a negative remark from a member of my own team about the fact that I was a twink. Mortensen nicely sums up this contradiction: 'while everybody hates meeting twinks in the battlegrounds, having them on your side is not a social stigma, but a nice convenience' (2006a). As a result, whether deviance is destructive or not, is certainly in the eye of the beholder.

Even though players tend to accept or at least tolerate twinks when they are on their side, battleground twinking is not what most players consider to be the social norm for experienced players. Using his player types (Killers, Achievers, Explorers, and Socializers), game designer Richard Bartle sees a main sequence of change that an average player goes through over time in MUDs and MMORPGs:

> Players typically start off testing the immediate bounds of their behavior (killer) then begin to acquire knowledge of their environment (explorer); following this, they apply their knowledge (achiever), in the course of which they forge bonds with other players; finally, they retire and spend their time chatting with their friends (socializer) (2004 165).

Bartle explains killers in terms of wanting to dominate other players. Battleground twinks, being oriented towards PvP combat, can be placed within this category.[98] Whether or not Bartle's evolutionary sequence is entirely applicable to *World of Warcraft* in general, the practice of battleground twinking seems to contradict it. Dominating other players, not socializing with them, is the endpoint for these characters. Having achieved a firm understanding of the game world and its rules (ie. having leveled up to the maximum level capacity), creating a twink character purely for PvP combat in battlegrounds means using your knowledge and in-game wealth to actively return to killer status.

[98] Bartle sees the desire to dominate as an unavoidable but nevertheless negative side effect of virtual worlds. Therefore, he includes not only attacking other players but making other's lives difficult in different ways as well, including verbal harassment, within his definition of Killers (2004 130). While griefing is unmistakably a part of PvP play, this is a somewhat limited view on player versus player behavior, especially in a MMORPG like *World of Warcraft* where dedicated, sports-like options for PvP exist in the form of battlegrounds. Bartle's main sequence, in which "killer" behavior only (or most outspokenly) exists among new players who are still experimenting with the boundaries of play, therefore becomes problematic when dedicated, high-level PvP engagement enters the picture.

Besides being a potential form of destructive deviance, battleground twinks are unique amongst their twinking peers for being counterproductive, at least in Mortensen's original meaning of counterproductive deviance as deviating from the plans of the game designers (2008 208). In terms of social deviance, battleground twinking is not just destructive but can also be considered counterproductive. The reason for this is not just the social stigma which is attached to twinking, but the simple fact that battleground twinks do not level up beyond their chosen level bracket. Battleground twinking is not only a form of individualized group play by choice but also by necessity; all non-twink characters they meet during PvP combat eventually do level up, making sustained social contact difficult. Battleground twinks meeting and befriending other twinks is not unheard of, and I encountered several twink-only guilds while researching this case study. Nevertheless, most twinks I met on my server had little interest in socializing with other twinks.[99] Battleground twinking then is a game of stake, where twinkers gain agency over other players within an individualized group context which, to a large degree, prevents sustained social interaction. For twinkers, this is not a loss, but intentional.

The effects of the individualized group play approach is not just felt socially but also instrumentally. Battlegrounds usually have goals that are best achieved by working together, but in most situations, twinks only opt for seeking out and destroying as much of the opposition as possible, either in small groups or alone and without much interest in shared goals. Communication during these battlegrounds is almost always limited to short messages concerning battleground objectives, the occasional insult ('l2p n00b!!!') or congratulatory remark ('gg', 'gj', '0wned!!!').[100] In several cases Brikk was even called back from achieving a battleground goal too rapidly, as a quick victory would mean less kills and thus less fun for the other twinks (non-twinks usually did not mind winning the round swiftly, especially when they were constantly being victimized by twinks).

Another effect of counterproductive deviance through battleground twinking relates to the experience of the game as a whole. By optimizing a character for a specific level rather than the highest level the game has to offer, battleground twinking is a play practice which creates an end-game situation in what Blizzard (and most players) consider the mid-game. In the next section, I

[99] Twink guilds are still very domination oriented; some guild revel in "steamrolling" the opposition by joining a battleground match with a full twink team. As I did not actively pursue a twink guild for Brikk, further research would be needed to investigate what this means for social play within such guilds.

[100] These abbreviations and examples of jargon translate into 'learn to play, newbie' (newcomer), 'good game', 'good job' and 'owned' (referring to a person having just dominated another).

show how counterproductive deviance is preceded by a more hyperproductive approach to playing, where players construct game goals where none are intended by Blizzard, and standardize character customization in a game designed around diversity.

4.3.3 A game within a game

As explained earlier, MMORPGs are a problematic type of game as they do not fit the typical definition of what constitutes a game. They are intrinsically open-ended, while the common conception of what defines a game is, amongst other things, a quantifiable outcome. Through questing, finishing instances or winning or loosing a battleground match, players can achieve quantifiable outcomes but they are only temporal and fleeting; there are always new quests to accomplish and other goals to set.

By creating an end-game situation mid-game, battleground twinking does actively pursue a quantifiable outcome. battleground twinkers want to gather the very best gear possible without passing a certain level threshold (which would make them "loose" their particular game) enabling them to then stay there indefinitely, repeating the same play ad infinitum. I am not arguing here that battleground twinking transforms *World of Warcraft* into a classical game. The activity and influence of battleground twinking does not directly affect the game's design enough for such a claim to stand. What I do argue is that by creating a quantifiable outcome, battleground twinking heavily deviates from the MMORPGs overall design, because these battleground twinks will never see the high-level end-game as Blizzard intended.

The process of deviance starts long before a battleground twink is "finished", which is the moment a twink can no longer acquire better gear and nothing is left but to hone their PvP skills in the battlegrounds. Starting a battleground twink requires the use of certain tactics which need to be deployed strategically in order for the twink to be optimized, some of which I will discuss using Brikk's evolution as an example. Brikk had already surpassed level nineteen shortly after I came into possession of the Mindthrust Bracers, so twinking within the ten-to-nineteen bracket was no longer possible. I therefore decided to turn Brikk into a dedicated level twenty-nine battleground twink and began to read up on twinking on the many websites and forum discussions dedicated to twinking. It was soon clear that I had to approach twinking carefully. Twinking did not (only) mean hawking the auction house for those perfect rare items in order to be able to purchase them for reasonable prices (read: reasonable for twinks). Some of the most coveted twink gear items could only be obtained by undertaking quests. But each time you defeat a monster within the game world or finish a quest your character earns experience points or XP and increasing XP means increasing levels and therefore constitutes a

danger to aspiring twinkers. As a result, minimizing Brikk's XP gain became key while his level crept up to level twenty-nine; too much XP and he would suddenly and irrevocably reach level thirty. While a regular character can just kill mobs and do as many quests as he likes – for them all XP is more than welcome – a twinker by definition must plan his way carefully through quests.

Blizzard's design of an open, emergent world where more XP is better is challenged by the approach above, where minimizing XP gain while maximizing rewards, forces a player to severely narrow his or her range of possibilities. They turn the MMORPG from a game of emergence with selected moments of progression, into a game of progression with less and less moments of emergence (Juul 2005 72). Creating a battleground twink is therefore similar to following a powerleveling walkthrough. In fact, a plethora of player-created twinking walkthroughs is available for every class, assisting you in the process.

When all self-imposed goals (like gathering the best twink gear) are met and the ideal twink is created, the practice of battleground twinking changes once more, this time into a game of pure emergence. As battleground twinks do nothing more than endlessly repeat the same battlegrounds again and again. Progress between rounds is limited. One could say gaining skill is a form of progress, but against non-twinks skill does not matter much – battleground twinks are built to easily dominate for a specific reason. Both game structures – progression with only some emergent elements and pure emergence – are far removed from the non-twinking experience *World of Warcraft* offers as its dominant, main strategy.

The process of creating a twink then is both hyperproductive and destructive in its deviance and its efforts to gain agency. By using a transgression of the game's intended design to dominate other players, while at the same time presenting players with counterproductive deviance (at least in the eyes of non-twinkers) it limits the game to a select group of practices, and ultimately halts progress towards the higher levels. Within this game of stake, there is one type of stakeholder which has not yet been included: other battleground twinks. Players who build and enter battlegrounds with their twinks are not just negotiating with Blizzard's design and non-twink players, but, as I will show next, also need to deal with their peers on the level of Game Play.

In the form of standardization, battleground twinking introduces another quantifiable outcome which deviates from *World of Warcraft*'s open-ended design. While Blizzard has always kept adding new content to the end-game through patches and expansion packs, relatively few changed the mid-game in terms of new content and gear, at least not during the time I was active as a twink player. This meant it became possible to draw up relatively stable

lists of the best gear and gear enhancements attainable at every top bracket level, and for each class. Placed within strategy guides and walkthroughs created by and for twinkers, these lists form the starting point of the planning phase of gathering the gear discussed above. Such guides not only provide the best tools to plan and execute the collecting phase of twinking, they also initiate standardization amongst twinks of each class. And when there is only one set of "ultimate" gear, all dedicated twinks eventually wield and wear the same items. For my level twenty-nine shaman Brikk, it became a matter of following such guides and checking the acquired items off the lists until the ultimate set of weaponry and clothing had been collected. A truly ultimate set which every twink of a certain class and level owns remains more hypothetical than realistic, because in reality some items are just too rare for everyone to possess, even for twinks and their wealthy owners. Different preferences in play style also lead to a diversity of worn gear. Nonetheless, the dedicated twinks whom I met on the battlegrounds consistently wore roughly the same gear.

The result of the standardization of battleground twinks is that only skill factors in as a winning condition in PvP situations against similarly optimized twinks – lessening the agency players have against other twinks in terms of dominative power. While most fights against one (or more) non-twinks usually resulted in quick victories, especially when level differences were present, one-on-one fights against other twinks became tests of skill and endurance. This is what the fully twinked Brikk encountered many times over when he began fighting in the battlegrounds. Through the shaman class' ability to self-heal, battles between Brikk and other healing-enabled twinks therefore could last minutes rather than seconds.

Fighting equally powerful twinks might reduce player agency against other players, for some twinkers, gear standardization offers another form of agency. These clashes of super-strong, evenly powerful twinks are among the few moments in *World of Warcraft* where winning or losing a duel with another player are purely a result of skill rather than gear or level. The game is designed for diversity and variety among characters and the items they wear and use, granting players the ability to be unique. By taking the uniqueness of characters away by standardizing customization, battleground twinkers deviate from the intended design. Over the years, Blizzard introduced dedicated PvP content on higher levels, creating similar situations of equality and standardization. However, due to the new end-game content which is constantly added, players interested in these high-level items need to keep working for it to stay on top. Battleground twinks, on the other hand, offer a relatively fixed form of standardization. The true benefit of equally itemized twinks – skill being the primary and decisive factor for victory – was nevertheless hardly visible within the battlegrounds. Even when twinks had the upper hand, fights rarely took the

form of twink-only duels (usually, fights are chaotic many-vs-many affairs). In theory, battleground twinks are nevertheless unique in their ability to exhibit skill over gear or level.

As with many of the case studies throughout this dissertation, my participatory observations of twinking practices in the *World of Warcraft* community are situated and subjective. Additionally, it also presents a snapshot of *World of Warcraft*'s evolution. As a case study dealing with individualized group play, my activities as a battleground twink nevertheless allowed me to provide insight into games of stake taking place between players among themselves, and between players and the intended design. Taking an active part in a deviant play practice some players would even consider cheating, allowed me to investigate ongoing negotiations concerning agency over the game and over other players is at stake, as well as the impact these negotiations have for the game in general.

After the period I participated in the game as a battleground twink to create this case study, the possibilities for twinking changed remarkably. With patch 2.3 (Novmber 2007), Blizzard introduced newly improved items to the old, low-level instances, including gear seemingly dedicated directly to battleground twinks. By doing so, Blizzard did not only acknowledge the popularity of twinking but also institutionalized it in *World of Warcraft*'s official core design. And not without reason: the results of a 2008 survey done by a website dedicated to twinking indicated that 70% of respondents spent more than 50% of their time, and 20% even spending more than 90% of their time, playing their twinks. Two-thirds of all twinks said they did so in dedicated twink guilds (Drayner). In other words, battleground twinking changed from a somewhat controversial activity into a viable, even socially-oriented alternative to "normal" play.

Twinking's evolutionary changes show that what is considered to be counterproductive, even destructive deviance can, through popular demand, persistent presence and acknowledgement by Blizzard, turn into part of *World of Warcraft*'s core use as intended by the game's design team. This process of normalization does not necessarily imply widespread acceptance of twinking among *World of Warcraft*'s community however. It is conceivable that Blizzard simply recognized the popularity of the practice itself within the battlegrounds, which triggered them to make it an institutionalized part of the game – whether players like it or not. Either way, what we encounter here is a game of stake concerning power relations between players which ultimately led to an evolutionary change of the game itself.

This case study has investigated twinking from several viewpoints, including its relation to virtual money, its dominance oriented nature, the way it interferes with intended MMORPG design and how it standardizes a game

which arguably is all about diversity. My aim is not to claim or pretend that these practices totally change the way twinkers experience their game. Being the result of luxury play, a battleground twink is rarely a player's main character, at least not during the period in *World of Warcraft*'s history when I was playing my twink. Having a battleground twink was like having an expensive hobby, while the locus of the game experience still took place at high levels, in the end-game content. Twinking is an activity pursued as a diversion or variation in the overall play experience. What we can say is that twinking points to the fact that a considerable number of players choose a form of play activity diverging from socially accepted forms of group play. In more than one sense, twinking is a form of transformative play that provides an entirely new way of approaching play within a MMORPG, as most of the intended design led by emergent variation is replaced by a very limited form of play aiming for a clear, quantifiable outcome. In a certain way, twinkers seem to play a game within a game which they have created for themselves by diverging from the norm.

In the next and final case study of this chapter, I focus on a play practice which, while less controversial, is all about gaining agency over other players in ways Blizzard's original design did not intend. After having dealt with individual and individualized group play in the first and second cases, the final case study addresses group play and introduces one of the most dedicated forms of instrumental play, raiding, in which a major part of the deviating practice is the creation and use of UI modifications.

4.4 Playing the interface

The user interface or UI represents one of most flexible parts of *World of Warcraft* in terms of what players are able to manipulate or add to the game. Players can, to certain extent, manipulate the looks of *World of Warcraft*'s native graphical user interface, and therefore their window on the world of Azeroth. Additionally, *World of Warcraft*'s application programming interface or API is set up to allow a certain level of access to the game's library, enabling the retrieval and, though UI modification, visualization of a large variety of data normally hidden from view. By using the appropriate UI modification, also called UI mod or add-on, players can, for instance, scan the in-game auction house to compile a pricing information database, or collect information about player performance for comparison purposes. Some UI mods are relatively simple and coded by individuals, others are large projects with groups of players writing and updating its code.

World of Warcraft's UI modding scene plays an important role in the game's participatory culture, as players have much freedom to manipulate the

existing user interface to improve or enrich their play experience, a freedom they do not have in relation to the instrumental rules and structures, or within the fictional world of Azeroth. Game researcher T. L. Taylor, however, warns us that we should not equate the participatory nature and use of UI modding with 'free, utopic, non-hierarchical, or unfettered' (2006b 9). Control still exists, both on the level of Game Contract (Blizzard has an extensive "UI Add-On Development Policy" giving Blizzard the means to allow and block add-ons as they see fit) and, as I show in this case study, on the level of Game Play.[101] What is at stake here is ultimate control over the game's mechanisms to attain the most optimized forms of instrumental performance. In contrast with the previous case studies, where players also negotiated the game's design mechanisms, the deviant practices investigated here are dedicated to group play, showing that players are not just gaining more agency over the game but willingly subject each other to new levels of social control in the process.

Dedicated instrumental group play in the form of raiding is such a demanding enterprise for those involved that UI mods have become more compulsory than optional. The harder the goal is, the more effort is required to get the right team together which then needs to function in perfect unison in order to succeed. According to the more dedicated raiding groups, without modifications, the basic user interface of the game lacks the tools to smoothly organize the players involved and manage the data streams of the ensuing battle. Through UI modification, the user interface during raiding has not only become more conveniently arranged but also the development of UI mods has resulted in voluntary social surveillance. As I argue in this case study, the use of UI mods as monitoring tools is not merely limited to inter-player surveillance. Players actively engage in "theorycrafting", a practice supported by UI modification, whose goal is to penetrate *World of Warcraft*'s hidden instrumental apparatus.

4.4.1 Mods as social surveillance tools

Because I decided that raiding should be part of my fieldwork research into *World of Warcraft* in late 2005, I become a semi-active member of a raid guild. By semi-active I mean that I did not participate in the guild's main raid team. Instead, I joined raids whenever there was a vacancy for a newcomer like me. My first experience with the use of raiding-oriented mods, however, was not

[101] According to Blizzard's 'UI Add-On Development Policy', add-ons must be free of charge; the code must be completely visible; they must not negatively impact *World of Warcraft* realms or other players; they may not include advertisements; they may not solicit donations; they must not contain offensive or objectionable material; they must abide by *World of Warcraft* ToU and EULA; and Blizzard has the right to disable add-on functionality as it sees fit (Blizzard Entertainment 2009). It further adds that 'failure to abide by them may result in measures up to and including taking formal legal action'(ibid.).

through using them but actually by forgetting to use them correctly. At one point I joined my guild in the Molten Core, at that time the hardest raiding instance of the game, requiring forty players to efficiently win. I registered my character on our guild's web forum to be able to take part in a "run" (a visit to a dungeon). I prepared by buying some fire resistant gear and potions (after consulting some dungeon strategy guides, I learned that some of the monsters in the Molten Core will fry you instantly without fire resistance), and I made sure I was online with my character on time. I was invited to the raid party by the leader and started to make my way to the entrance of the Molten Core raid dungeon, buried deep below the Blackrock Mountain. I was all ready to go when I received a message from the raid leader asking if my "CTRA" was malfunctioning. I quickly realized what he meant. The full name of the UI mod the raid leader was referring to is called CT _RaidAssist, and although I did not exactly know how it worked yet, I knew it was important for raiding so I had actually installed it some weeks earlier. The problem was, that a new version had come out during the intervening weeks, making my version outdated and dysfunctional. A quick reinstall could not prevent the fact that I was now late for the start of our run and moreover, I had let down the raid leader and the rest of the raid team who needed to wait for me. A similar event happened a few months later. While I did not register for a run, I happened to be online when the guild had an empty slot to fill on a raid to the Blackwing Lair dungeon, which had just been released by Blizzard through a patch. I offered my services but this time, because I did not have the required add-ons installed properly, I was simply denied access.

The main reason that my raid guild demanded me to install certain UI mods was not necessarily to improve my performance, but to improve the performance of the raid group as a whole. The CT _RaidAssist mod for instance enables players to view the health status of all other raid members through the interface (*World of Warcraft*'s own interface is limited to showing only five other characters). It is part of a collection of raiding mods called CTMod (Cide and TS 2005) and, being the first to offer such raid-dedicated modifications, it set the 'gold standard for raid add-ons' (Gilbert and Whitehead II 174). Raiding add-ons like the CTMod collection makes organizing and running a large group of people easier for its leader(s) to monitor the activity (or lack thereof) of each player. According to one of CTMod's creators, himself a raid-leader, the mod was created to make the job of leading a raid easier and smoother (Breckon 2007). Not just the leader but every player is able to see the status of all other members in the raid group. If someone is not using CTRA, everyone instantly notices. A simple glance at CT_RaidAssist's interface frames was enough for the guild leader I mentioned above to see that I was not prepared; I simply did not show up correctly in his add-on's display.

In the beginning of this chapter I discussed cheating, defined as the use of external sources (be it information, a modification or a hack) to improve play, as objectionable in the eyes of purists; in *World of Warcraft*, those who want to play on the highest levels will enter a situation where *not* using such external sources can lead to exclusion, purist or not. Having add-ons like CT_RaidAssist installed is not seen as an optional form of hyperproductive deviance, but as a precondition: without them you simply cannot participate in these forms of group play.

In Taylor's work on raiding communities, where she encountered similar mod-related situations, she points out that: 'because these tools have been refined through repeated use and iterative development and are widely adopted' (2006b 15). As such, they 'act as strong normative agents', a form of social coercion dictating how the game should be played (ibid.). In fact, on most raid guild websites and forums I visited, it is stated that the installation of a certain set of UI mods is simply mandatory. Installing UI mods to manipulate the game's standard design is a game of stake you cannot escape from when you desire to raid.

A raiding mod like CT_RaidAssist does not just dictate the norms for play (you have to install them in order to participate), but they also create a system of social control. Taylor speaks of raiding groups working with 'an extensive network of tools and functions that consistently monitor, surveil, and report at the micro level a variety of aspects of player behavior' (2006b 329). In *World of Warcraft* raiding guilds, people behave a certain way ie. are conditioned because they know other players might be watching and judging them, a situation which, as Taylor points out, is often thought of in terms of philosopher Michel Foucault's view of Jeremy Bentham's panopticon (1995), where people subjugate and discipline themselves without the need for or presence of a faceless oppressor or bureaucratic system.

Taylor is quick to add that 'we need to shade our understanding of surveillance a bit and consider the ways players readily adopt and enjoy what these tools afford' (2006b 14). The widespread use of UI mods like CTMod and KHLThreatmeter certainly suggest that players do not mind the potentially negative side of participatory social surveillance, as it helps them to excel in ways which would not have been possible without raiding mods. Social surveillance does not limit their freedom as much as it empowers them (Albrechtslund). We must remember that, like protocol, using UI mods remains voluntary, even if it becomes the standard. As media scholar Alexander Galloway points out when discussing computer protocol, 'proven success in the marketplace generally predates the creation of a [voluntary] standard. The behaviour is emergent, not imposed' (2004 128). The same can be said about social protocols. Being distributed rather than centralized as in a network, and

voluntarily fleeting rather than imposed and institutionalized by Blizzard, the participatory use of player-created UI mods evokes what French philosopher Gilles Deleuze called a society of control (1995). It presents the historical follow-up of the Foucault's disciplinary society, and presents less of a "prison" than the panopticon. UI mods are similar to computer protocol, which Galloway describes as 'a distributed management system that allows control to exist within a heterogeneous material milieu' (2004 8), arguing further that 'while protocol may be more *democratic* than the panopticon in that is strives to eliminate hierarchy, it is still very much structured around command and control' (2004 13, emphasis in original). We can see this in the way UI modification had been standardized into a precondition, as well as in the way raid leaders can monitor and if needed react to players who, in their eyes, misbehave or underperform. In terms of participatory control, the difference between a disciplinary society and a society of control is relative. As Deleuze observes: 'there is no need to ask which is the toughest regime, for it's within each of them that liberating and enslaving forces confront one another' (1995 179). Here, players liberate themselves from the limitations of *World of Warcraft*'s own group control mechanisms, replacing them with a new, participatory system.

The way the raiding community has shaped the use of certain UI mods as a precondition for both membership as well as interaction, has become one of the defining features of raiding customs and practices as an idioculture within *World of Warcraft*'s larger game culture. In the next section, I will show how the raider's fascination with *World of Warcraft*'s underlying data streams is not limited to the use of UI mods alone, and extends to live play situations.

4.4.2 Controlling code through theorycrafting

The use of raiding UI mods – products of *World of Warcraft*'s participatory culture – to access data otherwise hidden from view does not only change the way players interact with each other through participatory observation. As I show in this section, the fascination of instrumentally driven players of *World of Warcraft*'s hidden mechanics also touches the level of Game Design, as players try to gain agency over the hidden algorithms at the core of the game's code.

Not just data monitoring, but also data analysis are important means of control for a dedicated raid guild. While UI mods like CT_Raidassist are well-suited for live in-game monitoring, many guilds prefer to capture the data streams and to evaluate their performances afterwards. Blizzard actually allows players to log a large variety of different combat data by typing in the "/combatlog" command into the game's chat window. Combat data is then

saved in a simple text file in one of the game's folders.[102] Recognizing the popularity of data monitoring and analysis among hardcore raiders, Blizzard has continued to expand the possibilities of *World of Warcraft*'s internal combat log system, allowing both a larger range of data tracking options as well as allowing player produced UI mods to access more data in an easier fashion.[103] Using Blizzard's combat log data, players can export their performance, or better said: an abstract, quantified version of their performance, and upload them to a variety of websites dedicated to data log analysis, like wowwebstats.com or worldoflogs.com. On such sites, players can analyse raid activities, for example an attack on a particular instance boss, per class types (tank/healer/dps), per class (warrior, hunter, priest, etc.), per individual player, per attack type (melee, class-based ranged attacks, etc.), and so on.

While most of such sites offer the possibility to keep data private to a player's own guild members, many guilds open up their performance data for all to see. This performance exhibitionism, where data recorded in the relatively private sphere of a raid is made publicly available, again shows that many players do not consider social surveillance as an issue. In fact, top guilds can use data analysis sites alongside video recordings to showcase their skill outside of the boundaries of the game.

The possibilities for extensive data analysis in games have fuelled the practice of theorycrafting which, according to the most used *World of Warcraft* wiki, is 'the attempt to mathematically analyze game mechanics in order to gain a better understanding of the inner workings of the game'.[104] Many websites, blogs and forums are dedicated in part or in whole to theorycrafting. In most cases, theorycrafting aims to understand the inner mechanics of individual classes and the way their offensive or defensive methods can be optimized, as well as how they benefit optimally from "buffs", beneficial spells or other effects received from other classes. While the first form of optimization might benefit individual play (like solo-killing difficult mobs), as well as individualized group play (like twinking, or PvP in general), the latter aims to optimize coordinated group play such as raiding. Theorycrafting, or 'rule mining' as Mortensen also refers to the practice, then is one of the most hyperproductive, instrumental efforts to understand *World of Warcraft*'s inner algorithms, a part of

[102] The same applies to saving chat sessions and other non-combat info through the "/chatlog" command.

[103] In the periods directly after the implementation of changes in the combat log system, usually during a patch, mod makers usually need some time to adjust their mods to the changes. When the changes Blizzard makes are substantial, this can take more than a few days, sometimes even weeks are needed for adjustment. As one UI mod scene observer commented: 'that first week or two without our beloved add-ons such as Omen [a popular threat meter add-on] and damage meters reminded us just how much we've come to rely on them, for better or worse' (Porter). Remarks like these show how much the raiding community has come to depend on using UI mods for play.

[104] From wowwiki.com (http://www.wowwiki.com/Theorycrafting, accessed August 10, 2009).

participatory culture aimed directly at breaking down the barriers of game design which hide the official rules of play (2010 80).

While I will not post actual theorycraft calculations here, the following list of steps from a hunter class-oriented fan site will suffice in demonstrating the extreme efforts some players go through to optimize their performance through data analysis and theorycrafting:

1. *Sniff Test*: first thing is just to look at stuff and determine which [class and character abilities] won't make the cut. If something increases my health by 10%, I know that won't have any impact on my dps. This is also the stage where I sit around for a while and try to think up clever ways to take advantage of abilities, or combinations of abilities.
2. *Paper Napkin Theorycraft***:** the next step is I do some crude and simple calculations to see approximately where things stand. If there was something that was on the fence on the sniff test, I'll go ahead and eliminate it if it sucks at this stage. Mostly I'm determining what order to test in. This step is often done while driving.
3. *Collect Data*: next step is a whole ton of target dummy testing to collect my baseline data for stuff like glyphs (dps totals without glyphs, percentage of damage from each shot, stats of each shot, etc.)
4. *Theorycrafting*: Then I sit down and do the number crunching. As I've said before, the math here isn't hard. The hard part is setting up your equations to take everything into account. The most common theorycrafting errors come from people who just set up their equations wrong so they double up on something, or leave something out. This is Data Point 1.
5. *Testing*: Next is the really really painful part of actually testing in-game. I do testing on the target dummy, because it is the only perfectly controlled environment we have (assuming no one else is attacking it). I usually do this with raid buffs. This is Data Point 2.
6. *Spreadsheet Checking*: I also plug the data into a spreadsheet and see what it has to say. This is Data Point 3.

Now I have three data points to compare. If they all agree, then it's easy to smile and say my work is done; however, if one of them disagrees, then it's time to go back and try to find out why one is wrong. I could have made an error in my Theorycrafting – it happens. The spreadsheet could be wrong – it happens a decent amount. The in-game data could actually be wrong too! Perhaps the presence of raid

> buffs would radically alter the result, rather than scale it across all options evenly. That also must be investigated (Frostheim, emphasis in original).

Guides like the one above supporting data analysis and theorycrafting might not provide an entirely trustworthy interpretation of the game's mechanics, however they do show players where they are lagging behind and, more importantly, where and how they can improve. By collecting data through add-ons and using guides and spreadsheets for theorycrafting, players aim to gain more agency over the game's mechanics otherwise hidden from view.

In the game of stakes of theorycrafting, the perceived agency over the game is at least partly imagined, and Blizzard likes to keep it this way. By implementing unknown and random elements into combat mechanics, Blizzard refuses to let theorycrafters attain full knowledge about the game's core algorithms. As Blizzard's lead systems designer Greg "Ghostcrawler" Street pointed out in a forum discussion on a theorycraft issue:

> We like for players to experiment with gear, talents and the like. Having black boxes adds depth and a sense of exploration to the game. When everything is known with certainty, you can do things like definitively know the best choice in every situation, theorycrafting is dead (posted on the US forums, April 17, 2009).

So, while players may use elaborate sniff tests, spreadsheets and calculations to gage performance with every possible character setup and usable piece of gear, there is no full guarantee that a particular optimized setup is better than another: through design, Blizzard has added black boxes which shield the game's internal calculations from the player.

For players, theorycraft is a game within a game where the stakes are so highly instrumental that it aims to deconstruct *World of Warcraft* down to its bare algorithms. For Blizzard, theorycraft should remain a game: they know the practice is part of what keeps hardcore players coming back for more. Theorycraft provides players with never ending potential for improvement, even if this improvement is barely noticeable in play. While a particular sword may inflict a certain amount of damage on a mob, according to theorycraft spreadsheets there might be another sword which does 0,1% more damage in a certain context. Even with differences this small, instrumentally driven players usually strive to get this "better" axe, even if it means weeks of raiding, and thus a prolonged subscription to the game. Again, we must not underestimate the advantages and joy players derive from theorycrafting – whether they do it

themselves or make use of other player's calculations and guides. As Mortensen points out:

> If another [player] ends up using your contribution to create a better theory of how the game works, and eventually beats you, he hasn't really won and you haven't really lost. Instead the communal knowledge has grown, and you have both used it, added to it, and learned from it (2010 88).

I too have used theorycraft advise many times over when deciding which item was worth the effort to obtain. But we must keep in mind that, as one critical observer keenly blogged, 'theorycraft provides an irresistible carrot to the MMORPG game mechanic stick', keeping players engaged with the game through partly illusive forms of agency (Lewisham).

In the final part of this case study, I discuss the implications of the negotiations between the levels of Game Play (social surveillance), Game Culture (UI mods and theorycrafting) and Game Design (a manipulatable UI, but black boxed game mechanics) to illuminate the ways the game is experienced by those heavily invested in instrumental group play practices.

4.4.3 Exposing the inside

We can argue that *World of Warcraft* is primarily experienced visually through its computer-generated fictional world, the diegetic information, while much of the non-diegetic UI, with all its buttons and data readouts, remains relegated to the periphery of the screen. This is not to say that the non-diegetic does not play an important part in play. Even with its emphasis on the fictional world, *World of Warcraft* is no different from other video games (and especially other MMORGPs) in the way that it does not attempt to hide its underlying instrumental data flows. As Galloway expresses, video games rather 'flaunt' the fact that data plays an important role, as game designers know that through this information players understand how a game operates and what it asks them to do (2006 90-91). As explained in the previous chapter, playing *without* the UI is nearly impossible: it constantly communicates key information concerning your character and his or her actions to the player. *WoW*'s native UI features many pop-up frames and action bars, showing among other things a character's current inventory and gear setup, to the offensive/defensive spells at his or her disposal, and information about the character's health and that of the opponent he or she is fighting. Most of the information found in the frames and bars of the UI can be interacted with; clicking on a spell in an action bar results in your character using this spell; right-clicking on a helmet in the backpack-frame results in equipping this helmet. It is the non-diegetic that

informs and supports much of what happens in the diegetic, but through the UI the player also controls what takes places in the centre of the players' gaze, the fictional world of Azeroth.

Installing and using UI modifications, like those for raiding discussed above, add more non-diegetic material which subsequently also moves closer to the centre of the screen due to the limitations of screen space. The non-diegetic cluttering of the screen is not perceived as a drawback of using add-ons per se, as these add-ons *require* attention in the form of constant monitoring of both individual and group performance. Therefore, the non-diegetic becomes even more pronounced during play. In my case, by using the add-ons my raiding guild asked me to use, meant not just a shift in perceiving the game in terms of the balance between diegetic and non-diegetic elements, it also changed the way I played the game. In order to arrive at a constant optimal performance, I trained myself to always keep an eye on the add-on data streams, a habit which also started to influence my play experience during individual play and during play in small group formations. Most of this influence was not as much related to social surveillance but had to do with a shift from interacting with the fictional world (that which takes place in the world of Azeroth) to interacting with the interface (the flat layer of data located in front of the fiction).

Raiding UI mods introduce into play an emphasis on the non-diegetic which is so potent that it can result in players partly or wholly discounting the diegetic. An add-on like CT_RaidAssist alone adds several new windows to the interface, and instead of acting as pop-ups which are only brought to the front during periods of inactivity, having them in view *during* action is encouraged or even mandatory as the data streams they show are essential to dedicated instrumental group play. The sheer amount of extra interface superimposed over the game world transforms the way players conceive the game; even on large monitors, the fictional world is now competing with the abstract bars and meters of the interface. What was at first a matter of slaying a monster in a gloomy cavern becomes increasingly more a matter of observing a UI health bar slowly depleting to zero. Here, players actively manipulate Blizzard's game design through hyperproductive deviance – a game of stake where players strive for more agency over the underlying instrumental mechanics of their performance – thus reducing their view of the fictional world in the process.

The obligatory cluttering of the screen through add-ons is arguably less influential on play than the actual interaction with these add-ons; something which can be explained with a typical raiding example. As a hunter, a dps class type, my main job during raiding was to aim my bow at whatever target the rest of the group was trying to kill. Usually, one player within a party or raid is responsible for choosing the order of the targets which need to be brought down, a position known as the "main assist" or "MA". With the abundance of

player characters, NPCs and mobs on screen at the same time, usually crowded up in one spot, selecting a target by clicking on it in the game world can be difficult. Raiding add-ons offer the possibility to simply click on an interface button which represents the MA's current target. The more targets you need to select during combat, the more you must rely on UI interaction (rather than selecting targets in the fictional world) in order to avoid chaos.[105] Information about ongoing combat events is not just communicated visually through UI mods but, in some cases, also through audio. The Deadly Boss Mods add-on, for instance, sends out an audio signal as well as a textual warning to inform players that a raid dungeon boss is about to unleash a certain spell or attack, which does away with the necessity to pay attention to a boss' behaviour within the fictional world.

Large-scale, elaborate fights in raid dungeons then become a matter of reading, interpreting and interacting with the UI data rather than trying to make sense of what is happening in the fictional world. As I said earlier, being habituated to the use of add-ons during raids also informed my play in individual situations and in small groups, where I began to use my UI data more than before, sometimes even triggering irritation when I witnessed other players underperforming in casual rather than highly instrumental play situations. Like walkthroughs, UI mods are paratextual thresholds: they have the potential to go beyond simply providing additional information to the player; they control one's reading of the game as a whole.

Playing with the interface instead of the fictional world is reminiscent of the types of game out of which MMORPG's like *World of Warcraft* evolved: wargames and strategy games. Within these games, fictional worlds may be present but the action of the player exists, as Galloway puts it, on 'an informatic layer once removed from the pretend play scenario of representational character and story' (2006 14). When non-diegetic player actions take place within the game instead of in non-playable phases like the setup, they turn into 'gamic actions in which the act of configuration itself *is the very site of gameplay*' (2006 13, emphasis in original). This is exactly what raiding in *World of Warcraft* can feel like: not playing with the interface but playing the interface *itself*. By doing so, players 'enact the algorithm' instead of enacting a character within a fictional world (2006 19).

[105] An alternative for UI mods are so-called macro commands or macros. For example, by tying the command "/assist <player x>" to the keyboard letter "e" makes sure you automatically target <player x>'s target every time you hit the "e" button. While the macro system is native to the game and not an add-on, it also circumvents the fictional in favour of the interface. Macro's are limited in use and adaptability during group action, which is why they are often used next to UI mods by raiders and not instead.

Theorycrafting strengthens the feeling that the data streams from UI mods are the primary tool through which to play the game. The often minute results of skills and gear optimization through theorycrafting can only be perceived in action through UI mods. For the instrumentally-driven player, getting better statistical results during a boss fight can become as (or even more) important and enjoyable than killing the boss itself. By inventing new individual and group-oriented goals based on data rather than fictional victories, the focus on *World of Warcraft*'s underlying mechanics and data streams is a way to cope with the repetitive nature of raiding, where raid dungeons are "run" over and over, even when the challenge of beating its bosses has long passed.

While the use of UI mods and theorycrafting practices grant players increased agency over their performance as well as new goals to strive for, the emphasis on data brings with it a de-emphasis on the individual player's (virtual) identity. The heavy use of participatory surveillance and theorycrafting can be seen as part of what Taylor has called the 'relational' orientation of dedicated, instrumentally-oriented group players like raiders: 'paying attention to how the competencies of people relate to each other and how they can be coordinated' (2006c 86). It also evokes an important element of Deleuze's societies of control, which sees its members reduced from individuals to 'dividuals' (1995 180), a term political scientist Robert Williams explains as: 'a physically embodied human subject that is endlessly divisible and reducible to data representations via the modern technologies of control, like computer-based systems' (Williams 2005). Players of games like *World of Warcraft* are already represented as game characters, as such replacing the real with a virtual embodiment. Through the emphasis on UI modification and theorycrafting, raiders stratify themselves – and each other – even further into abstract, aggregated data representations within and outside of the game.

Recombined, these data representations can form the measure through which player's are judged. Taylor points out that through the 'rationalization and quantification of action [raiders] also strongly inform (and potentially limit) what is seen as "good play" or what is viewed as reasonable' (2008 195). This represents both the ultimate joy and ultimate sacrifice of raiding. One the one hand players have found a way to reclaim agency over the inner working of the game by logging, analysing and enacting *World of Warcraft*'s hidden algorithms, creating a new game experience of interface play where the fictional world becomes almost superfluous. On the other hand, by understanding what makes the game tick and acting accordingly, players have put a self-imposed regime in place where social surveillance (both in and outside the game) and optimization through theorycrafting playfully forces players into certain play behaviours, leaving little room for deviance.

4.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have looked at three cases of games of stake, each showing different tactics players use to gain agency over *World of Warcraft*'s design on individual, individualized group and group play levels. In the case study on powerleveling, I have shown that paratextual information in the form of walkthroughs provide players with the means to circumvent the dominant strategies of progress as designed by Blizzard. In the study on twinking, I used my own experience of becoming a battleground twink as a starting point to investigate this controversial practice in which players create a new game mid-game where dominating other players is the main attraction. Finally, the case study on UI modification and data analysis practices among raiders showed how agency over the game's design is gained by playing the interface.

Most of these deviant tactics discussed in this chapter make use of what Consalvo calls "found" actions or items, which improve play without actually breaking any coded or contractual rules (2007 114). I called the use of such found actions or items hyperproductive deviance, an addition to Mortensen's counterproductive and destructive deviance (2008 208). Counterproductive and destructive deviance provide their own forms of agency over or in the game; in the former by defying the goals set by the game's design, in the latter by purposely breaking with social protocol. The tactics of hyperproductive deviance provides players with the means to gain agency over the rules of the game design without necessarily defying them. Rather, they used the affordances of the game's design to make *World of Warcraft* work to their advantage, whether this advantage is over the game itself or over other players.

Through these case studies, I have showed a development of hyperproductive deviance which did not just move from individual to individualized group to group play, but also demonstrated an decreasing emphasis on the fictional world during play. Using walkthroughs, especially those aimed at powerleveling, replace the game's emergent narrative structure with more instrumentally oriented linear progression. Battleground twinkers are hardly concerned with the fictional while they collect the best items to outfit their twink character, or engage their opponents in combat. The repetitive nature of raiding where bosses are killed many times over, as well as the fact that much of a raider's engagement with the game during a fight takes place on the interface level, makes raiding's relationship with *WoW*'s fiction ambiguous. In the games of stake presented in this chapter, play moves away from fictional and social play practices to a more "bare bones" approach where play engages the inner, instrumental core of the game's design.

What the case studies in this chapter also show, however, is that tactics of hyperproductive deviance do not free players from control exercised from

the perspectives of Game Design, nor from the perspective of Game Contract. By manipulating and circumventing the dominant strategies of the game rather than breaking or hacking the rules of the game, players still need to make do with the affordances and limitations of *World of Warcraft*'s core design. I have, for instance, shown how the black boxes shielding the algorithmic core of the game prohibit theorycrafters from gaining full agency over the game's mechanics, and how powerlevelers still use quests as a dominant strategy for leveling up, even though they have no interest in the fiction the quests have to offer. From the perspective of Game Contract, we can see that, while hyperproductive deviance grants players with more agency over either the game or other players, they are still subject to social protocol. Players might, for instance, be considered cheats while powerleveling or twinking, which could result in social exclusion by their peers. In the form of participatory surveillance through UI modification, players even add additional layers of control to their game experience.

Whether or not players see such new social forms of control, or the fact that their agency over the game's design is partly illusionary, as problematic depend on the stakes of those involved. For most players powerleveling, twinking or theorycrafting, the perceived agency over the game and/or its players weighs more than the potential drawbacks. In any case, the way the game is experienced by those deviating from the dominant design is transformed considerably, both temporally (during powerleveling or twinking a character) and potentially indefinitely (habituating interface play).

From a Game Design perspective, there are also visible transformations. The deviant play strategies and the stakes they represented all directly and indirectly led to evolutionary changes in *World of Warcraft*'s formal design. Recognizing the annoyance slow leveling presented to players who wanted to start new characters, Blizzard has continued to ease the leveling process through patches and expansion packs. As explained in the second case study, the popularity of battleground twinking also resulted in the practice of twinking being institutionalized into the core design through the implementation of twink-oriented items on the lower levels. Similarly, many of the tools and affordances provided by raiding mods as discussed in the third case study eventually found their way in *WoW*'s official native UI, as a result making the player-created mods redundant. In such cases of adaptation and appropriation, what once was hyperproductive deviance has become an official part of the game. Such evolutionary changes are as much part of the outcome of the games of stake discussed in the chapter as the altered forms of agency and control players have over the game and/or other players.

Whereas in this chapter, most acts of defiance and deviance took place within the game, in the next chapter, I will look at games of stake which

transgress the boundaries of the game. By doing so, I will show that the battlefields of negotiation between stakeholders are not limited to the game but extend beyond it, with both players and Blizzard trying to stake their claims to *World of Warcraft* through various criminal, creative, legal, and managerial means.

CHAPTER 5: CLAIMING THE GAME

5.1 Introduction

The case studies I present in this chapter elevate the concept of games of stake to the next level, that of Game Contract, each investigating play practices and other forms of participation which exist in the marginal grey areas of what is possible and/or allowed with and within *World of Warcraft*. Like the case studies in the previous chapter, these case studies feature players who, through practices diverging from the intended use of the game or by judging other players playing the game differently, try to claim agency over what they consider to be their game. Additionally, these cases offer insight into the managerial activities of Blizzard Entertainment and its employees as they enforce the virtual law they have promulgated in the game's contracts, and by doing so they clarify just how far players are allowed to go in their efforts to claim the game through games of stake. The main question is then: how do different stakeholders situate themselves, or how are they *allowed* to situate themselves, in games of stake where what the game is, and how it should be played, is the key concern?

As in the previous chapter, the approach taken to the case studies fits within my framework of play in that it embraces the notions of individual play, individualised group play and group play practices. Because most of the games of stake discussed in this chapter take place on a meta-level of interaction with the game – not only inside but also outside of the game – the distinction between instrumental and free play will receive less emphasis here. Attention to practices taking place outside of the game world allows for a clearer understanding that the boundaries of play are not set by the game's design, but by its use – what is and what is not part of the game depends on the stakeholders and the stakes they set.

As often happens when doing fieldwork, the first case study presented in this chapter is a result of coincidence. At one point, I found my *World of Warcraft* account compromised; someone managed to get access to my login name and password. As a result, I found out that all my characters' virtual money and items, gathered over a period of more than two years, had been stolen. What followed was an intricate game of stake between Blizzard, who, as a service provider, could hopefully recover my losses; myself as a player who just lost his entire gaming capital; and a third, mysterious stakeholder in the form of a hacker or scammer, whose game it was to turn my affective gaming capital into monetary value. The larger issue at stake, however, is not a personal but general discussion about the ever more permeable boundaries between virtual worlds and the real world, and the way both players as well as

Blizzard attach monetary and affective value to the distinction between what is virtual or real.

The second case study focuses on games of stake concerning creative productions by players. It investigates the production of machinima, animations made through the game's engine, and their position as both welcome cultural objects as well as potentially destructive forces. Again, what is seen as welcome and/or destructive differs per stakeholder. What I show are two (in)famous *World of Warcraft* machinima movies and the way Blizzard and the player community reacted to them. Both productions violated the game's contract during the process of their creation. One of them, an epic fantasy tale set in Warcraft's fictional universe, was nevertheless awarded a prize by Blizzard. The other, showcasing a guerrilla-like form of devious play, was asked to be removed from several sites which hosted it. To prevent massive copycat behaviour, Blizzard ultimately even introduced changes to the game itself. Both cases expose the fine line between "good" and "bad" appropriation, within creative games of stake.

This chapter's final case study gives attention to a moment of power asymmetry and clashes between different player groups during a large in-game event instigated by Blizzard. Here, games of stake relating to the management and governance of the player base is under investigation. In this case, Blizzard faced community breakdowns as a result of new content aimed directly at a small segment of hardcore players, namely the raiders. The stakeholders here are not mere individuals but are shown to be groups of players, formed around certain preferred forms of play. Additionally, *World of Warcraft*'s form of governance will be compared with other virtual world games in order to convey how much (or little) power players are endowed with to manage their own inter-player and inter-group struggles. The practices of Blizzard's customer service employees play an important part also, and show the affordances and limitations the game contracts provide these particular stakeholders for the management of the player community.

The games of stake discussed in this chapter relate to money, creativity and community, which cover a wide spectrum of play norms and values under contractual negotiation. While different in approach and topic, the three cases in this chapter all propel the concept of games of stake to a next level, using the Game Contract perspective to show how claims about what the game is, and how it should be played, are grounded in social and legal contracts. By investigating not just the socially but also the legally negotiated boundaries of *World of Warcraft*, the affordances but most notably the limitations of the MMORPG's participatory culture become more pronounced.

5.2 Virtual thievery

Of all three case studies in this chapter, this first one deals most directly with the level of Game Contract. It tells the story of how I, for a short period of time, was banned from playing *World of Warcraft* due to allegedly taking part in illegal activities, with "illegal" here being defined as contravening the contractual rules as set by Blizzard in the legal documents accompanying the game. In reality, I was actually a victim of "virtual crime" – an awkwardly dual status of being both perpetrator and victim. I encountered firsthand what happens when a player collides with the legal side of *World of Warcraft*, a part of the game most players will not even notice after they click 'I agree' after installing the software. The aim of this case study however is not just to show my encounters with virtual law, but also to show the games of stake which surround the reason I became entangled in these problems in the first place. This is a case study about the trading of real-world money for virtual currency or other virtual services, a form of trading which is highly controversial not just on a legal level but on a community level as well, because it significantly alters the way the game can be played.

5.2.1 Play, work or crime

In late-April 2008 I received a phone call from a friend and fellow guild member in Sweden. This immediately struck me as awkward, given that our usual communication was customarily conducted through email and in-game chat, and there are charges attached to calling from Sweden to the Netherlands. The reason she called was to ask a question: had I been online in the game during that day? My answer was no; I had become a father just a week before, so playing *World of Warcraft* had not been on the menu for some time. She replied that she had been expecting this answer – my guild was aware that I had become a parent – and informed me that she and other guild members had still seen several of my characters online during that day performing all kinds of irregular and strange things. My characters did not reply to any in-game messages or other forms of communications when prompted. Worse even, some of my characters had been actively absconding with large numbers of valuable items from the guild's bank.

It did not take me long to understand that my account had been compromised. And indeed, after I hung up the phone and tried to log in into the game I found that my password had been changed, preventing me from reaching my characters. I quickly ran all my virus, adware and spyware scanners and, after having persuaded myself that all would be safe, retrieved and changed my password through the official website's account management

page.[106] Finally and with a freshly reset password I could log into the game. Those responsible for compromising my account had been very active indeed. All my high level characters had been dispersed throughout the game world. The most unpleasant surprise however was that, for the most part, all the items in their bags and bank accounts had disappeared. All the gold and most of the items I had compiled were gone. My characters were robbed right down to their virtual bones.

What happened when they broke in into my account and stole my virtual belongings, goes beyond cheating. Duping players into giving you their virtual currency inside of the game is one thing, but breaking into your account outside of the game in order to log into the game and strip characters of their belongings is a significant step beyond the boundaries of the game. Calling such practices a crime nevertheless remains difficult in terms of real-world law. We could say that the robbery of my virtual goods is a virtual crime, in the same way that the robbery of real goods can be called real crime. The problem with the term virtual crime is the word "virtual". As law scholars Gregory Lastowka and Dan Hunter put it, 'the term virtual crime can be just as meaningless as the term "virtual pet" if it is defined to include all computer-generated simulations of crime', adding that 'realistic simulations of mass murder occur every day on the computer monitors of those playing *Grand Theft Auto III* and on home entertainment centres displaying DVD's of *Hamlet*' (123). My aim here is not just to show that the theft of my virtual goods, or the burglary of my account was indeed a crime, but to convey how my quest to retrieve my virtual belongings led me to investigate what allowed the game environment to become a place where I could be robbed in the first place.[107]

The games of stake addressed in this case study revolve around the so-called Real-Money Trade (RMT), the buying and selling of virtual currency for real money, introduced in the previous chapter when I described twinking as a form of luxury play. It is also closely linked to the reason many players resort to speedrunning and powerleveling guides, also discussed in the previous chapter, as buying gold reduces the time needed to play (you earn gold by doing quests and killing mobs). The practice of buying gold is widespread in the genre. Games researcher Nick Yee gathered statistical data on MMO users and found

[106] I could find no virus infections, keyloggers or other malware on the three computers on which I had installed *World of Warcraft*. To this day, I still have not found a conclusive answer to how someone would have gotten access to my account details. Later that April, Blizzard and Adobe released a statement that old versions of Adobe Flash Player for browsers had vulnerability issues potentially targeting *World of Wacraft* players and their accounts. This might have happened but a definitive answer remains elusive.

[107] A narrower definition of what happened to my account is cybercrime, a crime committed against a computer by means of a computer. These forms of computer-mediated and – oriented crime, including "phising", are on the books in the real-world law of many countries (Lastowka and Hunter 123-33).

that twenty-two percent of all respondents admitted having bought virtual currency at one point (averaging $135), with older respondents – likely to have less time for play and more money to spend – turning out to buy virtual gold more often, and in larger quantities, than younger respondents (2005a). Getting a character to the highest level and then collecting the best/unique/prettiest/etc. gear is one of the main goals of a MMORPG like *World of Warcraft*. Levelling takes time, as does item collecting and some items can be bought but the better or rarer the item, the higher the price. Gathering enough virtual money to buy such items also takes time. And this is where a typical market system reveals itself; if a player wants something badly enough, he will pay any asking price for an item, even if it means coughing up real world money. As economy scholar Edward Castranova points out, the trade of virtual money for real world money (and the other way around) resembles 'nothing more than an ordinary foreign exchange rate' (26). The RMT phenomenon has resulted in a global virtual economy, its estimated size varying between several hundreds of millions to two billion US dollars at around the time of the theft (Lehtiniemi).

A famous early study on the relationship between MMORPGs and the real world economy raised quite a few eyebrows when it was published. Castranova calculated in 2001 that the gross national product per capita of Norrath made it the 77th richest country in the world, on par with countries like Russia and Bulgaria (2001 28). Norrath of course is not a real country, but the fictional world of MMORPG *Everquest*. But, as Castranova pointed out, 'from an economist's point of view, any distinct territory with a labour force, a gross national product, and a floating exchange rate, has an economy', including virtual territories where the labour force consist of thousands of players, and their labour is play (2001 16).

The most important difference between the real world economy and virtual economies is the legal status of trade. Whereas a real world country's government usually promotes the import and export of goods, many commercial games like *World of Warcraft* are controlled by companies who see such activities as illegal, and who do not hesitate to act accordingly when they find out you are guilty of RMT practices. Therefore, stealing virtual gold from other players is a virtual crime, but so is buying it with real money. On the level of Game Contract, Blizzard considers such trade a punishable crime. One of the main reasons for deeming this form of trade illegal is that it can cause problems such as hyperinflation within the in-game economy (as seen in the twinking case), problems which potentially interfere with players' enjoyment of the game. Still, many entrepreneurially-minded players and, in some cases, companies actively promote RMT because there is money to be made.

Due to the relative newness of MMORPG money trading, RMT exists in the grey areas of real world law and has attracted some highly dubious business practices as well as outright criminal behaviour. One of the larger players in the RMT field, virtual currency buyer/seller Internet Gaming Entertainment (IGE), is especially infamous for what investigative journalist and author Julian Dibbell calls its large-scale 'entrepreneurial madness' (2006b 203).[108] In addition to RMT activities, IGE is also notorious for its involvement (through its parent companies) in buying up the three biggest *World of Warcraft* information databases thottbot, allakhazam and *WoW*head, lead many players to fear that these user-generated databases would be bombarded with gold selling ads.[109] Whether or not these fears are warranted in this case, they are certainly understandable.[110] *World of Warcraft* players live under a constant barrage of gold selling spam, both in the game (through in-game chat and mail) and outside of it (on websites, forums, and even Twitter).

The supply-side of RMT to a large degree involves the large-scale use of farm bots, third-party software programs able to play the game without the need of human action (prohibited by the EULA), and the exploitation of workforces in low-wage countries. In the last case, we find cunning entrepreneurs who set up sweat shops where people "play" 24/7 in shifts to produce virtual goods and/or power-level characters for those who want to pay for it (Dibbell 2006b, 2007). Since their appearance on the MMO scene, these so called "Chinese gold farmers" have become the focal point of anti-RMT player sentiment.[111]

Worse yet, RMT spawned an army of "players" using phishing, keylogging and hacking practices to try to get access to players' accounts, stealing whatever there is with real world value. According to a report from

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[108] IGE's long-time CEO, former child actor Brock Pierce, became notorious for his allegedly sordid history, including 'the purchase of illegal drugs, child molestation, the transport of minors across state lines and the death of Pierce's dog at the hands of the "Spanish FBI."', as well as running a dotcom bubble company into the ground for which he fled the US (Cavalli).

[109] IGE's involvement of acquisitions and other takeovers is difficult to track. Several "exposés" written by mostly anonymous sources provide a "paper trail" of news items and other bits and pieces of data, showing that IGE had created a new company, RPG Holdings, to function as a friendly looking front through which to buy websites and networks like thottbot.com and mmorpg.net in 2004. These sites became part of the freshly created Zam.com network, to which popular MMORPG database allakhazam.com was added in 2006. Another company, Affinity Media, swooped in in 2007 to become the new owner of Zam.network and IGE. In this period, WoWhead.com, the third biggest WoW database, was purchased as well as several Korean gold-selling websites (see for example Looterslounge ; "Advocate").

[110] The owner of the databases after the acquisitions, Affinity Media, publicly stated that they were 'no longer in that business', but new rumours and evidence kept emerging that showed the link with IGE was still there – some would even claim IGE is the secret owner of Affinity Media (Edan Van Zelfden).

[111] The person or persons responsible for plundering my goods actually made a new character on my account called Gouyun. Either this person was from Asian/Chinese descent, or this name tag cheekily hinted at the prejudice that all hackers/bots/gold farmers are from China.

software security company Symantec, 2007 saw the black-market price for *World of Warcraft* account details rise to ten dollars, rivalling the price of credit card details (Symantec). It is not much, considering what you potentially get for that sum. An accounting using the then rate of exchange between *World of Warcraft* and US dollars showed that what was taken from me was worth about $186, and that number only represents the worth of the gold pieces, not the value of the huge stockpile of sellable items that was taken from my characters and the guild bank.[112] I would be considered an average player in terms of accumulated virtual wealth, yet the potential profit of stealing virtual goods is large. These acts, as well as the use of bots and other dubious practices are far removed from actually playing the game. Legal or illegal, they are at "work" making money, using a playful medium (or their users) as their field of work.

In the two paragraphs above, I put the terms play, player and work between quotation marks to signify that, when dealing with RMT issues, what is considered play and work becomes rather elastic and gelatinous. I do not share the classic view that play is an activity entirely unrelated to work or, as Johan Huizinga puts it, an activity that has 'no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it' (13).[113] Instead, I agree with game scholar Jesper Juul who regards potential real world profit from play a negotiable consequence of play (2005 36). Soccer can be played "just for fun", but also professionally, for money. The same goes for card games, or pretty much any game you can bet money on (which, arguably, can be done with all games). Games are characterized by 'the fact that they can be assigned consequences on a per-play basis', including making money through play (ibid.).

Whether people on the supply or demand sides of RMT are still playing instead of working however does not merely depend on social protocols and is under investigation in the third part of this case study. First, I will show that, for Blizzard, buying or selling virtual goods is very much a non-negotiable consequence of play. While for players, the negotiations concerning RMT might take place on the level of game community, for Blizzard their opinion on RMT is codified on the level of Game Contract; the EULA does not allow it, and if caught your account will be blocked from accessing the game temporally or indefinitely.

5.2.2 The power of small print

When I found out that my account had been broken into and plundered, the first thing I did was to report the theft by sending a message to Blizzard's in-

[112] Rate of exchange taken from *MMOBUX – Advanced MMOG Currency Research* (http://www.mmobux.com/, data retrieved May 8, 2008).
[113] If anything, we are rather looking at what Dibbell senses to be 'the emergence of a curious new industrial revolution, driven by play as the first was driven by steam' (2006b 297).

game helpdesk. It took a mere five minutes for Blizzard to reply, although they did not contact me within the game. Instead, I received the following email:

> Greetings,
>
> We are writing to inform you that, unfortunately, we have had to temporarily suspend your *World of Warcraft* account and place a final warning on it.
>
> Account Name: ACCOUNT
>
> Type of Violation: Involvement in online trading activities Investigation Concluded: 28/04/2008 Consequences for Account: Account suspended for 72 hours, Password Reset and Final Warning issued.
>
> It is with regret that we take this type of action, but it is in the best interests of the *World of Warcraft* community as a whole, and for the integrity of the game. After your suspension has expired, you will be able to access the *World of Warcraft* servers again.
>
> Please note that should any further violations of our Rules and Policies occur, this will almost certainly lead to the permanent closure of your account. (personal communication with Account Administration Team, Blizzard Entertainment Europe, April 29, 2008).

Instead of a talk with a GM, the usual result after sending an inquiry to the in-game helpdesk, I was confronted with a seventy-two hour ban for 'online trading activities'. I could no longer log into the game. Even worse, the "final warning" assigned to my account pushed me all the way to the top of Blizzard's "Penalty Volcano", a tiered system of punishments ranging from temporary bans to account deletion which serves as a 'visual representation of both the severity of each of our penalties and how often each type of penalty is given in relation to the others' (Blizzard Entertainment 2007a). I was suddenly one tier away from the top-level account closure penalty, which would mean I would lose all my characters. This would potentially jeopardize years of play and potentially harm my research.

My logical reaction to this email and temporary ban was to fight the accusations and state that I was not responsible for 'involvement in online trading activities' with my account. Apparently, the person or persons responsible for compromising my account had used my account for trading activities. I sent Blizzard several petitions through the official website and,

after the ban was lifted, opened a new in-game inquiry in order to contact a GM. The latter of which worked. As the excerpt from the in-game conversation I had with this GM below shows, Blizzard took this very seriously.

> 5/2 12:14:54.357 To Durngold: i got an email from blizz charging me with online trading activities
> 5/2 12:15:08.065 To Durngold: they suspended my account for 3 days and put a final warning on it
> 5/2 12:15:29.659 To Durngold: I did not involve myself in such activities, and have never shared my account
> 5/2 12:15:30.963 Durngold whispers: That would be due to the person on your accounts actions.
> 5/2 12:15:41.162 Durngold whispers: And any actions on your account, are your responsability.
> 5/2 12:15:54.569 To Durngold: even if hackers did it ?!
> 5/2 12:16:11.461 Durngold whispers: Well yes. Because it was your responability to keep the account safe.
> 5/2 12:16:26.869 Durngold whispers: If you did not, you are still responable for action taken on the account (chatlog conversation, May 2, 2008).[114]

According to Blizzard, the thievery was not just my own fault, I was also responsible for its further effects, including RMT activities. And indeed, when I looked up the 'unauthorised account access policy' on Blizzard's game support pages, I found that, as a player, I am in violation when someone *other* than me violates the EULA or Terms of Use through my account: 'it is *your* responsibility to make sure to use appropriate password protection techniques, that could include disabling file sharing, running virus checks, and other applicable measures to prevent accounts from being compromised' (Blizzard Entertainment 2007b, emphasis in original). They even open the policy article with a quote from poet Kahlil Gibran*:* 'If you reveal your secrets to the wind you should not blame the wind for revealing them to the trees' (ibid.). The difference between this situation and a real-life burglary, where you would not find yourself punished when the burglar uses the stolen goods for further criminal activities, can be found on the level of Game Contract.

Even when Blizzard acts too rigorously or blindly, when they make a mistake they tend to set it right when you push back at them about it. Even though initially both the GM and the EULA said I was to blame for someone else

[114] Names in this and following conversation excerpts have been changed for ethical and privacy considerations.

robbing my virtual belongings, the customer service department in the end did reinstate the stolen goods. Or at least a part of them: when I received all my items back through the in-game mailing system, I noticed that all my virtual gold was still missing. The following excerpt of a conversation I had with a GM after I received my items, shows Blizzard's reaction when I confronted them with this issue.

> 5/6 15:32:21.658 To Frozensteel: first of all: thanks for returning all of my items, and the stolen guild bank items too
> 5/6 15:32:35.068 To Frozensteel: but as said in the ticket; my gold is still missing :(
> 5/6 15:34:24.383 Frozensteel whispers: I see. Unfortunately after an account is compromised we are not always able to restore everything that is lost, in case we were unable to recover the missing gold.
> 5/6 15:35:29.901 To Frozensteel: the hacker(s) did make a new lvl 1 char on my account, maybe they transfered it away through him?
> 5/6 15:36:22.579 Frozensteel whispers: Yes, we have investigated these avenues but were unable to recover any of the missing gold.
> 5/6 15:36:44.316 To Frozensteel: what could have happened to it then?!
> 5/6 15:38:04.227 To Frozensteel: I mean, it was quit a lot, and most of it I was keeping 'safe' for a friend who stopped playing till WotLK
> 5/6 15:39:02.930 Frozensteel whispers: I cannot discuss the details of our investigation process I'm afraid, to do so would be a breach of our policies (chatlog conversation, May 6, 2008).

While the amount of gold stolen was considerable, they did not recover it for me and they refused to tell me why or where it went. If they were able to find the data showing when, where and how my account had been stripped empty, and which items went missing, then surely they should have been able to find information on the amount of money my characters where carrying. Even if they were unable to track where the gold went, they at least knew how much needed to be reimbursed. Not returning my gold was therefore a deliberate choice. While it's no problem for Blizzard to simply create virtual money by simply pressing a button in the same way a national bank is able to print new notes, doing so would mean injecting more money into the virtual economy which is already being saturated through RMT practices. If anything, Blizzard would rather eject money *out* of the game.[115] Trying to get it back means

[115] Take this forum post by a community manager as an example: 'In our continued efforts to combat cheating in *World of Warcraft*, more than 105,000 accounts were closed and over 12 million

tracing the intricate money flows RMT traders have set up to try to cover up their tracks, in all probability a more laborious task than simply refusing to reimburse a player who lost it by his or her own fault in the first place. The EULA protects Blizzard from questions about their decision-making process; discussing the details of the investigation, as the GM informed me, is a breach of policy.

We can distinguish several forms of contract-based control at work in the above game of stake between Blizzard and myself. We can find automated surveillance of my account through *World of Warcraft*'s network, because apparently my character's behaviour was data-mined, enabling Blizzard to accuse me of involvement in RMT. There is also non-automated governance through Blizzard's GM's and other service employees, who read and replied to my mails and entered in conversations with me in-game. Lastly, we find the more passive control system of the contracts themselves, the End Users Licence Agreement and Terms of Service. While players constantly interact with the rules on the level of Game Design, the contractual rules on the level of Game Contract are only brought up after installing the game client and subsequent patches and expansions and, like in my case, when stakeholders collide over contractual rules. Both active and passive control mechanisms are there to remind players that, as law professor Jack Balkin puts it, the 'freedom to play is the freedom to play within the rules the platform owners have created' (2006 87). In this case, my freedom to play was limited through both control mechanisms, as I had broken the rules according to platform owners. The ban prevented me from accessing the game, the violation of agreements gave Blizzard reason to lock me out (which subsequently prevented me from disputing this decision in-game with a GM). While active control is an effective measure to stop misuse of the game instantly (as defined by the EULA), passive control produces Blizzard's ultimate defence in games of stake like mine: I should have read the small print.

In essence, the small print of the EULA and related contractual documents describe point by point what the non-negotiable consequences of play are in the eyes of the platform owner. As explained in chapter one, these legal documents are often scrutinized for being too harsh. They enforce a plethora of rather extreme rules and limitations upon players, without providing them with many means to defy them other than not playing the game.

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gold was removed from the game economies in Europe, Korea, and the US in the month of November. The closed accounts were associated with activities that violate *World of Warcraft*'s Terms of Use, such as using third-party programs that allow cheating, and farming gold and items. These types of activities can severely impact the economy of a realm and the overall game enjoyment for all players' (posted by "Thundgot" on the official forums, December 22, 2006). Posts like these occur every few months, exposing to the community that Blizzard is indeed watching closely.

On the level of contract, the power of the small print and the way it is enforced makes *World of Warcraft* (and similarly governed virtual worlds) a hotbed of activity for potential games of stake. Game theorist Julian Kücklich argues that the subjects of virtual worlds 'do not pay the government to deliver the goods – security, economic stability, etc. – but rather for the packaging of the goods in the form of mythology, ideology, and history' (2009 345). As the "government" of *World of Warcraft*, Kücklich notes, Blizzard derives its power precisely from this absence of social content from the contractual relationship with players (ibid.). That does not mean that the EULA does not serve a purpose beneficial to most players. 'Properly enforced', writes Dibbell, 'the EULA makes each virtual world its own parallel legal universe, immunized as much as it can be from the inability of existing law to reckon its strangeness and possibilities' (2006a 144). What proper enforcement entails is a discussion players are actively involved in, even if they can not directly influence the way *World of Warcraft* is governed. In the next section, I show that players do not only engage in games of stake with Blizzard over RMT and EULA issues, but also with each other.

5.2.3 Part of the game

In the final section of this case study, I discuss the games of stake between players instead of those between players and Blizzard. The stakes here are not about legal or monetary values. The focus is on the affective values of play, that is to say the ways RMT interferes with but also modifies existing notions of gaming capital.

When I decided to pursue RMT and powerleveling services as a topic for this dissertation after what happened to my account, I hypothesized that few players would admit to participating in RMT practices or using third party services for power-levelling. Widespread as they may be, these activities are far from accepted within the player community. On the official forums, where players need to log in using their game account in order to post, admitting to having been involved in these practices would also lead to potential investigations by Blizzard. On the many unofficial and therefore far more anonymous forums which developed around the game, players appeared to be far more outspoken on the topic. Here, the differences of opinion between players were felt strongest.

Below are two posts from a discussion on gold buying on the MMO-Champion website's forum, emphasizing both the benefits of buying gold and related "illegal" practices of the enjoyment of the game.

> I've done it all, actually. Purchased accounts, sold accounts, purchased gold, purchased powerleveling -- the whole nine yards. Almost all of it

> was done before the big crack-down, before it was "strictly enforced". [...] At any rate, most of it was worth it. I did it because *WoW* is a hobby. I work, hang with friends and family and play *WoW*; it's a big hobby of mine thus it gets funded so I have a constant flow of fun. Sure, farming can be enjoyable, but sometimes I want to do things and not have to farm for a month -- that's not fun. I'm not paying to work all the time in a game.
> At any rate, I don't see a huge deal with it. If people want to spend their money on it, let them. I don't support hackers, though. Nor keyloggers and things of the sort (posted by "Gabriev" on the mmo-champion.com forums, July 8, 2008).

> Why waste hours and hours of farming when you can work for one hour and buy 2k gold with the money you make in the one single hour? I'd much rather stay 1 hour overtime at work than farm couple days @ *WoW*, any day (posted by "Janz" on the mmo-champion.com forums, July 8, 2008).

These arguments sound reasonable. As law scholar Joshua Fairfield points out in a discussion on the dichotomies between real-world law and virtual worlds: 'No one complains that I did not build my house for myself. No one complains that I did not assemble my truck by hand. No one even complains when I buy a precision-tooled set of golf clubs. And yet there is a complaint when I ask someone else to create an avatar or an account in a virtual world to my specifications' (2008 16). The following post however voices one of the main arguments of players against these practices:

> Cause that's not the way the game is supposed to be played. Cry and cringe whichever way you want, it's the truth and it doesn't matter what you say in many people their eyes you are a cheater by doing so and deserve 0 respect. (posted by "Tiens" on the mmo-champion.com forums, July 9, 2008)

This somewhat angry reaction puts the finger where it hurts: there is a way the game is 'supposed to be played' – not according to Blizzard's legal department but according to the player community – and the gold buyer therefore is not doing what he should be doing within the limitations of what is considered to be the game's boundaries. He is therefore deemed a cheater. The problem is that, for the players buying gold or hiring powerleveling services, the way the game is supposed to be played is not enjoyable. The games of stake here are not

about gold farmers becoming workers rather than players, but players feeling that play becomes a chore, like work, instead of fun, like play.

In chapter one, I emphasised that in the constant movement of play between its free and instrumental form, the extremities of both are never reached, because when reaching the purest forms of free and instrumental play, play loses its meaning. The ultimate form of free play would be a meaningless act, while the ultimate form of instrumental play would turn into the antithesis of play, a simple means to an end often referred to as work. When instrumental play in a MMORPG stops being fun, instead turning into a chore of mindlessly repetitive operations in order to reach a goal, players usually refer to it as farming or grinding. When you must pay for the privilege to play, which is the case with *World of Warcraft* through its subscription model, the consequence is that players start 'paying to work' as the forum post above expresses it.

Ideally, a player has fun while he plays. The "fun factor" is highly subjective though; what is hellishly repetitive for one player can be joyous escapism for another. Even the most forgiving player will nevertheless reach a point where "fun" play gives way to a boring grind. Game designer Raph Koster phrases it best when saying that 'those of us who want games to be fun are fighting a losing battle against the human brain because fun is a process and routine is its destination' (2005 118). Most players keep the game experience fun through socialising – grinding might be boring but you can also chat about it with others – but what they are actually playing while chatting away might hardly be exciting. The challenge for game designers is to keep their game a challenge for the player. Players ask, in some cases demand, a 'constant flow of fun' as we can read in the forum post above. If this flow of fun is not present or, in the case of grinding in a MMORPG, is hindered by an uninviting amount of mindless instrumental activities, players will find ways to circumvent the problem.

Buying gold or using powerleveling services are part of the divergent tactics deployed by players unhappy with the game's limitations or design decisions they do not like, but players using them are under constant threat of being identified as cheats. As explained in the previous chapter, cheating is hard to define, especially in a constantly changing multiplayer environment, and therefore can lead to endless discussions among players. Game scholar Mia Consalvo, who studied RMT-related contestable player practices in the MMORPG *Final Fantasy XI* (Square 2002-), reckons that for most players these activities are likely seen as forms of unfair advantage (2007 165). I would agree with such an analysis. Recurring themes in arguments against money buying and power-leveling are that players who do so have not "earned" the right to the fruits of their financial investment.

In *World of Warcraft* there are several rites of passage which are universally seen as key in the overall experience of playing the game. An example is getting your first mount, which becomes possible when a character reaches level forty. New players seldom have gathered the amount of money needed to buy a mount straight away when reaching level forty (a hundred gold pieces), and the process of gathering the money needed, is one of the biggest challenges players face during the initial levelling process. During this phase they begin to learn about how to use the auction house, how to use their chosen professions profitably, how to play cooperatively in order to achieve better (and therefore more valuable) loot. The moment when the mount is bought is often celebrated as a major achievement.[116] Simply buying your mount without having put forward the effort to gather the money yourself means downgrading the mount's status as a major achievement, a reward proclaiming perseverance and skill to a player's peers. In other words, the mount's value as a form of what could be called ludic capital is at stake, as well as what is considered fair play – or even play itself – among players.

Among players, the devaluation of gaming capital is at the core of RMT related discussions. Spending hours, days, even weeks on gathering the materials or virtual money for a particular highly regarded or valuable piece of equipment or other clearly definable achievement (a mount, an honorary title, a reputation with an in-game faction) leads to affective value worth defending. Be it work or play, fun or repetition, these required investments of time and effort are built into the game's design, giving stakeholders who value its worth a weapon against those who simply do not care: they can be written off as cheats.

In many cases, name-calling is only "sticks and stones" to money-buyers and powerlevelers; perpetrators do not care about being labelled a cheat since their particular tactic is to keep their play fun. Others avoid possible public conviction by keeping their activities a secret to their peers. Regardless of this, the only stakeholder who can have a lasting impact on the way they play is Blizzard. This impact can go as far as to block access to play altogether through a EULA-triggered account ban.

Some players have tried to find a way out of their situation of being relatively powerless as stakeholders in relation to Blizzard. In May 2007, an American player called Antonio Hernandez filed a class action lawsuit against gold seller business IGE. As one virtual law blogger explained, Hernandez filed the lawsuit 'on behalf of essentially all *World of Warcraft* players', because 'by farming gold, spamming chat, camping spawns, and generally diminishing the *World of Warcraft* experience, [IGE] allegedly prevented players from receiving

[116] The same goes for the other varieties of mounts, like the epic mount at level sixty (a faster, more extravagantly looking beast costing a thousand gold pieces), or the first flying mount at level seventy (a thousand gold pieces again; the epic version costs five-thousand gold pieces though).

the full benefits Blizzard intended them to receive as third party beneficiaries of Blizzard's Terms of Use and End User License Agreement' (Duranske 2008a). During an interview, Hernandez' attorney commented that players like his client:

> 'have paid their $15 for some entertainment, and IGE is polluting that entertainment. It's kind of like, if someone pays for a ticket to go see a movie, and if someone else comes in behind them and kicks their seat, you can get them to stop doing that. We're just trying to get IGE to stop kicking the seats' (Blancato).

This lawsuit points to an interesting development where players do not wait for Blizzard to act on what they think are practices which are ruining their game but actually take their game of stake to real-life court. While IGE might be a company, they are also using players (or, in the case of low-wage country gold farmer, "players") and thus play to make money, leading to what one virtual law observer jokingly called the 'new meaning of player vs player' (Methenitis). Here, the arguments used against IGE in the Hernandez case actually involve players defending, even legally using Blizzard's own ToS and EULA against other players, without the involvement of Blizzard itself.[117] While the case was ultimately dismissed due to a settlement between the parties involved, what the Hernandez vs. IGE case showed was a game of stake fought by players on the legal level of Game Contract usually exclusively controlled by Blizzard.[118]

Due to the unique nature of virtual property in virtual worlds like *World of Warcraft*, with stakeholders applying different affective and monetary values to it, it is increasingly difficult to separate the real from the virtual. There are legal scholars and economists who suggest that virtual worlds and the real world should remain separated. Castranova for instance calls for a specific 'law of interration', a system of real world laws that grant EULAs a legal status 'robust enough to allow them to preserve virtual worlds as play spaces' (2006b 79). The idea is that virtual worlds which consciously let real world economy enter their virtual one (like *Second Life*) should be covered by real-world law. Other virtual worlds should be closed off entirely from real-world law

[117] Blizzard publicly stated that they strongly support the goals of the lawsuit, adding that they 'believe that shutting down gold farming and real-money transfer is in the interest of all World of Warcraft players and that a victory in this case would have a positive long-term effect on the online gaming industry as a whole' (Magrino). While Blizzard did support the goal of the lawsuit, they did not legally support the lawsuit itself.

[118] IGE ultimately agreed that they 'will not engage in the selling of World of Warcraft virtual property or currency (commonly referred to as "gold," "gold farming," "real money trade" or "RMT") for a period of five (5) years', but because the setup of IGE as a company changed a few days before the lawsuit was filed, IGE was not required to change its business model (Duranske 2008a).

(examples like discrimination or certain forms of pornography would however still fall under real-world law), rendering all disputes within them the exclusive business of players and platform owners. This would preserve (self-)selected virtual worlds as pure spaces of play, spaces in which people can escape the troubles of the real (see also Castranova 2007). The danger of the second system lies in the power of the designers. Even if such laws of interration would bring into force all kinds of behavioural and ethical rules and guidelines for platform owners, in the end these platform owners are the ones setting up the rules of code and contract. Outside the reach of real world law, they can now "rule" their world as they please, making them stakeholders with so much power that players often can do nothing but endure it or move out entirely by cancelling their subscription. The EULA is one of the tools designed for this very purpose. Balkin instead proposes a selection of different statutes of interration for virtual worlds, each depending on the basic principles of the virtual world's organisational structure, which would bring all types of virtual worlds under real-world law. The underlying goal is to protect both players and designers under all circumstances (2006 107-13). While *World of Warcraft* is not covered by any law of interration, the lack of clear real world laws tackling the type of virtual crime I was victim of effectively, meant that Blizzard was the only authority to turn to.[119]

What we have seen in this case study are games of stake where the stakeholders – Blizzard, "regular" players, "cheaters", cybercriminals – all try to set or cross barriers, some legal, some not. Questions about what is fair play, what is cheating and what is crime are both socially and legally negotiated. Through these negotiations, the actual rules of play are constantly challenged, showing that even on a contractual level, these is no such thing as a shared understanding as what the boundaries of *World of Warcraft* are or should be.

5.3 Performing on the edge of rules and fiction

The second case study in this section addresses creative productions by players, home-made fiction and non-fiction films to be more specific, made within and with the game. The productions under discussion here display free play in its most outspoken form: players who do not play the game to beat its goal-oriented content, but instead seek ways to expand or in other ways manipulate the fictional world, or who try to find the edges of what is possible

[119] I called the main information line of the Dutch government ("Postbus 51") to ask if my case could be labelled as internet fraud or another form of cybercrime. They found my case amusingly unusual and at first made a serious attempt to find any sort of information about it in their database. After a twenty minute search, all they could offer was to send my case on to the Department of Justice itself, in order to have experts delve a bit deeper into the Dutch law books. Unfortunately, I never received a reply.

in the game's design in terms of the coded rules and boundaries. These creative productions do not always conform to what the designers and other players find an acceptable appropriation of the virtual world and its fiction. It makes this case study as much a discussion on fan creation as one on game design exploitation, both of which can lead to creative and in some cases legal games of stake.

The forms of creative production discussed in this case study are machinima, films made through a game's software engine. They are creative productions mimicking real film by having players act out roles according to a self-authored or adapted story-lines. Scenes are framed and subsequently 'filmed' through dedicated recording software (often using the first person perspective of an off-screen player) and, ultimately, cut and scored as needed. The practices of play and production we see here turn players into performers or virtual puppeteers; their goal is not just to amuse themselves but also to entertain an imagined audience, as most machinima productions are shared through video-upload sites such as YouTube or dedicated machinima databases like Warcraftmovies.com.

In the first part of this case study, I discuss the creation of fan fiction and its role in player agency over Warcraft's fictional universe. The second part shows how the machinima filmmaking process exists in a legal grey area, with Blizzard condoning – even actively promoting – the creative practice but not all the tools making it possible. In the final part, we look at machinima filmmaking as a practice which can trigger legal action by Blizzard on the level of content as well. Two *World of Warcraft* machinima productions are featured in this case, both made by dedicated teams of players. The first, *Tales of the Past III* (Falch 2007a), is an epic piece of cinema featuring characters from Warcraft lore. The second, *Exploration – The Movie* (Dopefish 2005) shows free play at its most devious as a team of explorers show hidden game content not ment for the public eye. Comparing the way Blizzard handles both productions – the second actually contributed to formal changes in the game's design – shows the thin line between creative endorsement and opposition among stakeholders.

5.3.1 Our story, your story

In an interview, Chris Metzen, Blizzard's VP of creative development and the creator and warden of Warcraft's fiction, has summed up the genesis of Warcraft's fictional universe as following:

> I grew up with Dungeons & Dragons, as a Star Wars fan, as a comic fan, with their vast continuities. They hooked me so young, and kept providing me with serial instalments of IP that I thought: that's where it's at. I'm always confident we'll build cool, fun games to get people to

> play – but what if we attempted to construct more of a universe for them, and keep people thinking about them when they're not playing (EDGE 2004 84).[120]

This 'thinking about them' only reflects the bare minimum of agency players actually derive from the fictional universe Metzen and his colleagues have envisioned. On this level of agency, the player serves, as media theorist Henry Jenkins puts it, as 'a more-or-less passive recipient of authorial meaning' (1992 25). Instead, players act as *active* readers and act as what Jenkins calls 'textual poachers', picking up those elements they find pleasurable or useful for their own needs and, in some cases, deploying them in new, unexpected ways outside of the formal narrative or fictional world on offer (Jenkins 1992, 2002b). In the case of machinima filmmaking, this deployment is not limited to only the time players are not playing, but takes place during play as well.

Unlike fans of television series, films or books however, players of a MMORPG are allowed a more active engagement with their beloved fictional world and its inhabitants through play. Or as game critic and historian J. C. Herz expresses it when discussing the MMORPG *Star Wars Galaxies*: 'not just to press your nose against the window of this universe, but to actually be a living, breathing part of it, and have thousands of people implicitly acknowledge that you are part of it' (2002 114). Even though the agency players acquire over the fictional world is limited (as shown in chapter two), the elaborate fictional universes of MMORPGs and the fact that players are active within these worlds with their own characters can elicit great emotional investments from the players. As I show in the following case, Warcraft players/fans, can be highly vocal stakeholders in the fictional material, causing minor and major games of stake when elements of the existing fiction are changed or altered by the design team during content updates.

In October 2005 and with much ado, Blizzard announced the first expansion pack for *World of Warcraft*, called The Burning Crusade, which would add a considerable amount of new content to the game world, including entirely new additions to the established fiction. During the months that followed, Blizzard constantly unveiled what these additions would be, creating much heated speculation and discussion among the player community. One of the more controversial additions was a new playable race called the draenei. Apparently being descendants of the demonic and highly evil eradar race, the draenei were met with great hesitation by fans of the Warcraft fiction, especially as the draenei were to be allied with the "good" alliance instead of

[120] Blizzard's art director Samwise Didier proudly adds to this firm rooting of the company's design team in fan subcultures: 'It's like a geek squad here [...] And that's a badge you wear with honour' (EDGE 2004 82).

the "evil" horde faction. Moreover, the draenei were to arrive in the Warcraft universe with the help of an inter-dimensional spaceship-like vessel.

The clash with expectations and established fictional tradition (spaceships in a fantasy setting?!) caused an uproar in certain parts of the player community, triggering Blizzard to respond. As Blizzard's head of creative development responsible for the changes, Metzen personally addressed the issues on the official message board, admitting he might have made some mistakes:

> Right… To be totally up-front with you guys, it's my bad, straight up. The obvious lore contradiction with Sargeras and his encounter with the eredar was clearly documented in the Warcraft III manual. I wrote those bits about four years ago, and to be totally honest, I simply forgot. Genius, right? […] I can assure you, no one's more crushed about this mistake than I am. I've spent the last few days kicking my own ass over this one. Sucks to fail. It may not always be evident, but we take this story stuff really seriously at Blizzard (posted by "Tseric" on the official forums, May 5, 2006).

Without going into detail about who Sargeras is, and how his encounter with the eradar would matter, it is interesting to see that Blizzard felt they needed to respond to continuity problems with something which was printed in the manual to a game released several years prior to *World of Warcraft*. As Jenkins points out, 'within the realm of popular culture, fans are the true experts', with trivia like these being the main source for this expertise (1992 86-87). It grants players cultural authority, 'claiming moral right to complain about producer actions challenging their own interests' (1992 87). In this case, the complaints were met with a conciliatory reaction, and what could be considered a formal apology from *World of Warcraft*'s main story creator and keeper.

While Metzen did excuse himself to the community for his "faults", in the end no changes were made to the origins of the dreanei, the spaceship-like vessels or other controversial additions to Warcraft's fictional universe remained. It would simply be too expensive to change all the designs around the time a game is launching, so instead, the history was just rewritten to fit it in. These re-written bits and pieces of fiction have become part of Warcraft's "retcons", a term coming from "retroactive continuity", which originated in the culture of serialized comics. In comics, retcons describe the liberties comic writers and artist sometimes take to reinvent superheroes with a long standing narrative tradition, like Batman or Superman, just to keep them fresh or

introduce them to new audiences.[121] While in this case the retcon might not have been entirely deliberate, it does reinvent the fictional universe, the degree of which varies in impact depending on which player you talk to. Most players will not even have noticed the changes, for some retcons can ruin "their" game.

Applying retcons to *World of Warcraft* is a practice that is not solely limited to Blizzard alone. Players too like to write and rewrite their favourite (or less favourite) parts of *Warcraft* to make it better, or just to play around with retcon possibilities. While such retcons might not have much formal weight – only content designed by Blizzard's creative team is considered canonical by most players – they can form and become popular extensions and alternations of the acknowledged fictional universe. In the same way fictional trivia plays a part in criticizing the established fiction, we should also consider them as forming the 'basis for critical reworkings of textual materials' (Jenkins 1992 87). The first machinima discussed in this case study, *Tales of the Past III,* actively uses and reworks fictional trivia from Warcraft's fiction to create a story dealing directly with some of Warcraft's biggest story lines.

Since its release in December 2007, the third and most popular part of the *Tales of the Past* machinima series has been downloaded more than a million times from its main hosting site, warcraftmovies.com, with an average of almost 3500 downloads a day.[122] *Tales of the Past III* is a eighty-nine minute epic film, produced in the European Dunemaul realm by an all-player cast and crew; it has become one of the most widely seen *World of Warcraft* machinima.[123] The creator of *Tales of the Past III*, Martin Falch, introduces its story as follows:

> Since the death of Yimo and the shattering of the Orb of Visions, the Horde and the Alliance have accepted an unstable peace agreement. However, old hatreds stand in the way of cooperation and at the same time, chaos erupts as the Lich King finally takes action. In the meanwhile, Blazer travels to Northrend to hunt down Mograine,

[121] According to Wikipedia knowledge, the term "retroactive continuity" originated in the early 1980s during a discussion between the writers and readers of the *All-Star Squadron* comic, which put famous superheroes in alternative universes. Since then, it was shortened to retcon and has spread to other media with deeply invested fan cultures.

[122] With its size being 2.4 gigabytes, a large part of *Tales of the Past III*'s audience probably saw it through streaming media. These viewers are not counted in the initial million plus downloads, making the film's actual audience considerably larger.

[123] The success of the machinima *Leeroy!!* (PALS FOR LIFE), eclipses that of *Tales of the Past III*. The short film featuring the hijinks of a fictional players called Leeroy Jenkins (a character created by player Ben Schultz) has even found an audience outside of *World of Warcraft*'s culture. Leeroy Jenkins has become an internet meme, a cult phenomenon even referenced on TV's *Jeopardy!* and *South Park*.

> the Death Knight, and retrieve the legendary blade that may decide the fate of Azeroth – The Ashbringer… (2007b).

This short introduction in itself is enough to show that this machinima honours and at the same time changes Warcraft's canonical fiction. The looming danger of the Lich King, the Death Knight Mograine and the legendary Ashbringer blade are all fictional stalwarts of the Warcraft series. They are beloved, even sometimes revered icons of Warcraft's fiction and are "poached" for the purpose of creating the narrative of this machinima. The other characters mentioned, Blazer and Yimo, are not part of the official Warcraft canon, nor is the Orb of Visions. These additions, which turn *Tales of the Past*'s version of Azeroth into an alternate fictional universe, originate not just from the imagination of its director/writer, but from an entire guild of players. The *Tales of the Past* series began with a self promotion video by a guild named Eden Aurorea (Falch 2005). From there, it evolved into a series with focusing more on *Warcraft*'s fiction, including the canonical icons mentioned above, but still rooted in the Eden Aurorea guild with its members as the main actors.

The player-created characters of *Tales of the Past III,* which for a large part constitute the retconning we find in the film, are therefore not purely fictional; they exist inside the game as actual player characters, with very real players behind them who in many cases had been playing these characters for a long time. In an interview with the film's creator Martin Falch, it became clear that this element of *Tales of the Past*'s gestation was a big draw for participation: 'a lot of people wanted to join in, get their character famous etc, while the actors already in the movie had a lot of fun being recognized - I guess when we were recording you could say they were "actors", but for outside recordings they were walking around in the game with the gear they used in the movies and the names of their own characters' (chat interview notes, November 18, 2008).

Falch and his crew's blending of new with existing fiction does not only signal a shift from consumer to prosumer as discussed in the first chapter, but also what machinima specialist Henry Lowood considers a 'metamorphosis of the player into a performer' (2007 64). This in turn allows for performance-based adaptation, where players are able to adapt their own personal and shared Warcraft stories into film form through the performance of play (Glas 2008a). As I have shown in chapter three, *World of Warcraft* does not allow players to change much in the fictional world in any persistent manner – even killing famous characters has no lasting consequences as they will just reappear later to be killed again by other players. The role of the fictional world however changes when viewed through the virtual lens of the machinima filmmaker. As literary scholar Marie-Laure Ryan puts it: 'the original game world becomes a

quarry of visual materials, a matrix out of which players generate other worlds' or, as I would argue, create retcons in existing worlds (Ryan 2008). 'Lost in the process', Ryan continues to point out that, 'is the interactive character of the source world' (ibid.). Machinima may record and document the performance of play but the end result has the same non-interactive qualities as regular film. In machinima like *Tales of the Past III*, however, narrative agency shifts towards the players as their play performances can suddenly take new meanings through machinima filmmaking. When seen by hundreds of thousands of players, these meanings can transform players (or at least their player characters) into community celebrities or, to keep it within Warcraft's fictional universe, heros who can become as famous as their canonical counterparts.

While *Tales of the Past III* is a good example of textual poaching in the way that it modifies and expands the core text through active appropriation by players, we should be cautious not to confuse these forms of appropriation with resistance. Jenkins borrows the notion of poaching from De Certeau who considers appropriation as an important tactic to resist and challenge constraints set by a text's formal producers (De Certeau ; qtd. inJenkins 1992 23-27). While I would argue that the production process of *Tales of the Past III* is a game of stake, where the film's creators actively negotiate what is possible within *World of Warcraft*'s rules and fiction, conflict in terms of fictional appropriation was in this case carefully avoided. In the game of stake that is the creation of a machinima like *Tales of the Past III*, Blizzard and the film's creative team are not the only other stakeholder involved. The player community also forms a major stakeholder, with strong opinions of what can and cannot be done with Warcraft's fictional universe. As Jenkins points out, fan fiction creators might consider themselves individualistic and nonconformist in the way they approach the source text, they are 'nevertheless responsive to the somewhat more subtle demands placed upon them as members of fandom – expectations about what narratives are "appropriate" for fannish interest, what interpretations are "legitimate", and so forth ' (1992 88).

As one would expect, there are infamous examples of machinima filmmakers purposefully resist the established norms and expectations. Lowood points to a sexually explicit machinima (as far as such a thing is possible due to limitations of the game's design) called *Not Just Another Love Story* (Pope 2005) which was published on warcraftmovies.com. After the film was picked up by the community and started to cause flame wars on the official forums due to its adult content, Blizzard removed all forum links to its location and locked any threads discussing the machinima (Lowood 2008 190). Even though it was censored on the official forums, the film itself has remained untouched on its hosting site. In another particularly controversial *World of Warcraft* machinima, a raid guild filmed itself while crashing and destroying a

funeral ceremony staged within the fictional world which was honouring a player who died in the real world. In the credits, the responsible guild simply says 'Yes, we know we are assholes :D' (Serenity Now). While it is debatable whether this particular production is a machinima film or simply a (highly subjective) documentation of an in-game event, the outcry over this particular video was even felt outside of *World of Warcraft*'s community (Combs). Regardless, fan fiction usually does 'respond to the perceived tastes of their desired audience', devious productions like the one mentioned above being more the exception than the rule (Jenkins 1992 88).

The negotiation process between stakeholders preceding and during the actual appropriation (ie. filmmaking) process is as much part of the game of stake as the end result. As Falch pointed out in my interview with him, preparation is key: 'to get the upper hand in the potential lore discussions […] I made sure to read up on any material related to some of the lore I included, such as *WoW*wiki.com and I also read through 3 different canon books' (chat interview notes, November 18, 2008). When recreating famous characters, Falch tried to fuse existing canonical fiction with audience expectations of how such characters should behave:

> For instance, in order to portray Thrall in a plausible way, I was inspired by his appearance and actions in Lord of the Clans [a *World of Warcraft* book] and in the games, coupled that with some of the "fan speculation" such as the subtle romantic hints between him and Jaina Proudmoore [another famous character] and added my own interpretation of him and what he'd do (chat interview notes).

According to an interview Falch did with a *World of Warcraft* fan site, he nevertheless had to reel in his own ambitions with this character: 'Thrall was originally going to die alongside Blazer in the sacrifice towards the end. However, I sort of decided to not do it […]. I felt it would be dangerous to change too much of the lore since it seems to be a rather dangerous area to move in' (Toumia). This dangerous area of course hints at pontential conflict with the perceived audience within the player community.

With machinima like *Tales of the Past III*, authority over the fictional universe of *World of Warcraft* then no longer lies solely in the hands of the formal design team, neither does it entirely rest in the hands of the player(s) adapting it to machinima film format. Instead, textual authority becomes negotiated, shared and staked. Like any other fan-created text, machinima like *Tales of the Past III* are 'shaped through the social norms, aesthetic conventions, interpretative protocols, technological resources, and technical competence of the larger fan community' (Jenkins 1992 49). If acceptance from the community

is desired, machinima filmmakers are required to find the perfect balance between new content, retconned content and the canonical. Some actively defy acceptance by refusing to conform to accepted fictional or behavioural liberties, but most filmmakers try to expand their audience, not limit (or anger) it.

In the next part of this case study, I show that the games of stake surrounding machinima filmmaking are not limited to the level of Game Design. Not the adaptation and appropriation of the fictional universe for fan fiction but the tools needed to produce machinima films boost these forms of filmmaking onto the level of Game Contract. As I show below, the ensuing games of stake can put players in an awkward position in opposition to Blizzard.

5.3.2 Looking the other way

As a stakeholder directly benefiting from a committed and involved gamer community (active players stick to a game longer, which means larger revenue), Blizzard is well-known for nurturing player creativity. The company has set up a fan sites program, which brings out reports on community news, player-organised events and hosts many examples of fan art on their official site alongside its own artwork. Throughout the years, they have also hosted fan fiction and art contests, some of which were oriented towards machinima films. The way Blizzard promotes machinima filmmaking has nevertheless remained somewhat vague in terms of the affordances players are allowed.

Even though many machinima and other non-fiction player-created videos (like recordings of raids, pvp action or walkthroughs) have been around since and well before *World of Warcraft*'s release in 2004, Blizzard published their first official endorsement information dedicated to making machinima only in September 2007.[124] The stated goal of the information was to 'nurture the advancement and growth of this young artistic community' and to 'say with resounding clarity: Blizzard is a fan of your works' (Blizzard Entertainment 2007c). It is made clear, however, that the information should be considered as a 'guide for fair-use video creation: a new reference document which outlines the rules and guidelines that should be followed when crafting your videos' (ibid.). The guide assists in helping to 'avoid "grey area" decisions for which there is no definitive answer out there for whether a course of action is permissible or not according to Blizzard' (ibid.). This grey area as well as the rules and guidelines provided to avoid getting there reveal Blizzard's stakes regarding machinima movie making. Machinima artists may use a game like *World of Warcraft* as what Lowood calls a 'found technology' (2008 184, a reference to Duchamp's object trouvé) to produce new creations but are not

[124] During the beta test phase of *World of Warcraft*, players already created a large variety of videos, most of which aimed at simply showing various aspects of the game in action to people who were not allowed to participate in the beta testing.

allowed to fully appropriate the game. While the guide stresses that it wants to assist machinima filmmakers to 'provide inspiration and show what the art form is truly capable of achieving', including creating machinima for educational purposes or sending them in for consideration to film festivals, there are nevertheless very clear "don'ts" filmmakers should avoid; for instance commercial use, R-rated content, or more than '10 seconds total of sponsor promotion per production' (Blizzard Entertainment 2007c).

It took Blizzard a relatively long time to set up the machinima fair-use guide, something which might be explained by examining Blizzard's rather ambiguous relationship with the film form – a relationship which was not wholly solved through the fair-use guide they eventually published. The reason is this: in order to make more ambitious machinima like *Tales of the Past III*, players often make use of third-party programs and private servers allowing them more creative freedom than the core game. In contrast to prior games famous for the machinima creations they spawned, first-person shooters like the *Quake* and *Half-Life* series, *World of Warcraft* does not allow for modification beyond the user-interface. The possibility to modify a game partly or entirely through open instead of closed game design is seen as one of the driving forces behind the rise of machinima in the mid to late 1990s (Jones ; Lowood 2008). As I have shown in chapter one, in *World of Warcraft* such practices are in violation of the Terms of Use and are thus forbidden.

An example of a third-party program used to make *World of Warcraft* machinima is *WoW* Machinima Tool, written by Mads Hagbarth Lund alias Malu05. It gives machinima artists access to up to ten fully controllable in-game cameras, time control (changing from day to night), weather control (instant rain if needed), expanded animations for characters and the ability to spawn NPC's and objects which can also be animated at will. None of these options exist in the main game software and can be readily considered an exploitation of the game's design.

I argued earlier that we should be hesitant in calling all forms of fictional appropriation resistance and the modification of games using tools like the one described above are, as game scholar Robert Jones points out, indeed 'part of the intended use of the product – as indicated by the source code being made available to gamers', and as such 'hardly seems resistive' (267). In the case of *World of Warcraft*, with its closely guarded source code, modification beyond the user interface is certainly *not* the intended use of the product, making a program like the WoW Machinima Tool a potentially resistive force.

In many cases, machinima filmmaking using private servers and modification tools can nevertheless be considered involuntary rather than deliberate forms of resistance. The creator of WoW Machinima Tool is fully

aware that his program does not sit well with *World of Warcraft*'s exploitation policy:

> It *ONLY uses simple direct memory modification* to gain acces to its features and abbility to change variables in the game memory. *It does not use any form of code / dll injection or attempt to call functions* in any other way. It currently acceses playerbase, playercam, speccam, worldtime and weather soon too. The *World of Warcraft* Machinima Tool *does not alter any gameplay related features.*
> […]
> From a Ethical point of view this application still does violate the Terms of Use. However not the bottom line for the policy itself. But help machinima authors to express Azeroth and beyond, and thereby help other players "mentally" explore it on 2nd hand (Lund, emphasis in original).

Even though the aim of the tool is to give machinima audiences the possibility to explore Warcraft's fictional universe indirectly through the medium of film, and to provide machinima filmmakers more means of expression, the tools *could* be used by those with a view to exploit or cheat. Fearing this, Lund states that he is 'still not 100% sure' whether he should keep the project open-source, 'since i know it in the end can cause more damage than good for a project like this' (Lund). He concludes his discussion on the tool's legal status with an open question addressing Blizzard: 'I respect any word from Blizzard about this project and will take any word to consideration' (ibid.).

Blizzard's fair-use guide does not provide all the answers the *World of Warcraft* machinima scene is looking for and the company could even be said to contradict itself in the way it approaches machinima. It makes no mention of using third-party programs or other technical means which violate the terms of use. In 2006, before they published their machinima guide, Blizzard co-sponsored a machinima competition with up to ten-thousand dollars in prize money. All movies could be entered, provided that they comply with the entry rules, most of them comparable with those stated in the game's EULA (no profanity/obscenity, no unauthorized use of copyrighted material, no derogatory characterization of any person or group on age, race, gender and so forth).[125] No mention was made about using third-party programs, but the contenders, among which the elaborately made and ultimately prize-winning

[125] Other terms are more vague: 'depictions of any conduct, language or other context deemed inappropriate by the Sponsors [Blizzard, ed.] or any of the judges selected by the Sponsors' (Xfire). Here, we see that even on the level of content, Blizzard retains the possibility to reject those practices (or depictions of them) they feel are inappropriate.

comedy *Illegal Danish – Super Snacks* (Hackleman), could not have been made without them. *Tales of the Past III*'s creator Falch recognizes this situation from the Blizzard-organised Blizzcon community events:

> Blizzard's claim on one hand (and even stated so […] to some other authors), that they'll "hunt down" people using private servers for machinimas or people using third party programs, even those using modelviewer, that extract files from *WoW* – while at the same time, each and every single category winner in both this year's Blizzcon and that of last year's were made using modelviewer and a lot of them using private servers (chat interview notes).[126]

What we see here is a situation where Blizzard as a stakeholder allows, even sponsors a violation of their own Terms of Use policies. Outside of the few machinima contest they organised or sponsored, Blizzard tends to have no official opinion about individual machinima projects due to this contradictory situation, instead opting for a general endorsement of machinima as a creative process. Even though *Tales of the Past III* has an audience of over a million players, Falch was never publicly acknowledged for this achievement by Blizzard. As Falch explains: 'thing is, I use private servers and extract their MPQ files etc, things that are against their EULA - basically they can't officially complement my movies, since they'd have a huge community uproar as to why I can use private servers while others aren't allowed to' (chat interview notes). To prevent community unrest and to keep the machinima scene intact as an important pillar of the game's participatory culture, Blizzard keeps silent about the practices going on behind the scenes of machinima making. In the process, machinima makers are left in the dark about what they are and are not allowed to do.

By remaining vague or ambiguous about what is allowed and what is not, Blizzard has created a situation wherein they can act, or refrain from acting, at their own discretion when they disapprove of certain machinima productions.[127] In the next case study, I discuss a machinima which crosses the line between what is deemed acceptable by Blizzard, both on the levels of Game Design and Game Contract.

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[126] A Modelviewer is a relatively simple program allowing players to view game models like characters or weapons in the game files.

[127] Being vague about this matter might just serve a purpose for Blizzard in games of stake with other companies, not just with the players or machinima makers. As Falch notes: 'the benefits of actually enforcing those rules are close to zero from blizzard's point of view, so in all honesty, I think Blizzard added them mainly for legal reasons: "it's not our responsibility if authors use copyrighted music etc"' (chat interview notes).

5.3.3 Exploration or Exploitation

Not all machinima poach the existing fictional universe or even present a narrative setting in Warcraft's fictional universe. As explained earlier, publication platforms like warcraftmovies.com host many other types of video productions, ranging from recordings of play sessions, to walkthroughs and much more. Such films have their historical roots in the replay culture of real-time strategy games (like the original Warcraft games) and the demo scenes of early first-person shooters, and they are usually of little interest for those viewers who are not also players. Those who are interested in these videos, says Lowood, 'watch them incessantly as a means for bringing detached analysis to bear on the improvement of their own skills and strategies' (2006 364).[128] On the popular Warcraftmovies.com, less than ten percent of all submitted films are "traditional" narrative-based machinima, the rest are recordings of in-game performances (2006 366-67).

Not all machinima or related video productions are in line with Blizzard's EULA or fair-use guide. You can for example find parodies of real commercials, lampooning real-life brands with *World of Warcraft*-oriented humour, Warcraft-themed remakes of music videos, or mischievous films showing nude characters in various stages of implied sexual conduct. In some cases, Blizzard acts on machinima of which they do not approve.

One of the machinima types Blizzard particularly sees as highly unwelcome, in some cases triggering (threats of) legal action in order to get them removed from hosting sites, are films focusing on extreme forms of exploration; free play practices often looking for ways to exploit the game's design. Blizzard fears these productions as the play practices shown in these films do not only violate the EULA but also because they teach other players. This is the flipside of replay-oriented machinima; these films demonstrate how to play better but, potentially, also how to cheat. A machinima can, for instance, show in detail a discovered bug in the game's software which allows players to reach areas in the game world they are not supposed to visit. Such a video can subsequently cause a surge in copycat behaviour, but also result in new ways to exploit such a bug that the initial discoverer did not conceive of, which then are also recorded on video and distributed to the community.

The more extreme explorers, always looking for the limits of the game's design, are seen by Blizzard as unwanted 'culture jammers', participatory culture's opposite of poachers, and in Jenkins eyes 'classic avant-gardists' celebrating their 'own freedom from media control even as they see

[128] To differentiate between machinima and this type of film, Lowood introduces the term game films; the difference lies in the fact that they are historical in nature. (2006 363). As my interest lies with the means of production, I will use the term machinima to describe both, signaling differences when needed.

the "masses" as still subjected to manipulation' (2002a). By spreading their practices among the community through machinima they entice others to join the uncontrolled fun. Jenkins disagrees with the originator of the term, Mark Dery, who sees jamming as a practice actively perverting existing mass media productions as an almost political act of counter-culturalism (Dery). In his discussion on television fandom, Jenkins emphasizes that 'fans do not see television content as "ugly, dull and boring" or necessarily see themselves as acting in opposition to dominant media institutions' (2002a). The same goes for *World of Warcraft* explorers; they usually do not want to resist the game but at the same time they want to show its hidden marvels to the rest of the community.

Whether the makers are poachers or jammers, some exploration movies have actually led to (threats of) legal action and formal changes in the game's design through patching, thereby frustrating potential copycat behaviour. In May 2005, an avid explorer by the name of Dopefish published *Exploration: The Movie,* a machinima showing content few people outside of the core design team had ever seen. It showed characters walking through regions which many thought did not even exist yet. Some of these regions have been published in the years following the movie, like the Ahn'Qiraj ruins, the Caverns of Time or the Outlands. Other regions shown still have not been announced as being in production when this study was finalized in mid-2010 and might never see the light of day in finished form. Dopefish and his explorer friends nevertheless managed to get inside of rough and temporary design versions of these regions, in the process surprising friend and foe. Embarrassingly enough, *Exploration: The Movie* also claims to show the secretive GM Island and Designer Island, regions never meant to ever reach the public eye. Here, the game masters and designers "live" and play with the game's design. Among other things, we can see an explorer ride his mount over large, barren terrain with the sentence 'chum is my love monkey' written all over it, probably the work of a designer making fun of another Blizzard employee. Not surprisingly, Blizzard was not amused by this disclosure of secret content and some of the websites hosting the movie were asked to take it down.[129]

A follow-up movie by the same team called *Nogg-aholic the Movie* (Dopefish and Forg) appeared in November 2005. Even though this movie featured an even bigger collection of explorations of *World of Warcraft*'s hidden content, it was not legally pursued in the way *Exploration the Movie* had been. One major difference was that this new production did not *show* how to use

[129] *Warcraftmovies.com* still lists the film's original entry, noting that 'This movie is no longer available due to a Blizzard request. It violates their Unreleased Content policy' (Warcraftmovies.com). The film can nevertheless still be found on various other video hosting sites and peer-to-peer sharing networks.

exploits to explore terrain normally hidden from view. *Exploration the Movie* at one point shows an exploit technique that has become known as "wallwalking"; walking up a steep hill at a very specific angle making it possible to "stick" to the surface enabling players to climb them. Through the mountaineering-like wallwalking, players were shown how to get up the hills surrounding the human city of Stormwind, showing the see-through "backside" of the city's architecture, a façade of hardly discernable forms and textures. *Nogg-aholic: the Movie* does not show the technique itself, lessening the potential for copycat behaviour.

In contrast to most exploration videos, the creators of these machinima productions were far more dedicated to provide a resistive commentary on the game. Judging from the Nogg-Aholic blog, wallwalking and exploring in general is very much seen as an act of defiance in Jenkins' original meaning of culture jamming.[130] Clicking on the topic 'why do we wallwalk?' on the blog leads to a six-panel cartoon, showing a man who tells a friend why he enjoys walking on a little wall on his way to work. The man frames his activity as a 'pleasing physical activity' which elevates/estranges the wall walker from the surrounding world ('for a minute when I'm done the world is strange') as well as its inhabitants ('I pass these rich fucks with their little bags of dogshit – shithandlers in fancy track suits').[131] This suggests that the wallwalkers see their deviant practices as a transformative experience, which not only provides an altered view on the fictional world but also sets them apart from players who just follow *WoW*s main play strategies. It is not the continuous collecting of bigger, better and more expensive items – one of *WoW*s core instrumental goals – which makes these wallwalkers happy; it is the gratification of free play in its purest form.

Additionally, the blog offers an series of posts entitled 'Why *WoW* is a bad game', which provides a host of reasons why the owners of the blog are dissatisfied with the core game as designed by Blizzard. Their stake in the *Exploration* and *Nogg-Aholic* machinima productions seems clear: they want to break open established norms in, and views on, the game. The films are both explorations of the game's limits as critiques or exposé's of the game's merits and failures. The fact that Blizzard actually took steps to limit the distribution of *Exploration: The Movie*, both established and confirmed the explorers as rebellious, strengthening the exploration community and pushing it underground.

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[130] The now defunct *Nogg-Aholic* blog can be found at http://nogg-aholic.blogspot.com/ (accessed June, 2009).

[131]The cartoon image can be found at:
http://photos1.blogger.com/blogger/8095/1604/1600/wallwalking.jpg (accessed June, 2009). The *Nogg-Aholic* blog does not mention the author of the cartoon, nor its origins.

The attention to these machinima productions contributed to the popularity of wallwalking as a form of exploration, with the initial films and their subsequent removal from video sites by request of Blizzard spawning a multitude of machinimas showing off new discoveries. Blizzard, however, eventually announced that they officially considered wallwalking an illegal exploit of the game's design. Many explorers reacted furiously: why take away this "innocent" form of free play? Blizzard Community Manager Caydiem reacted on the community forums:

> Now, I completely understand the desire the act of cliff-walking, but I want you to step back for a second and look at it objectively – cliff-walking is the act of hitting a very steep slope at juuuuust the right angle so you don't fall down. If you hit it normally, you would slide to the bottom. That is an exploit, as it's doing something that goes against the proper game mechanics (in this case, the steep slope stopping people from gaining access to these areas). It's a small exploit, mind – nothing horrendous or game-breaking – but it's an exploit nonetheless.
>
> As such, I want you to understand that there's no way that we should allow this exploit in the game. It does cause problems in PvP – accessing areas you should not in order to gain an advantage over the enemy. Yes, exploring is fun, and it's one of my personal joys in these games, but this particular method of exploration was never meant to exist and cannot be condoned (posted by "Caydiem", November 28, 2005).[132]

Soon after, patch 1.9.0 (released January 3, 2006) removed the possibilities for wall walking.[133] As a farewell to their favourite pastime, a group of dedicated explorers did one last wall walking trip on the evening before the implementation of the patch, capturing their adventures in the nostalgia-ridden machinima *Last Wallwalk the Movie* (Dopefish 2006).[134]

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[132] Retrieved from screenshots posted on the Nogg-Aholic blog (http://nogg-aholic.blogspot.com/, accessed June, 2009)

[133] Not much attention was given to this exploit removal in the patch notes. Under the header 'world environment' it simply stated 'Players should no longer be able to walk on steep terrain' and included many other changes.
(retrieved from *Wowwiki.com*, http://www.WoWwiki.com/Patch_1.9.0, accessed August, 2009). Since the release of the first expansion pack, an even more severe measure was taken to keep players from reaching areas they should not (which still continued through other means and exploits). Since then, players who venture into areas they should not be in according to Blizzard get to witness their character being automatically teleported away from such a place.

[134] In *Last Wallwalk the Movie*, we see a group of more than 80 gnome characters in an epic journey through the mountainous regions of Azeroth on the European Moonglade server. At several points,

The case of wall walking and its removal from the game by patching reveals the influence divergent forms of free play – especially when they are recorded and distributed through popular machinima – can have on formal changes in the game's design. In this case, players were appropriating the game in ways Blizzard did not expect them to and, ultimately, decided to hinder them from doing so any further. Usually, exploration is more about immersing oneself in the fictional world than it is about achieving structural goals; a form of play that is allowed, even encouraged by Blizzard through the environmental design of the game world. The fact that wallwalking also caused players to exploit more goal-oriented content – for example in the PvP battleground situations CM Caydiem pointed out above – caused unwanted overlap between free and instrumental play. Not only did players get to places they should not be, they also caused unfairly balanced game situations. Cultural poaching and jamming became so intertwined that Blizzard ultimately found itself reacting with the removal of the possibilities for wallwalking altogether.

The stakes of wallwalkers are about valuing the freedom to explore, and to play and otherwise behave in such a way as to defy the norm; machinima moviemaking is an important tool to express these values. Even if Blizzard would appreciate the free play forms of the explorers, they cannot condone what they see as cheating. Patching out the option of wallwalking stops the practice altogether, whether it is used innocently or deviously. Players valuing exploration beyond the limits set by Blizzard are continuing their efforts to explore and exploit. Machinima showing their activities still appear on many video hosting sites, including Warcraftmovies.com, as well as in peer-to-peer networks – placing them further out of the reach of Blizzard's control sphere.

The second case study of this chapter focused on widening the possibilities for free play by extending or adjusting the fictional universe as designed by Blizzard through machinima. Such play practices often involve the use of third-party programs, exploits and other deviations from the core game, and potentially leading to games of stake with other players or, more drastically, Blizzard, who might consider these forms of participatory culture as undesired. The fact that not all "illegal" practices are punished by Blizzard, like

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they actually meet GMs who turned up to see the bizarre parade of gnomes, one of them informing the group that 'This area is restricted and offlimits to players I would all to ask kindly to please leave this area and be sensitive to the Role-playing element of this realm'. After informing him that they thought they were allowed to wall-walk until the patch – following statements made by Caydiem – he simply stated 'Well I am sorry Caydiem is a US CM and therefore I am asking you to please leave this area'. This shows how hard it is to manage a player community which spreads all over the world, with individual players following statements made by US Community Managers, statements not always communicated to their European counterparts. In the end, the wall-walking participants where all booted out of the game, their accounts were given an official warning and a three-hour ban from the game (Dopefish 2006).

in the use of certain tools used to produce popular machinima like *Tales of the Past III*, results from the freedom Blizzard has as a powerful stakeholder to differentiate between "good" and "bad" appropriation. This decision-making process is not negotiated between players and platform owners, nor is it entirely transparent; machinima makers remain uncertain about whether their practices of appropriation and creative productions move within or stray beyond the contractual boundaries of the game.

5.4 The fragmented and the multiple

Whereas prior case studies looked primarily at situations where players engage in games of stakes, the third and final case study of this chapter investigates a game of stake instigated or at least triggered by an act of Blizzard.[135] In January 2006, Blizzard released patch 1.9, titled *The Gates of Ahn'Qiraj*, which implemented highly anticipated new content. This patch would finally open a huge gate in the south of the fictional world which had remained sealed since *WoW*'s release, offering access to the mysterious city-kingdom of Ahn'Qiraj which consisted of two major raid dungeons. For the first time in *World of Warcraft*'s history, this new content was not instantly accessible to the players upon release of the patch. Opening the gates to Ahn'Qiraj and thus the new content required players to participate in a "War Effort"; without this effort, the gates would remain shut. As I show in this case study, this design decision led to major struggles between different player groups, all with different stakes for opening the gates.

The main question this chapter asks, however, is not primarily how the game of stake concerning the opening the Gates of Ahn'Qiraj was triggered, but how players negotiated the differences of opinion and agency within this game of stake. This case study addresses issues of (self-)governance in times of social unrest among a player community. The difference between this case study and the previous two within this chapter is twofold. First, this case study does not look at what players can and cannot do but what players can and cannot say within *World of Warcraft*'s contractual bounds. Therefore, this case study is less about control issues concerning play and more about communication. Secondly, it looks less at individual player practices by focusing more on a player community as a whole through participatory observation of a specific realm during a time of stressful events. Like the previous case studies, control and agency issues are at the heart of the games of stake present here, as the introduction of a new patch to the game caused player groups to rebel against each other.

[135] An earlier version of this case study appeared in the *Medi@terra Art + Technology Festival 2006* conference proceedings (Glas 2006).

Opening the Gates of Ahn'Qiraj required two acts from the player community, which required a certain degree of cooperation between the competing Alliance and Horde factions. Firstly, there was a (voluntary) assignment for all players to collect nearly four million items (supplies for the war effort like bandages, food, and so on), a requirement without which the opening of the gates would not commence.[136] As the new Ahn'Qiraj content behind the gates consisted of two new raid dungeons aimed only at the raiding community, many non-raiding players did not bother to participate in this collecting effort. The second part of the war effort consisted of a series of extremely difficult quests involving visits to all of the most challenging dungeons, as well as collecting another 40,000 (and much more difficult to collect) items. This assignment was not meant for the entire player community but only for the most hardcore raiding guilds, many of whom put in the effort to be the first to complete the tasks at hand. According to members of the raid community I had spoken to in the realm I was following the event in, only three raiding groups had, at this point, managed to beat the dungeons bosses which formed the threshold for partaking in the Ahn'Qiraj quest series – this challenge was only for the very best raiders. Blizzard even introduced a competitive element in the form of a scepter which functioned as a key for the gates – only one player within each raiding group who managed to finish the challenges could receive this scepter. The first scepter to strike a gong near the gates would start the actual opening of the gates.

By wielding this scepter, the raiding community had obtained the key to unlock the new content for all players, and the power it exerted became the basis for the games of stake which would unfold. Even though the new Ahn'Qiraj content was solely aimed at the top raiding guilds, other players also had stakes in the actual opening of the gates. The event itself, dubbed "the War of the Shifting Sands" by Blizzard, was introduced as a major happening in *World of Warcraft*'s fictional universe, including a pre-scripted re-enactment of the historical events by famous NPCs which led to the initial closure of the gates, as well as a ten hour invasion of giant insectoid creatures all over Azeroth. Understandably, players invested in *World of Warcraft*'s fiction did not want to miss out on this one-time-only event in their realm. Even if they were not interested in the Ahn'Qiraj raiding content, they considered the opening as an event that was also theirs.

[136] Later, this communal collection part of the war effort turned out to be optional, as it turned out, the opening event would happen even without turning in these resources after a certain time. As one of Blizzard's lead designers Jeff Kaplan explained: 'we don't want to punish players on realms that aren't cooperating, so in a week or two the resources will start to just come in on their own' (Schiesel 2).

For the first in time *World of Warcraft*'s history, a small handful of players held a key to new formal content and when this content would become accessible. The scepter holders had the power to decide when to open the gates and thus to exclude or include other players in the opening event. This power asymmetry between a few raiding guilds and the rest of the player community was granted to them by Blizzard's design of the event. These raiding guilds, then, acquired a level of agency over the game normally reserved for Blizzard alone, while other players remained powerless.

Before continuing with the games of stake that took place in the time prior to and during the opening of the gates in the realm I was active on, I will discuss the basic power hierarchies between *World of Warcraft*'s stakeholders in terms of agency over the game's design and governance. Both the powerful role of the scepter-holders (and the resulting power asymmetry with other players) and the way the community upheaval was dealt with by Blizzard are strongly linked to the way *World of Warcraft*'s formal governance is structured.

5.4.1 Community control, controlling community

As I have shown in earlier chapters, players are constantly negotiating the rules of play on the levels of design, contract, community and culture, but in many cases the only stakeholder with real formal influence over the game is Blizzard. Players can modify their user-interface; they can play in a divergent or devious manner; they can even role-play or produce fan fiction; but they do not have access to the game's code. Nor do players have access to the managerial tools of Blizzard, both within the game and on the official forums. Blizzard is not a faceless entity, but has an actual presence in *World of Warcraft*'s community through Game Masters (GMs, primarily active within the game) and Community Managers (CMs, primarily active on the forums). Using the tools at their disposal, these Blizzard employees help, police, and in other ways govern and support the player community in ways players are unable to do so by themselves.

The scepter-holders during the Gates of Ahn'Qiraj events found themselves in a position between the relatively powerless players and the all-powerful Blizzard. It created a situation where the distribution of formal power was more varied rather than strictly oppositional, a situation which might not usually be common in *World of Warcraft* but nonetheless is important, even fundamental to many of the game's precursors.

Comparing MUDs and *World of Warcraft*, game researcher Torill Mortensen points out that when it comes to player creativity, '*WoW* allows it, whereas MUDs depend on it', explaining that in MUDs 'new administrators, builders, and developers are recruited from among the player base or from friends of the current developers' (2006b 411). In many MUDs, players are not

just players, but they are also active on various levels of influence over the core game experience. MUDs thus present a hierarchical power order far more complex than just powerless players and all-powerful company employees or, as they are called in many MUDs, "Gods". In between basic players and Gods we can find more privileged players including the so-called "wizards". As the highest achievable title for a person which is not part of the initial design team or in other ways employed by the company, wizards have access to all administrative functions of the MUD except for direct access to the main code. As virtual worlds scholar Elizabeth Reid explains, these privileged players are not democratically elected but often chosen by the Gods on the basis of demonstrated talents, be it imaginative object design or excellence in conquering the game world (1999 119). As they are so experienced in the game and its challenges, wizards, or "wizzes" as game designer Richard Bartle calls them, are 'on the whole no longer concerned with the virtual world *per se*, just in its inhabitants' (2004 165-66, emphasis in original). These privileged players actively help to manage both the game and the community, helping out and, if needed, punishing players for any wrongdoing. This level of self-governance by players greatly differs from *World of Warcraft*'s power organization. In MUDs we see a system where basic players can raise their influence as stakeholder considerably, leading to both governance and development becoming a collective effort.

In contrast with MUDs*, World of Warcraft*'s "Gods" (the CMs and GMs) usually do not share their power with players. One significant reason is that most MMORPGs form a business, while most MUDs are non-commercial – the companies behind MMORPGs simply cannot afford to have players potentially ruin their game through mismanagement. Comparing this situation to real world political situations, Castranova compares the dictatorial, non-sharing power of commercial MMORPG companies to despotism (even going as far as to call them tyrants): 'for reasons involving business competition and the like, the developer state does not make any efforts to legitimize its rule through, say, effective lines of communication or transparent decision-making processes' (2005 208). This does not have to be a problem, though, because bad governance in these worlds results in the game's "citizens" – and paying customers – walking away. This could create a 'highly efficient despotic regime that, thanks to competition with other despotic regimes [ie. other commercial MMORPGs], does its best to provide legitimate services for the people' (ibid.). The problem is, these service representatives are spread out thinly and, unlike the wizards of the MUD, are not participating as players in the game. The "government" remains a mostly invisible force which only shows itself when the EULA is broken (such as in the prior case studies of this chapter). Rather than the MUD's wizard which is interested in the inhabitants i.e. the players,

MMORPG customer service employees seem mostly interested in the state itself i.e. the game.[137]

In the case of *World of Warcraft*, Blizzard does not use/employ players as in-game customer service assistants or as any other official form of co-governance where players receive more agency in the game or in its community than other players.[138] Blizzard's GMs and CMs do indeed offer valuable help and assistance to the community, but unlike the wizards do not do so out of sheer philanthropy. They employ service managers whose job it is to uphold the law in the form of the EULA and ToS. Due to the costs of employing all these customer service workers, explains Castranova, a 'for-profit government will provide just enough service to maintain its population', which in practice often means that the players are left to govern themselves, without any real power to actually do so (2005 214). The fact that all players are equal (be it equally powerless) can be an advantage over the more varied power hierarchy of MUDs where privileges can be used for favoritism (Reid 1999 126). But without the constant presence of GMs and CMs within the game and on the forums due to constraints dictated by commercial concerns, Castranova ultimately sees not despotism but 'anarchy spiced with occasional profit-oriented tyranny' as the most common governmental situation in modern MMORPGs (2005 210). In the case of the Gates of Ahn'Qiraj event, 'profit-oriented tyranny' came to the fore as some players began to disagree with the notion that they needed to work for content which they had already paid for through their monthly subscription. More outspoken opponents of the mass collection of items even called this part of the war effort "slave labour".

When one particular player or a guild within a MMORPG like *World of Warcraft* suddenly *does* acquire real power which can change or affect the

[137] Exceptions however do exist. Sony Online Entertainment's *Everquest* features a voluntary guide program. In exchange for free subscription, these volunteers are asked to spend several hours per week helping out other players through a dedicated guide account SOE created for them. Their function is to be 'peacekeepers' or conflict resolution agents, as game scholar Sal Humphreys calls them, assisting in the collection of information about player problems before sending this information on to GMs (2005 217). However, these volunteers are recruited from the *Everquest* website and are effectively "paid" for their work in the game by getting a free subscription. We can consider these players as participants in co-governance with the game's GMs. However, as Humphreys points out, these forms of volunteerism are also a way for SOE to outsource customer service functions for little or no cost (2005 218). As in many cases of participatory culture within commercial environments, the line between participation and exploitation is thin.

[138] Blizzard did introduce the 'Most Valuable Poster' or MVP program on the game's dedicated forums for a handful of players who have proved themselves to be valuable assets to the community. Like with the community managers active on the forums, posts made by MVPs are of a different color than posts of regular players, signifying their importance and, more importantly, credibility as a source of information. In terms of power, MVPs are however not granted more access to the forums' admin tools. Blizzard does not make a secret of the outsourcing benefits of the MVP program: it 'frees up the time of Blizzard representatives to focus on their primary job duties' (from the "MVP FAQ", official US forums, posted by "Nethaera", July 3, 2007).

whole community – "being wizard for a day" so to say – it can lead to unique situations of strife between players. The following part of this case study presents such a situation concerning the opening of the Gates of Ahn'Qiraj. As I show, in the games of stake which ensued in the realm I was observing, despotism and anarchy were felt as different stakeholders both claimed agency over the situation.

5.4.2 With great power comes great responsibility

The main actors in the Ahn'Qiraj case were those who, after weeks of intense instrumental group play, finally acquired the means to open the gates in the form of the scepter. A character named Fang, a member of a Horde raiding guild named Heroes of Thrall (HoT), and Cassandra, a member of an Alliance raiding community called The Alliance League (TAL), became the scepter holders and decided to join forces to open the gates together.[139] Both groups worked intensely to get their hands on the scepter, and opening the gates together was seen as a welcome inter-faction gesture. As the most vocal scepter holder on the realms' forum, part of the dedicated European *World of Warcraft* forums, TAL's Cassandra became the most prominent figurehead of the endeavor to the rest of the community. Communication about their progress was made public through the realm forum.

While initially being very open about the whole process, the raiding guilds became more hesitant, even a bit secretive about the extent of their progress after a negative experience with the community. An earlier public announcement of a large event by TAL and HoT that was part of the quest series to reach the scepter, attracted many other players and with them antisocial behavior such as ganking and spam in the various chat channels occurred. The raiders and players interested in the events taking place (the historical re-enactment, the invasion) thought such devious players ruined the experience. As Cassandra later recalled in a forum post:

> We made that one public. And I still regret it, as what was supposed to be a really nice event was ruined by people yelling "OMFG, I PAYD 10G IN TRAVEL FOR THIS??", "LOL DOWN IN FRONT" and finally "GANK THE HORDE!" after everything was done. The people writing back and

[139] Due to ethical considerations, all guild and character names have been changed to disguise their identities. The specific realm the developments took place on remains unmentioned for the same reason. If indicated, gender was not determined through information about the player in real life. Instead, the characters' gender was chosen.

> forth through the event mounted weren't really helping either (posted on the official EU forums, March 1, 2006).[140]

Expecting the worst with a large public opening of the actual Gates of Ahn'Qiraj – in other realms where the gates had already opened, massive player presence even crashed the realm's servers – TAL and HoT decided to make the event semi-public through an invitation-only system. The player community was informed through the forum that they could "whisper" (a direct, personal message) either the Horde or Alliance scepter holders about the date and time of the opening in-game, in order to allow access to those interested while discouraging troublemakers. What sounded like a good idea quickly turned sour when someone under the name "Deepfroat" suddenly posted the date and time in a new forum thread called "The AQ Gate Scandal" (posted February 2, 2006).[141] As previously explained, players can only post on the official forums by logging in with one's personal account, and as a result, most players post on the forums as their main characters. Deepfroat can be identified as a pseudonym because this particular character was only level one, and as such, in all probability, was an alternative character created solely for this posting. Although scepter holder Cassandra later found out who was behind this pseudonym – 'I know who and hold no hard feelings to him' (chat interview notes, June 14, 2006) – her first reaction to Deepfroat's post was less forgiving:

> Congratulations in ruining it for all those who wanted to see it.
> Was it really so hard to contact Fang or me if interested?
> We're changing the date. And keeping it completely secret this time.
> If you need to blame anyone, blame this guy (posted February 28, 2006).

To recapitulate this complex series of events: the gate-opening event was the main stake for all involved. A broad and varied segment of the realm community wanted to witness it but the raiding community carrying the scepter to open the gates attempted to find a way to limit the number of players present during the event through a social threshold (the whispering method). Though difficult, it was nonetheless possible for non-raiders to participate in the events; an effort of the raiding community to distribute or at least negotiate their hard-won power with other stakeholders (particularly those interested in *World of Warcraft*'s fiction) without sacrificing the experience of the event

[140] Unless stated otherwise, from here on, all quotes come from postings on *World of Warcraft*'s official EU forum, which can be found at: http://www.wow-europe.com.
[141] Being a pseudonym itself and an obvious reference to the secret informant called "Deepthroat" in the Watergate scandal, the character name "Deepfroat" was not changed for this study.

itself. That is, until Deepfroat spoiled their plan by announcing the date and time to the entire realm community, causing the scepter holders to withdraw from an open process, leaving other stakeholders without any means of knowing when the gates would open. Suddenly, the scepter's power was no longer shared but monopolized by the raiders.

The reaction of the scepter holders surprised quite a few players, especially those who did contact the scepter holders through whispers. In hindsight, scepter holder Cassandra explained her actions as a slight overreaction: 'I felt hurt and betrayed. No other way to explain it. So I lashed out' (chat interview notes). What followed on Cassandra's post was a slew of reactions either supporting the scepter holders' case or flaming commentary about this Deepfroat character. With increasinly more people joining the discussion, opinions on the matter began to shift. While most agreed that what Deepfroat did was inexcusable, the decision to make the opening of the gates a private event was met with antipathy. One of the first to vent their concerns was a player called Raidor:

> It annoys me that TAL and HoT can choose to keep this hidden just for themselv. Doing that scepter quest wasnt that hard work i think, and there were other guilds \ coms [communities] on the server that would be more than glad to do it. This is a WORLD event, not a event for 2 raid communities. Alot of people worked hard to open these gates, and now you're just screwing everyone over… way to go (if the server will crash at the event. There's nothing you can do about it, and it will do so even if you keep it secret or not. The place will be packed with tons people 2 minutes after you hit the gong. you guys gonna make a human shield outside the place and say to people invite only. /shoo?) (posted February 28, 2006).

Another player joined the discussion with a similar comment:

> I would love to assist and witness such a unique event, but considering the elitism and arrogance shown by those organizing it, I might as well just try to be there on my own, or just curse them for their pride and selfishness on keeping to themselves an event that the whole server worked on.
> I overheard that on a certain server the guild taking care of the scepter, once they took it, they asked for a rescue to the rest of the server in the shape of gold among other things. While what's being done on [this realm] isnt that bad, it will certainly kill any hint of reputation that these two guilds had (posted by "Pehar", February 28, 2006).

TAL and HoT's argument that they deserved a more private opening rather than a public one – after all, it was them that finished the difficult quest series and grind sessions – were not accepted by many non-raiding players, though several raiders also voiced their concerns. With these groups colliding, and with more players joining in, the discussion progressively turned into a large flame war within a twenty-four hour period. At one point, a poster called Kratora provokingly suggested that the raid communities where "basement virgins". After flaming back with comparable sexually tinted remarks, and subsequently deleting these, HoT's Worgal reacted with:

> It's people like you who drive raiding communities to be selfish/elitist and such about these things, you and the people of your kind are not a welcome contribute to my gaming experience nor my everyday life.
> And simple to say this, yes it was wrong of me to consort to flaming and sexual remarks and sinking to your level.
> But for all I care right now, let the AQ gates open, let the server crash. Why should the communities try to do a nice thing when apparently they get flames/name called/harassed no matter what they do (posted March 2, 2006)

In the end, the guilds did announce that the gate opening would be a public event, with the date and time no longer being a secret. The Gates of Ahn'Qiraj were opened in the early Sunday morning hours of March 4, 2006, with the announcement coming the night before. The raiding community's initial efforts to keep the event relatively stable did not turn out successfully; several server crashes occurred before, during and after the opening event, as well as excessive connection latency (better known as "lag"), made playing nearly impossible for hours. The fact that the opening of the gates became a public event instead of a private affair for the raiding guilds involved did however resulted in peace (or at least a temporary cease-fire) between the raiding community and the sub-communities which formed to oppose them.

As Bartle points out, successful virtual worlds often reach a point of balance in which all different types of players are content enough with each other's presence that they will stay and play (2004 133). While I did not encounter any players actually leaving the game because of the Ahn-Qiraj incident, the events described above did reveal tensions between different groups of players, each with their own play preferences, interests and stakes. With only the raiders getting new content with the opening of the Gates of Ahn-Qiraj, for non-raiders, part of this tension was the result of a lack of attention to their needs by Blizzard. The raiders on the other hand were left in a position where they now suddenly had to contend with the entire player community

about an event which many considered primarily theirs. A key element in the build-up of tension, however, was the scepter and the power it held. If one group of players is offered the power of access to new content that many other player also desired, the equilibrium between player groups becomes unbalanced, and the differences between player groups becomes more pronounced and problematized. It shows that a game (or at least a realm's) community which might appear whole and balanced, can appear to be rather fragmented when faced with stressful situations due to power asymmetries.

5.4.3 Identity and community experimentation

The community fragmentation mentioned above was not extinguished (but even ignited) by the potential for identity play within virtual worlds. According to communication scholars Beth Kolko and Elizabeth Reid, it is exactly the fragmentation and multiplicity of virtual identities which appear potentially problematic for community building in virtual environments in terms of social coherence and continuity (220). As they explain, 'it is all too easy on-line to find oneself becoming entrenched in a position that is increasingly indefensible or merely uncomfortable to maintain', for instance during flame wars, while it is equally easy to abandon that position by abandoning the persona through which it was projected (ibid.). While the options for building and rebuilding characters and thus a virtual identity (or identities) differ with each MUD or MMORPG, in *World of Warcraft* the notion of easy abandonment as described above is difficult.

In *World of Warcraft*, identities are bound to and articulated through player characters, both in game and on the dedicated forums. The switching costs – the cost of abandoning everything you have with a particular character to start a new one – are high, as identities are linked to the enormous time investment related to levelling up these characters. Making a controversial character "disappear" to avoid harassment from other players is thus emotionally and financially costly if that character has been created through months, even years of play. For the companies behind these games, the high switching cost are even beneficiary as Castranova points out: 'If switching costs are high', making it less attractive for players to move over to a competing MMORPG, 'the amount of government service necessary to keep the citizenry sedentary is low' (2005 214). Through the years, Blizzard introduced different character re-customization services for a price: a name change (€8), appearance and name change (€15), realm transfer (€20), race change (€20) and faction change (€25). In doing so, Blizzard made switching costs a very real part of virtual life in *World of Warcraft*.

One would think that due to the more stable link between characters and identities due to high emotional and financial switching costs, *World of*

Warcraft should produce relatively stable communities. As all players can create several characters without other players knowing which characters are played by the same person, both identities and communities can still be fragmented and multiple. The fact that players can create new characters on a whim just to post sensitive matters on the dedicated forums, as was the case with Deepfroat, and delete them shortly after is still quite easy and cost effective. The same goes for starting flame wars on the forums, spamming the in-game channels with advertisements for gold sellers, or verbally assaulting other high-level players in-game through whispers. According to Cassandra, the latter actually happened to TAL members during the flame wars on the forums (chat interview notes).

Even though the stakes may not always be big in flame war situations (I have witnessed flame wars erupt about very futile matters), the means for players to wreck havoc within the bounds of the character creation system run deep. Flame wars or other forms of social upheaval are hard to solve or contain by players themselves, as they have been granted no formal power by Blizzard to keep fighting parties apart, or to punish wrongdoers. The "Gods" of *WoW*, however, do have such power, most notably from the perspective of Game Contract. Investigating the way these Blizzard employees handled the situation in the realm I was observing during the Gates of Ahn'Qiraj events provides valuable insight into collisions between powerful and powerless stakeholders in games of stake.

When power asymmetry causes virtual community breakdown and civil unrest, virtual law and order are useful tools to avert chaos. In MUD's for example, "toading" is a well-known way to deal with offenders of a community's peace. It represents the practice of Gods and Wizards 'using their special powers to change the name and description of the user to present an unpleasant appearance (traditionally that of a warty toad) and the moving of the user to some very public area of the MUD where other users can taunt and chastise him or her' (Reid 117). Toading can also result in the total annihilation of a player's account, making the practice a virtual death warrant (Dibbell 1998 18).

Toading is a community appeasing way to show that law and order is indeed in place, a practice players themselves are involved in, which we do not find a counterpart in *World of Warcraft*. Players have the ability to report other players' wrongdoings, which is a form of self-surveillance, however they cannot act on them in any formal way, which is a lack of self-governance. Not having the manpower to police all situations of player struggle, Blizzard's GMs and MCs primarily come into action when their EULA is being violated (as in the first case study of this chapter). When the violations are of a social or behavioral nature, Blizzard usually does not punish perpetrators publicly.

Instead, they temporary or indefinitely ban them from the game and/or official forums.

Blizzard did eventually act during the ongoing games of stake between player groups, but not in a way that most players were expecting. At some point during the ongoing flame wars, a friend of Cassandra posted the following under the header "Well isn't this comical":

> After God knows how many pages of absolute mess and utter stressed debate over something Cassandra and Fang were doing for the community, I log in this morning and find Cassandra, of all people, has been banned from the forums.
>
> The grounds cited were verbal harassment.
>
> It makes me seriously question the eyesight of our CM's on these forums. Are you sure you didn't intend to ban half a dozen people trolling that thread with anti-raider remarks?
>
> Now seriously. Which one of you clowns was it that got her banned? (Posted by "Kellandra", March 3, 2006)

As became clear soon after, Cassandra was banned from the forums for forty-eight hours for severely threatening the aforementioned character Kratora (who had become one of the most prominent opponents of HoT and TAL's actions). Whether it was unfair to punish a player for overreacting after an endless barrage of verbal assaults, against her and her raiding group, appeared hardly relevant for Blizzard – and if it was, they certainly did not show it. The fact that Cassandra went beyond the boundaries set by the forums rules and guidelines during the back-and-forth flaming, was the main reason and justification for Blizzard to act with a temporary ban on this player.

As the contractual rules for participating on Blizzard's dedicated forums have been accepted by all players, it is hard to argue that Blizzard acted unjustly in this situation. It does however point to the fact that, instead of offering a solution like the somewhat medieval but community appeasing toading of the MUD, now those in power only swoop down from above to uphold their strict laws without any direct or transparent communication with the community. Eventually, the discussion thread following Kellandra's post, which mostly consisted of a new flame war on the fairness of the ban, was "locked" by a Blizzard CM with the austere statement:

> Please respect the forum guidelines by keeping all discussions in a civil tone, especially if you reply to a poster of a different opinion than your own.
>
> If you keep a civil tone when posting, you will not get banned (posted by Vaneras, March 3, 2006).

Community governance through EULA and ToS enforcement here covers, even tries to subdue the anarchy which arose due to the fact that players had no real means to govern themselves while fighting over their stakes in the Gates of Ahn'Qiraj incidents. Verbal harassment aside, Blizzard also remained impartial on the larger issue of whether or not the raiders had or should have the right to keep the opening a secret. Actions on behalf of one group of stakeholders (for example the raiders) on this realm would force them into a position to take a similar stance on all realms, where different player groups might have similar, different or no problems at all.

While exceptions exist, the multiplicity of realms of MMORPGs – there is not just one *World of Warcraft* but many – also marks a difference between them and MUDs where all action tends to take place within one virtual world. If players do not like the community of the realm they play in, they can switch characters to another realm (at a certain cost that is). While the community in this realm might be different, from the perspective of Game Contract, it is treated exactly the same. Players cannot, however, change the realm itself into something else without access to the necessary powers, whereas in MUDs, 'if players are not happy with the game as it is played, they develop a new one' with the privileges they already have (Mortensen 2006b 411). Due to the multiplicity of realms and the impartiality it requires to manage them as one singular game, Blizzard's in-game and on-forum assisting and policing of the players is based on objective contractual codes of conduct and less so on subjective moral or ethical judgments.

Impartial or not, Blizzard was acutely aware of the possibilities and dangers of giving one group of players power over the reveal of new content before handing this power over to the players. At the time patch 1.9 was released in January 2006, Blizzard's Jeff Kaplan spoke about their upcoming Ahn'Qiraj event in a *New York Times* interview:

> This is the first time that we've really put all of the power in the hands of players. So you see some really interesting things going on. In some places, you see multiple über-guilds that have treated each other with respect, or who have called a truce, and are engaged in some massive collective farming. You see a lot of guilds setting up contests to

> encourage others to participate. The event really comes down to the politics and diplomacy on each realm (Schiesel 2).

Blizzard's intentions, as shown through Kaplan's remarks, echo Castranova's idea of MMORPGs as possible 'petri dishes for social science' (2006a 170). As this case study only investigates one such petri dish, I do not claim to offer a broad, cross-realm inquiry of the Ahn'Qiraj case. As such, the situation described here was experienced differently on all other realms.[142] Kaplan talked about 'really interesting things going on', and the aim of this case study has been to show such an interesting thing in the form of community fragmentation. Both the power introduced through the sceptre and the resulting politics and diplomacy mentioned by Kaplan were the responsibility of one particular subgroup of players: the raid community. Implementing such power asymmetries in the design of a game like *World of Warcraft* remains a tricky affair. If not all subgroups agree that the privileged group handled this power in the right way, and when they have no means to negotiate such asymmetries in any democratic way but are subject to the whims of those with the power, a community has nothing left to do but to turn on each other.

In this case study, the games of stake were not just about struggles between the all-powerful Blizzard and the all-powerless player-base; it was about struggles between players who, arguably against their will, suddenly saw themselves elevated by power in a land where everyone was resigned to the fact no one could ever be king. Deepfroat's version of the Watergate scandal revealed that, when players are comfortable with being equally powerless, it is difficult to distribute extra power to selected players without social riots breaking out. This is the point where games of stake can turn ugly between players who might share values, but not the equal means of power to defend them. The realm community studied, as do many similar realm communities, turned out not to be whole but actually fragmented to a point where, when power disturbances took place, anarchy arose.

5.5 Conclusion

In this final chapter, I have investigated what can best be described as the difficulties different stakeholders in *World of Warcraft* encounter when disagreements arise about what is "good" and what is "bad" behavior in or around the game. The case studies presented in this chapter are distinct in form

[142] I nevertheless came across more stories of severe power struggles during and after the event. For example, a wiki post on the US Illidan realm lists 'The Gong Affair' as one of the most (in)famous events ever to take place among its players, with some guilds still being "blacklisted" by the community for using the scepter while other guilds were not present yet to witness the event. From *Wowwiki.com* (http://www.WoWwiki.com/Server:Illidan_US, accessed January, 2010)

and topic, but nonetheless share the fact that the games of stake they introduce all focus on issues on the level of Game Contract. Both the social protocols and legal contracts which are part of this level of negotiation were found throughout all three case studies. Investigating the various ways these forms of contract play a part in the stakeholders' efforts to claim agency and ownership over the game allowed me to shed light on the question about how different stakeholders situate themselves in games of stake where certain forms of play and/or appropriation of the game are preferred above others.

In terms of social protocol, I have shown throughout this chapter how players actively negotiate differences of opinion when it comes to potentially inappropriate or in other ways undesired behavior. In most cases, these negotiations take place on forums, where issues like the buying of gold with real money are discussed extensively. I have also investigated tactics players use to circumvent the side-effects of social protocol, for instance by showing how players create new low-level characters with the sole purpose of anonymously entering into controversial discussions. While such tactics can also be used for insidious acts, like the anonymous harassment shown in the Ahn'Qiraj case, they also offer players means to defend their stakes while, at the same time, limiting the chances of attracting community scorn and/or exclusion. Through the negotiation of social protocols, players demonstrate a well-informed ability to manage themselves in games of stake. In direct negotiations with Blizzard, however, player agency is for the most part limited.

This chapter dealt exclusively with activities of players: the case studies presented have in common the ensuing games of stake involving Blizzard as an actively participating stakeholder. Whereas Blizzard's stakes in the previous chapter's case studies were primarily articulated through the game's design, here we have seen Blizzard actually stepping in to enforce their contractual rules or in other ways govern the game and its inhabitants. I have, for instance, shown how various Blizzard employees, from designers to GMs, participate on forums and in the game world. They do so to voice the company's concerns, for instance by locking discussion threads with an undesired topic or tone on the official forums, or they do so to enforce the rules in-game, for instance by banning access to the game for players engaging in the trade between real and virtual money – a practice the company considers an illegal activity.

Blizzard's active part in games of stake which tackle breaches of contract is, in most cases greeted positively by the player community; as the social protocols players create and (re-)negotiate among themselves are not always sufficient to deal definitively with devious behavior. From observation and experience, I can, for instance, say that most players agree with Blizzard's tough stance on the black market of the Real-Money Trade, even if it results in

some collateral damage (like my temporary ban from the game due to supposed involvement in RMT activities). The RMT case study, however, did also show that not *all* players agree with Blizzard's tough stance against buying gold with real money. For some, acquiring gold through RMT is the only way to compete with players with more time to spend on the game. While these players can openly engage in negotiations about the rights and wrongs of such practices with other players, when interacting with Blizzard, they find that their rules on RMT are nonnegotiable.

While the absolute nature of the contractual rules of *World of Warcraft* does not stop players from breaching them, it certainly enlarges the stakes involved, with the outcome of such games of stake being a potential temporary or indefinite ban for the player. A pressing issue discussed in this chapter, however, is that Blizzard does not always enforce their contractual rules in a transparent way. Similarly to the way black boxes are built into the game's design to keep players guessing about the inner workings of the game, vague and/or inconsequent contractual rules and the enforcement thereof leaves players in the dark about what they can and cannot do within or (in the case of the machinima filmmakers discussed) *with* the game.

The strict method with which Blizzard governs *World of Warcraft* on the levels of Game Design and Game Contract does not make the company exceptional. In fact, many commercial virtual worlds are set up as what law professor Lawrence Lessig calls 'merchant-sovereignties' (287). 'Our recourse with respect to merchant-sovereigns', he points out, 'is simply to take our business elsewhere' (ibid.). What I have shown in this chapter is that players do not always take what could be considered the easy way out. Manifesting a large investment in this particular game, players continuously create arenas of negotiation through which control, agency and ownership is consolidated and contested, even if it implies opposing an omnipotent ruling sovereign.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation set out to investigate questions concerning how negotiations between stakeholders in and around a game (including both players and the game's developer) take form; how these negotiations define, challenge and alter the process of play; and how they effect and influence the game as a cultural object. Before moving on to this study's conclusions I would, however, like to begin with an anecdote.

In July 2008, I ventured to Paris, France, to visit the Blizzard Worldwide Invitational, a large convention celebrating Blizzard's computer games and spinoff products. Thousands of Blizzard fans from all over Europe and beyond, of which a considerable part were hardcore *World of Warcraft* players, gathered in a giant convention centre somewhere on the Parisian outskirts to attend developer Q&A panels, play unreleased games, get the latest scoops, buy merchandise, meet other players and be part of the Blizzard brand community. This particular edition of the Blizzard Worldwide Invitational preceded the release of the *WoW*'s *Wrath of the Lich King* expansion pack (which was playable in demo-form on the convention floor). As I planned to end my fieldwork with the release of this expansion pack, I reckoned visiting this event would provide me with an interesting final overview of the *World of Warcraft* phenomenon condensed into one (very real) space. The following excerpt comes from a blog post I published soon after the event:

> The whole thing started with a giant opening ceremony. The most fascinating part about this ceremony wasn't that the hosts whipped the crowd into a cheering frenzy for the presence of Blizzard's "superstars". That was to be expected. No, it was because these superstars included not only the designers and founders of the company but also the heads of PR, marketing and, yes, even global finance. So here was a crowd of thousands, cheering for those who did not make the games and virtual worlds they adore, but for those whose job it is to make a lot of money out of this love. [...] Most of the crowd didn't even know these "suits" (I didn't hear their names being called out due to the deafening music) but cheer they did. (Glas 2008)

What this observation illustrates, is that The Blizzard Worldwide Invitational is an unabashed celebration of all things Blizzard. While during the event itself I was amazed by the players' enthusiastic reaction to what constitutes the corporate rather than creative part of the game industry, in hindsight I realized that the crowd was, in fact, cheering both for Blizzard and *itself*. Why the crowd's reaction should be considered self-celebratory will be among the

answers provided in this conclusion. As I will argue in this conclusion, the concept of games of stake as introduced in this study can be considered central to the shifting relationships between producer and consumer, both in games like *World of Warcraft* and the larger media landscape.

This conclusion's aim is threefold. First, I will provide a short review of the research conducted, recapitulating the essential discussions and findings of each chapter. Secondly, I will answer this study's main questions as mentioned above by focusing on the concept of games of stake. Thirdly, I will address how my chosen methodology contributed to – and presented challenges for – the study of games of stake, and to what potential new venues for research into games of stake these insights and shortcomings lead.

As I have shown throughout this dissertation, *World of Warcraft* is a game shaped and controlled by different stakeholders, each with different stakes in what the game is and how it should be played. I called the negotiations about these differences of opinion and preference games of stake and I situated these games of stake at the core of the *World of Warcraft* experience. I therefore began this dissertation with a chapter called 'Framing the Game' in which a theoretical framework was introduced which enabled me to analyze the kind of negotiations that constitute games of stake. This framework situates games of stake between several levels: Game Design, Game Play, Game Culture and Game Contract. On the level of Game Design, I examine the basic structure of *World of Warcraft*, both in terms of game definitions and as a result of historical developments in the genre of which the game is part. The Game Play level focuses on the ways players engage with *WoW*'s basic game structure, with play itself being defined as a movement which both conforms to and frees itself from rigid rules, whether these are coded or socially construed. On the level of the Game Culture, I position *World of Warcraft* in terms of subculture and a participatory culture, showing that play and other forms of engagement are not limited to the game's boundaries. Lastly, the Game Contract level makes clear that boundaries, however, do exist; not just in terms of technology or code, but in terms of legal contract and social protocols. Each of these levels illuminate a different aspect of *World of Warcraft*, which allowed me to explore different approaches to understanding this game in terms of its use. Limiting the analysis of a MMORPG like *World of Warcraft* to these levels of investigation may have its consequences on views of the game as a whole, but this kind of limitation is needed to clarify the social, political and economic stakes involved in the evolution of this game which I pursued in this study.

Closely linked to the theoretical framework, the chapter 'Studying the Game' introduced my methodological approach. Linking participatory ethnographic observation to virtual ethnography techniques and considerations, I clarified my dual role as researcher and player. I did not just

study but also played the game extensively, and as many of the case studies in this dissertation have shown, these two activities overlapped to a large extent. As I will discuss below, approaching the game in the manner this study intends, has its drawbacks but I am convinced that prolonged play was the only way to fully understand the mechanisms and strategies laid out in the case studies.

The chapter 'Controlling the Game' analyzed how key stakeholder Blizzard has set up *World of Warcraft*'s intended use through a series of choices primarily made on the level of Game Design and concerning the game's underlying technology, its rules and its fictional world. By doing so, I investigate Blizzard's stakes in the game – how it wants players (not) to behave in the game. The chapter conveys how the way the game was constructed on technological, rule-based and fictional levels infuses the game with certain presuppositions about the players' desires and imposes or at least offers the players a particular set of behavioral and social values. These game design choices are highly potent in terms of games of stake: they inform to a large degree what players can and cannot do within and with the game through nonnegotiable code.

The 'Gaming the Game' chapter investigated how players negotiate the intended use of *WoW* by engaging with the game's affordances and limitations, in efforts to render the game their own. I presented three case studies dealing with the level of Game Play. Based on individual play, individualized group play and group play practices, each case study showcased a battlefield of negotiation concerning particular issues at stake. In the case study on the use of walkthroughs, I have shown (leisure) time to be at stake. In the case study on twinking, the power over other players was the focal point of negotiation. Finally, the case study on UI modification exhibited the measures players take to expose *WoW*'s hidden algorithms. While different in topic, these case studies are nevertheless similar in the exercised tactic of hyperproductive deviance; making creative use of game mechanics, often in combination with external assistance (player-created strategy guides; UI modification), to surpass and/or transgress the game's dominant strategies. These tactics, I showed, allow players to procure heightened control and agency over the game and/or other players. However, what I showed is that the outcome of games of stake featuring such acts of deviance does not just grant players increased agency and control over the game, but also results in altered ways of playing and perceiving the game – in some cases initiating new forms of self-imposed control. Players, then, free themselves from dominant play strategies as much as they subject themselves to new forms of control.

Finally, the 'Claiming the Game' chapter is characterized by three case studies which elevate the notion of players creating their "own" game to the level of Game Contract. In this chapter, I tried to explain how different views on

what *World of Warcraft* is, as well as how it should be played and how it should evolve, can lead to conflict between players, and between players and Blizzard. In the case studies, I showed how various stakeholders collide in games of stake concerning the trade of virtual money for real money; the creation of machinima films; and the introduction of new, controversial game content. This chapter exposed the thin line between acceptable forms of play and cheating, between labeling certain forms of appropriation acceptable, improper or even illegal, and between "right" and "wrong" ways to engage in and govern player conflicts. By doing so, this chapter conveyed the challenges of being part of (in the case of players) and administrating (in the case of Blizzard) a game where the stakes can differ significantly, leading to various claims of ownership.

By investigating *World of Warcraft* on the levels of Game Design, Game Play, Game Culture and Game Contract, I have shown that the traditional dichotomy between consumer and producer does not convey the complexity of a game of this type. The fact that the game is designed to offer a broad range of different play styles and preferences, ranging from individual play to group play and everything in between, has resulted in a wide variety of players, each with their own take on – and stakes in – the game. Both Blizzard and these players all have different views on the game – what it is, how it should be played, and how it should evolve – all the while sharing the same virtual environment. Control, agency and ownership over the game, I argue, do therefore not reside with either consumer or producer but, instead, are constantly shifting between various stakeholders. In other words, *World of Warcraft* is continuously *at stake*. In what I call games of stake, negotiations over what the game is, how it should be played, and how it should evolve, take form in various configurations of participation. As I have demonstrated throughout this study, games of stake convey both converging and diverging stakes, leading to situations of both cooperation as well as conflict. The games of stake discussed in this study also show that power is not always distributed equally. Blizzard, for instance, is an especially powerful stakeholder which does not shy away from enforcing rigid, nonnegotiable and, in some cases, untransparent rules on the player community. Players nevertheless find ways to circumvent, deviate and transgress these rules if they so please. Power over the game therefore does not reside with Blizzard; formally, it might own the game but in reality, all stakeholders involved can (and do) claim the game to be their own. *World of Warcraft*, then, does not just contain games of stake but should be defined as a game of stake *itself*.

The fact that players themselves are just as much "owners" of the game as Blizzard, I would argue, is for a large part the reason why the crowd reacted so audaciously during the Paris convention. A game like *World of Warcraft* is, after all, as much their accomplishment as it is Blizzard's. It is their play, and

the ongoing negotiation thereof, that shapes and defines the game. When, for instance, players feel the dominant strategy of leveling up is too slow, they can powerlevel through the game using walkthroughs, ignoring most of the game's emergent content by replacing it with a wholly linear experience. Battleground twinkers make shrewd use of the game's mechanics to dominate other players, by fashioning a new, unique way of player-versus-player combat. Explorers put game design flaws to use to show an eager audience what lies beyond Azeroth's otherwise unscalable virtual mountains, teaching other players how to exploit the game's design in the process. It is through such games of stake, and others discussed in this dissertation, that players showcase their tactics to gain control, agency and ownership over and in *World of Warcraft* – tactics which change the game considerably.

While players display a wide range of practices which ignore, bend or in other ways deviate from *World of Warcraft*'s design, players nonetheless do not possess direct access to the game's code or contract, nor is the game designed to be appropriated and adapted by players in any formal, persistent manner. The power to truly change the game resides solely with Blizzard. Players can negotiate their own particular game experience and, through (individualized) group play, the experience of others, but they are effectively powerless to actually directly transform *World of Warcraft* for *all* players. Players however *do* have an indirect influence on *WoW*'s formal evolution. To use examples from this study: it is Blizzard, not the players, who at a certain point decided to incorporate more item options for battleground twinking into the game due to its continued popularity. It was also Blizzard, not the players, who appropriated certain player created UI mods, making them part of the official UI. It was also Blizzard who, in a reaction to devious exploration machinima, patched the game so that wallwalking practices enabling players to escape the boundaries of the fictional world, would no longer be possible. All these examples show Blizzard adjusting the game to prevent it being exploited, or attempting to change it in such a way that is becomes more appealing to the player community. Depending on the stakeholder you ask, the changes mentioned above constitute negative or positive evolutionary steps. Either way, these changes are triggered by players deviating from or transgressing the rules of play through games of stake.

The concept that *World of Warcraft* does not only display continuous games of stake, but should be considered a game of stake itself, is not just an ontological claim about this particular game or similar titles, but rather a meta-theoretical claim with methodological consequences for the study of other forms of participatory culture. Studying games of stake – that is, the ongoing negotiations about the what, how, and why of a particular media object by its various stakeholders – can be transferred to other forms of participatory media

objects and environments. Games of stakes are the struggles various stakeholders encounter when dealing with a contested space of interaction, struggles which have less to do with consumers vs. producer dichotomies than they have to do with the stakes these negotiating parties represent in terms of control, agency and ownership.

My particular approach to studying games of stake involved participant observation, which proved to be highly beneficial for understanding the various negotiations taking place between stakeholders. However, this approach nevertheless confronted me with some challenges and limitations – both by choice and circumstance. Both the advantages and limitations of my approach have, to a large extent, informed my findings, which is why I would like to re-address my methodology in this conclusion.

First, I want to revisit the discussion started in chapter two which involved my dual role of being both a player and a researcher, which formed the foundation and starting point for many of the findings in this study. By having spent a substantial amount of time playing the game and participating on the many websites surrounding it, I not only became a highly proficient player, but, as researcher, I also managed to understand the game and the way it is played in ways not possible without actually playing. Game Designer Richard Bartle has pointed out that researchers who play a game to study it eventually reach a point where they "grok" (ie. profoundly and intuitively understand) the game's concepts (2010). He does not, however, consider this process of grokking games as necessarily positive:

> Study game after game after game, eventually you'll reach the same point that game designers reach: you'll merely have to read the manual to know what a game is going to play like. Actually playing it will tell you more, yes, but with swiftly diminishing returns (2010).

Bartle actually goes on to argue that 'anyone who advocates privileging play at the centre of Game Studies is dooming themselves, because either they are incapable of gaining any meaningful insight into their play or the gradual accumulation of such insight will rob them of their ability to enjoy playing' (ibid.). I prefer to disagree with Bartle. The argument that studying games through play lessens the enjoyment of play is arguable to say the least.[143] His other point, about diminishing returns after prolonged play, rings truer. I would argue, however, that for the study of games of stake, prolonged play and even

[143] As the same could be said about, for instance, analyzing literature in Literary Studies or studying film in Film Studies, this is a moot argument.

the potential reduction of fun Bartle warns against do *not* diminish returns per se.

At moments where play seems to become repetitive and intuitive rather than challenging, I argue, players are more prone to engage in games of stake. Players usually do not use walkthroughs when they experience the game for the first time; they do so when they need to revisit it for the umpteenth time. They do not twink their first character either but use the knowledge of the game they gained with their main characters to shape a new character into a twink. Players make machinima when they have "grokked" the game. Games of stake, then, are born from the interplay between boredom and fun, and to truly understand why players engage in games of stake, grokking a game as a researcher can be as valuable as playing it for the first time. Whether play should be at the centre of Game Studies might remain debatable, but without prolonged play, however, studying and understanding games of stake is difficult. For this reason alone, participant observation is of great value to this type of research.

While participant observation provided insight into complex processes of negotiation which was otherwise hard to attain, my limited access to Blizzard's point of view proved to restrain my observations. As this study focused extensively but also exclusively on the players' perspective in games of stake, Blizzard's perspective in *World of Warcraft*'s evolutionary design changes was only attained through an analysis of patches and other content updates, as well as the company's public statements in interviews, on forums and so forth. As explained in chapter two, this approach enabled me to experience the game like a regular player, but it remains insufficient for ascertaining authoritative views on all Blizzard's design choices. One element in *World of Warcraft*'s evolution largely absent from this study is the influence "casual" players have on the game's formal development.[144] I therefore want to address this issue here in the form of a discussion which should be seen as contemplative, and as a potentially interesting venue for further research.

As a study focusing on games of stake through participant observation, many of the case studies presented lean towards showing the activities of the more vocal and/or active players within *WoW*'s community, at the expense of less active and/or vocal players. In chapter one, I introduced the notion of a long tail of participation, where I argued however, that a small contingent of players is responsible for the large majority of participatory contributions to the game, in the form of the production of creative material (fan fiction; UI

[144] The term "casual" can mean many things in terms of game culture. As game scholar Jesper Juul points out, there is nonetheless an identifiable stereotype of the "casual player":'this player has a preference for positive and pleasant fictions, has played few videogames, is willing to commit little time and few resources toward playing video games, and dislikes difficult games' (2010 8).

mods; information wikis), but also in the form of active forum and guild participation. These players also engage in games of stake most visibly and therefore feature in most of the presented case studies. As one would expect, the voice of these active players is heard by Blizzard and informs the decisions they make in order to improve the game. Both for in- and outsiders, the most vocal/active players are the face of *World of Warcraft*'s (sub)culture.

We should, however, not underestimate the value of the actual long tail of participation for a company like Blizzard. It is the long tail which, due to its sheer length, contains the lion's share of players and therefore, more poignantly, represents the lion's share of *WoW*'s paying customers. Pleasing this group is arguably as much, if not more important for sustained success than pleasing the most active and vocal players. By data mining the play practices, and therefore preferences, of this silent majority of players, Blizzard can adjust the game to their needs through patches and expansion packs, even if this silent majority never specifically expresses or voices its concerns through games of stake. These "silent" wishes can differ greatly from those of the highly vocal, active users. A good example of such a difference was the introduction of so-called "welfare epics". During the period in which I was an active player, the game's evolution progressively catered for individual, "casual" play practices through patches and expansion packs. So-called epic items, which were initially rewarded only to those engaging in the most dedicated forms of instrumental group play (like raiding), became increasingly accessible for solo players over the years. Hardcore players eventually began to use the derogatory term welfare epics to describe the easiest to obtain items, suggesting that their wearers can only procure good items with help from the state, ie. Blizzard. Judging from my observations of raiding forums, a considerable contingent of the hardcore players, for instance, remains bitter about the introduction of these welfare epics. Not so for the casual, individual play-oriented players: they use the welfare epics en masse in the game and do not seem to care much that the way they received them differs from how it was previously (an interesting game of stake in and of itself).

Additionally, there is an argument to be made about the level of control, agency and ownership casual players wish for – both in terms of the freedom they desire in their engagement with *World of Warcraft* and in terms of the amount of authority they concede to Blizzard. Whereas the more vocal, participatory players shown throughout this study claim the game to be their own, in my experience many casual players do not seem to mind following the dominant strategies as provided by the game's design, nor do they object to Blizzard's sometimes tough enforcement of the contractual rules. They like their play environment to be managed by an external controlling force, which they do not consider antagonistic. Game scholar Espen Aarseth's negatively

compares *World of Warcraft* with a theme park, a 'hollow world' where players are 'allowed to see, but not touch – let alone build or destroy' (2008 121). For many players, however, the safe, self-contained, tightly controlled characteristic of the world of *WoW* forms the main attraction, in the same way that shopping malls, gated communities and, indeed, theme parks themselves form attractive environments for many people. This argument once more suggests that the traditional dichotomy between consumer and producer as well as the concept of convergence between the two as recognized in participatory culture, are limited. In a game like *World of Warcraft*, consumers and producers do not exist in an oppositional relationship, nor are they in perfect unison when it concerns control, agency and ownership. We should rather think of *WoW*'s players as a highly diverse group of stakeholders, with very different needs, desires and stakes in the game. Similarly, we should be hesitant with identifying power over the game as either a (negative) top-down or (positive) bottom-up force – many consumers *desire* to be controlled and governed by the producers of their leisure pastime of choice.

If for Blizzard, the silent majority is more important than the vocal minority, then researchers too should not ignore them. The emphasis on the most participatory players, and the skewed view this provides of a player community as a whole, is present in many studies on phenomena like *WoW* – including this one. Although this group fascinated me from the start, for my research, this group and its play practices, wishes and needs nevertheless remained an elusive one to study, because they are less active on forums and, arguably, deviate less dramatically (or at least less visibly) from the game's dominant strategies.

Future research, then, would consist of a study of the practices and desires of casual players in *World of Warcraft.* Participant observation, however, is only partly able to analyze this group. Procuring access to Blizzard databases for data mining purposes of casual play practices, as well as in-depth interviews with Blizzard's development team on its concerns towards this part of the player community, would produce an appealing and valuable addition to this study. Moreover, as my own play as researcher has, in all probability, also been data-mined by Blizzard, attaining access to this data should also provide me with additional insight into my indirect role within the game's development, how insignificant it may be. Attaining access to such personal data through other means (for instance by using third-party software) might be forbidden on the level of Game Contract, resulting in a situation where part of my research process is, we might argue, now owned and kept largely inaccessible by a commercial entity. This situation is not limited to my study, but presents a challenge for all forms of virtual ethnography addressing a commercial media environment.

While Blizzard appears to be hesitant to allow outsiders direct access to its game development (to my knowledge, Blizzard has, as of 2010, not allowed external parties access to their databases), other game companies have shown that granting researchers – and players – insight into development and maintenance of their games yields valuable results for all parties.[145] Studying the effects of *World of Warcraft*'s silent majority is not just valuable for game-based research. All studies of participatory media featuring a long tail of participation benefit from an analysis of the non- or hardly-active users when they are perceived to be of great importance to the evolution of said media. In the case of *World of Warcraft*, which, through its massive success, has become a model for successful game development, the influence of the silent majority within the game's participatory culture is, quite possibly, felt throughout the game industry and beyond.

While there remains much to be studied when it comes to the influence of games of stake on the development of MMORPGs and similar shared (and therefore staked) environments, this study shows that, when it comes to control, agency and ownership, *World of Warcraft* is the result of years of ongoing processes of negotiation between many different stakeholders on various levels of engagement. As I have demonstrated, these stakeholders include game designers, role-players, raiders, customer service employees, Chinese gold farmers, machinima filmmakers, UI mod builders, twinkers, Game Masters, casual players, cheaters and, yes, even researchers.

[145] Game researchers Nick Montfort, Nick Yee and Scott Caplan for instance were permitted official access to the back-end database of the game they studied, *Everquest II*, from its operator, Sony Online Entertainment, offering them a wealth of data on player behaviour. As they point out, 'This level of access and cooperation between a game developer and an academic research team is the first of its kind' (2008 999). Another game developer, CCP Games, has set up a "Council of Stellar Management", made up of players chosen through election, for their MMORPG *EVE Online* (2003-). This council represents the player community in CCP Games organised meetings and at a certain point was even transformed into its own formal department within the company (Augustine 21).

SUMMARY

World of Warcraft can be seen as the epitome of the so-called massively multiplayer online role-playing game, or MMORPG, a type of computer game known for large-scale virtual worlds where thousands of players can play with (and against) each other. Developed and maintained by American company Blizzard Entertainment, the game supports a wide variety of different play styles, ranging from highly goal-oriented to free-flowing, all within an elaborate fantasy setting. The game, which requires a monthly subscription fee, has no "game over" scenario – it can be played for years on end without reaching a conclusion. For some players, *World of Warcraft* is a game in the traditional definition of the term, with monsters that need to be defeated, levels to be gained and better, stronger items to collect. For others, the game is primarily a platform for social interaction. For most, it is something in between. The freedom to choose your own ways to engage with *World of Warcraft* does, however, also lead to differences of opinion between different types of players, and between players and the game's developer, about the nature of "good" or appropriate forms of play. All have their own stakes in what the game is, how it should be played, and how it should evolve. This study investigates the negotiations that take place between different stakeholders about these issues. These negotiations, which I call "games of stake", constantly define, reconfigure and sometimes even defy the rules of play, leading to collaboration and conflict. By studying games of stake, this study positions itself in the larger debate about shifting relationships between consumers and producers, where progressively collaborative, participatory practices make it more difficult to know who controls and/or owns these media objects.

In the first chapter, entitled "Framing the Game", I provide a theoretical framework through which I access the complex process of negotiations between the stakeholders involved in *World of Warcraft*. This framework consists of four levels – Game Design, Game Play, Game Culture and Game Contract – each epitomizing a different approach to a game of this type. In the section on Game Design, I focus on the definition of what constituted a game, which among other things shows that *World of Warcraft* partially falls outside of this definition due to a lack of a clear, quantifiable outcome, as one cannot win or lose *World of Warcraft*. Players are instead free to create their own goals. Additionally, the Game Design level focuses on historical developments within MMORPG design, showing that many of the game's design choices can be traced back to a longer tradition of role-playing games and even early (non-digital) strategy games. On the level of Game Play, I approach play ontologically, conceptualizing play as a movement constantly conforming itself to and freeing itself from rules. I call the two extremes between which play

moves free play and instrumental play. The rules of play are not only codified into the game's design, they can also be socially constructed. The result is that devious play practices in a multiplayer environment can be deemed antisocial. I introduce such forms of play as individualized group play. On the third level, Game Culture, I position *World of Warcraft* in terms of subculture and participatory culture. Here I show that the activities of players are not limited to the game's boundaries. *World of Warcraft* is actively appropriated, augmented and enriched by its players through, for instance, fan fiction, user-interface modification and the creation of information databases and strategy guides. Finally, the level of Game Contract shows that the players' activities are controlled not only by codified rules of play. First of all, players agree to behave in a certain way with and within the game by signing the End-User License Agreement and Terms of Service documents (the well-known "I Accept" button during software installation). Secondly, players are subject to a wide variety of social protocols which, if broken, could lead to social exclusion. Within and between these four levels, constant negotiations—or games of stake—take place about what *World of Warcraft* is or should be, how it should be played, and who has the right to answer such questions. Investigating the complexities of *World of Warcraft* with this multi-layered approach allows me to explain in greater detail what is at stake in game design, social, cultural and political-economic terms.

The second chapter, entitled "Studying the Game", investigates the methodological issues of playing the game as a researcher. The research for this study was conducted through participatory observation techniques, with ethical and practical considerations from the field of virtual ethnography. My main arguments are that playing as a researcher cannot be considered merely beneficial, but is in fact a precondition for understanding games of stake, and that engaging in games of stake as a researcher through, for instance, cheating helps identify and reflect on play practices which would have been otherwise inaccessible. In this chapter, my function as both player and researcher, and the implications of this double role in terms of subjectivity and critical distance, are nevertheless critically addressed.

In the third chapter, called "Controlling the Game", I provide an in-depth analysis of *World of Warcraft* in terms of Game Design, showing how Blizzard Entertainment has created the game with certain intended uses in mind. By investigating the game on three levels of design – technology, rules, and fiction – this chapter shows what players are and are not allowed to do within (and with) the game, and how the game guides players into certain play patterns, sometimes voluntarily, and sometimes without choice. In the first section of chapter three, I show how *World of Warcraft* functions in terms of computer and network technology. I explain how the network on which the

game is played is centrally controlled by Blizzard, offering the company ample opportunity to monitor player behavior. Furthermore, the role of computer hard- and software as automated storyteller and referee is analyzed, as are the affordances and limitations of the configuration of game characters. In the second section, I analyze the instrumental structure of the game. Here, I discuss *World of Warcraft*'s emphasis on stats, which depict everything from your character's experience level, health, and strength to the amount of damage output a particular bow or sword has, as the driving force behind instrumental progress through the game. Additionally, the quest is investigated: not as a plot device, but as a tool to keep players engaged in the game indefinitely. Finally, the way character classes are designed to force players into certain play and behavioral patterns is explored, as is the way the game sets players up against each other for player versus player (PvP) combat. The third section of chapter three deals with *World of Warcraft*'s fictional world. Here I show how players are split up into factions waging eternal war, a situation they cannot escape after the initial faction choice is made. I also analyze how the virtual world of *World of Warcraft* is represented in terms of space and time, showing among other things that while player characters might experience progress, they are in fact stuck in time, unable to have any lasting influence on their virtual surroundings. By investigating *World of Warcraft* on the levels of technology, rules, and fiction, this chapter shows how Blizzard functions as a force disciplining play into dominant strategies through a series of affordances and limitations in the game's design. By defining the boundaries of play through their design decisions, Blizzard puts forward its stakes in the game. In the next chapters, I show how players actively negotiate these boundaries through games of stake.

Chapter four, entitled "Gaming the Game", views the game from the Game Play and Game Culture perspectives, showing how players address strategies and limitations imposed on them as well as the fact that they share the game with others. The chapter consists of three case studies in which *World of Warcraft*'s intended use as analyzed in the previous chapter will be challenged through devious and/or divergent play practices. The first case study limits itself to individual play by focusing on the use of so-called "walkthroughs", often player-created strategy guides explaining how to progress through a particular part of the game as quickly or efficiently as possible. By using these guides, players do not only bend and transgress regular forms of progression through the game, but even deconstruct and demystify *World of Warcraft*'s fiction in the process. The second case study focuses on a specific form of individualized group play called "twinking". This somewhat controversial play practice involves boosting the strength of low-level characters so they can easily overpower their competition. These boosted

characters, or twinks, give players an entirely new goal and purpose in the game, primarily because twinks operate on a level in the game which most players strive to get past as soon as possible. The third case study of chapter four explores group play. It deals with user-interface modification and data-mining practices hardcore players engage in for social surveillance purposes. Monitoring each other's activity during and after play sessions provides players with large amounts of data, which are then analyzed with the aim to improve group coordination and performance. Data analysis also serves as a means to gain more insight in and agency over the game's hidden algorithms, giving players the feeling that they transgress the rules of play. The three case studies in this chapter have in common that they deal with play tactics which I call "hyperproductive deviance". These tactics, which often involve the use of external aids (in the form of walkthroughs, or user-interface modifications), make creative use of game mechanics to gain control and agency over the game and/or other players. This form of deviance does not only defy dominant play strategies, but aims to transgress the rules of play. In the next chapter, the issue that such deviant play tactics can also lead to friction between players, and between players and Blizzard, will be discussed in more detail.

The fifth and final chapter, entitled "Claiming the Game", elevates the concept of games of stake to the level of Game Contract. While players have a large degree of freedom to play *World of Warcraft* the way they want to, there are play practices and other forms of participation which exist in the grey areas of what is possible and/or allowed with and within *World of Warcraft*. This chapter also contains three case studies, each focusing on different games of stake where legal agreements and social protocols are being negotiated. The first case study has its roots in personal experience: at one point during my research, I found my *World of Warcraft* account compromised when someone managed to get access to my login details and had stolen all my virtual possessions. The case study shows the intricate game of stake between Blizzard and myself about guilt and innocence, and investigates the black market which exists around MMORPGs where virtual money is traded for actual money – the so-called Real-Money Trade (or RMT). It shows the ever more permeable boundaries between virtual worlds and the real world, and the way both players and game developers attach monetary and affective value to the distinction between what is virtual and real. The second case study deals with the creation of machinima, a form of filmmaking using game engine technology to create animations. Producing these films, as this case study shows, often involves moving into grey areas within the contractual agreements between players and Blizzard. On the one hand, Blizzard sees machinima as a welcome addition to the game's participatory fan culture. But on the other hand, we see many high-profile machinima films being made using third-party software

solutions which are in violation with the End-User License Agreement. This has led to a situation where popular machinima films which are officially in violation are tolerated by Blizzard. This situation gives the company the power to decide which are "good" and "bad" forms of appropriation, while leaving machinima filmmakers in the dark about the boundaries between the two. The third and final case study of chapter five presents an investigation of a particular event during the history of *World of Warcraft*'s fictional world, namely the opening of large gates which would finally provide access to the mysterious lands hidden behind them. As only one small group of players actually received access to the key to the gates, and therefore was able to decide at what moment it would open the gates, a large conflict erupted between player groups on the server I was playing on. This incident is taken as emblematic for the sometimes fragile, fragmented nature of *World of Warcraft*'s player community, especially when the stakes players have invested in the game differ wildly. Blizzard, this case study shows, has only limited means to act as mediator between arguing parties, while players in turn have no real means for self-governance, which often leads to inflammatory situations. The case studies in this chapter are distinct in form and topic, but all show what it means to be part of a virtual world where different stakeholders claim the right to decide what forms of play are preferred and/or acceptable, while only one stakeholder truly has power. Through the negotiation of social protocols, players demonstrate a well-informed ability to manage themselves in games of stake. In direct negotiations with Blizzard, however, player agency is for the most part limited.

By investigating *World of Warcraft* from the perspectives of Game Design, Game Play, Game Culture and Game Contract, this study shows that the traditional dichotomy between consumer and producer does not convey the complexity of game of this type. The fact that the game is designed to offer a broad range of different play styles and preferences has resulted in a wide variety of players, each with their own take in – and stake in – the game. Blizzard and these players both have different views of the game – what it is, how it should be played, and how it should evolve – all the while sharing the same virtual environment. Control, agency and ownership, this study concludes, do therefore not reside in either consumer or producer but, instead, are constantly shifting between various stakeholders. *World of Warcraft* itself is therefore continuously *at stake*. The games of stake in which control, agency and ownership are constantly negotiated convey both converging and diverging stakes, leading to situations of both cooperation and conflict.

While Blizzard has ultimate power over the game, it is the players' play, and the ongoing negotiation thereof, that shapes and defines the game. This study therefore concludes that *World of Warcraft* does not just contain games

of stake but should be defined as a game of stake *itself*. This is not just an ontological claim about this particular game, but rather a meta-theoretical claim with methodological consequences for the study of other forms of participatory culture. Games of stake are the struggles various stakeholders encounter when dealing with a contested space of interaction, struggles which have less to do with consumer vs. producer dichotomies than they have to do with the stakes these negotiating parties represent in terms of control, agency and ownership. Active participatory observation is an indispensible method to gain insight in and reflect on these complex processes.

SAMENVATTING (DUTCH SUMMARY)

World of Warcraft kan worden gezien als het summum van de zogenaamde *massively multiplayer online role-playing games,* of MMORPGs, een type computerspelmedium dat bekend staat om immense virtuele werelden waar vele duizenden spelers met (en tegen) elkaar spelen. Het door het Amerikaanse bedrijf Blizzard Entertainment ontwikkelde en onderhouden spel biedt de gebruiker een reeks van verschillende speelstijlen en –doelen aan binnen een uitgebreide *fantasy* setting, waarin zowel ruimte is voor extreem prestatiegericht spel als meer vrijblijvende interactie. Het spel, waarop een maandelijks abonnement moet worden genomen om te kunnen spelen, kent geen "game over"-scenario; het kan jarenlang gespeeld worden zonder dat er een eind bereikt wordt. Voor sommige spelers is *World of Warcraft* een spel in de traditionele zin van het woord, met monsters die moeten worden verslagen en speelpersonages die een steeds hoger *level* moet halen, terwijl het voor anderen meer een platform voor sociale interactie is. Voor de meeste spelers is het een combinatie van beide. De vrijheid zelf te kunnen kiezen hoe te spelen in *World of Warcraft* leidt echter ook tot meningsverschillen tussen spelers, en tussen spelers en de ontwikkelaar van het spel, over de betekenis van "goede" of acceptabele vormen van spel. Elk van deze partijen heeft zijn eigen belangen bij wat het spel is, hoe het gespeeld zou moeten worden, en hoe het zich verder zou moeten ontwikkelen. Dit proefschrift onderzoekt de onderhandelingen tussen de verschillende belanghebbenden (*stakeholders*) in en rond *World of Warcraft* over hun visie op het spel. Deze onderhandelingen, welke ik "*games of stake*" noem, definiëren, reconfigureren en, in enkele gevallen, tarten de regels van het spel, met zowel vormen van samenwerking als conflict als gevolg. Door deze *games of stake* nader te bestuderen plaatst dit proefschrift zich binnen discussies over de veranderende verhoudingen tussen consument en producent. In deze discussies zien we dat door de toenemende mate van participatie van consumenten in productieactiviteiten het steeds lastiger te zien is wie precies de controle heeft over en eigenaar is van media objecten.

In het eerste hoofdstuk van dit proefschrift, getiteld '*Framing the Game'*, wordt een theoretisch kader neergezet van waaruit de onderhandelingen tussen verschillende belanghebbenden in en rond *World of Warcraft* kunnen worden benaderd. Dit kader bestaat uit vier lagen: *Game Design*, *Game Play*, *Game Culture* en *Game Contract*. Elk van deze lagen staat voor een andere benaderingswijze van een computerspel als *World of Warcraft*. Binnen de laag *Game Design* ga ik in op de definitie van spel, waaruit onder andere blijkt dat een MMORPG als *World of Warcraft* deels buiten de standaarddefinitie valt. Dit komt met name door het ontbreken van een helder einddoel – je kan dit spel niet winnen of verliezen – waardoor spelers hun eigen

doelen moeten creëren. Binnen de laag Game Design worden tevens historische ontwikkelingen van het MMORPG-genre uiteengezet die laten zien dat keuzes in *World of Warcraft*'s spelontwerp te situeren zijn in een lange traditie van *role-playing games* maar ook (niet-digitale) strategiespellen. Binnen de laag *Game Play* wordt het begrip spelen ontologisch uitgelegd als een beweging die zichzelf voortdurend schikt aan en vrijmaakt van rigide regels. Deze uitersten worden instrumenteel spel (*instrumental play*) en vrij spel (*free play*) genoemd. De regels waar vrij en instrumenteel spel zich tot verhouden zijn niet alleen gecodificeerd in de regels van het spel maar kunnen ook sociaal geconstrueerd zijn. Dit maakt het mogelijk dat spelen naast individualistisch of sociaal ook asociaal gevonden kan worden. Deze vormen van spel worden "*individualised group play*" genoemd. Binnen de laag Game Culture wordt *World of Warcraft* gepositioneerd in termen van subcultuur en participatiecultuur. Hiermee wordt duidelijk gemaakt dat de activiteiten van spelers zich alleszins beperken tot binnen de spelwereld, en dat het spel actief wordt toegeëigend, aangepast en verrijkt door spelers, bijvoorbeeld door fan fictie, userinterface-modificatie en de creatie van informatie databases en strategiehandleidingen. Binnen de laag Game Contract, ten slotte, wordt getoond dat er wel degelijk grenzen zijn aan de activiteiten van spelers die verder reiken dan gecodificeerde spelregels. Allereerst zijn er de contractuele afspraken die elke speler met Blizzard aangaat zodra hij de *End-User License Agreement* en *Terms of Service* documenten ondertekent via de welbekende "I accept" knop tijdens de installatie van de software. Ten tweede zijn er allerhande sociale protocollen waaraan spelers zich dienen te houden om niet uitgesloten te worden van deelname aan sociale activiteiten binnen het spel. Zowel binnen als tussen deze vier lagen vinden voortdurende onderhandelingen – games of stakes – plaats over wat *World of Warcraft* is of zou moeten zijn, hoe het wel en niet gespeeld moet worden, en wie het meeste recht heeft dit soort vragen te beantwoorden. Door de complexiteit van games of stake vanuit een gelaagd kader te benaderen is het mogelijk duidelijk te maken wat er precies op het spel staat op design-technisch, sociaal, cultureel en politiek-economisch niveau.

Het tweede hoofdstuk, getiteld '*Studying the Game*', richt zich op methodologische vraagstukken die men tegenkomt bij het onderzoeken van spellen als *World of Warcraft*. Voor deze studie is gekozen voor een combinatie van participerende observatietechnieken en ethische en praktische overwegingen uit de virtuele etnografie. In dit hoofdstuk wordt beargumenteerd dat spelen als onderzoeker niet optioneel maar een voorwaarde is voor het bestuderen en begrijpen van games of stake. Actieve participatie in games of stake door, bijvoorbeeld, vormen van *cheating*, helpt bovendien met het identificeren van en reflecteren op vormen van spel die anders ontoegankelijk waren gebleven. Mijn dubbele rol als onderzoeker en

speler wordt in dit hoofdstuk niettemin op kritische wijze tegen het licht gehouden in termen van subjectiviteit en kritische afstand.

In het derde hoofdstuk, getiteld '*Controlling the Game*', wordt gekeken naar de manier waarop Blizzard Entertainment het door hen beoogde gebruik van *World of Warcraft* heeft ontworpen op het gebied van *Game Design*. Door drie verschillende niveaus van het spelontwerp te bestuderen – de onderliggende technologie, de regels en de fictie van de spelwereld – wordt getoond wat spelers wel en niet mogen doen in (en met) het spel en hoe spelers een bepaalde richting worden opgestuurd in hun spel, soms vrijwillig, soms zonder keuze. Het eerste segment van hoofdstuk drie laat zien hoe *World of Warcraft* functioneert in termen van computer- en netwerktechnologie. Zo wordt uiteengezet dat het netwerk waarop het spel gespeeld wordt centraal gecontroleerd wordt door Blizzard, waardoor alle speelactiviteiten nauwlettend in de gaten kunnen worden gehouden. Aandacht is er ook voor de rol voor de computer als geautomatiseerde scheidsrechter en spelverdeler, evenals de mogelijkheden maar vooral ook beperkingen die spelers worden aangeboden bij het creëren van hun virtuele personages. In het tweede segment van het hoofdstuk wordt de instrumentele structuur van het spel geanalyseerd. Hier wordt *World of Warcraft*'s nadruk op statistieken ('*stats*') bediscussieerd. Alles van de ervaring ('*experience*'), gezondheid ('*health*') en kracht van een personage tot de slagkracht van een wapen is omgezet in statistiek, en het streven naar betere cijfers is één van de grootste stuwende krachten voor instrumentele progressie in het spel. Ook de rol van de quest wordt onderzocht – niet als gereedschap om een plot uit te zetten maar als middel om spelers oneindig aan het spelen te houden. Ook komen de dwingende rolpatronen die spelers via de keuze van hun type personage opgelegd krijgen aan bod, evenals de manier waarop spelers worden uitgedaagd tot *player-versus-player* (PvP) activiteiten waarin niet met, maar tegen anderen wordt gevochten. Het laatste segment van hoofdstuk drie laat zien hoe de fictieve wereld van *World of Warcraft* is ontworpen. Zo zijn de spelers ingedeeld in twee fracties die verbonden zijn in een eeuwigdurende oorlog waaruit spelers niet kunnen ontsnappen. Ook analyseer ik hoe *World of Warcraft*'s virtuele wereld is gerepresenteerd wat betreft ruimte en tijd. Hieruit blijkt dat spelers slechts de ontwikkeling van hun eigen personages kunnen beïnvloeden. Om hun personages heen lijkt de tijd stil te staan en bestaat er nergens de mogelijkheid om de fictieve wereld in wat voor vorm dan ook te manipuleren. Door *World of Warcraft* te analyseren op het gebied van onderliggende technologie, regels en fictie laat hoofdstuk drie zien wat spelers wel en niet mogen in (en met) het spel, en hoe het spel idealiter gespeeld zou moeten worden door de implementatie van dominante spelstrategieën. Hiermee laat Blizzard zien welke grenzen zij stellen aan het spel. Dat spelers

hier vaak een geheel andere mening over hebben, wat uitmondt in allerhande *games of stake*, blijkt uit de volgende hoofdstukken.

Hoofdstuk vier, getiteld '*Gaming the Game*' laat de *Game Design* analyse-laag kruisen met die van *Game Play* en *Game Culture* door te tonen hoe spelers omgaan met de mogelijkheden en beperkingen die het spel hen biedt. Het hoofdstuk bestaat uit drie casestudies die elk een andere *game of stake* bespreekt die het gevolg is van afwijkende speelvormen. De eerste casestudie beperkt zich tot individualistisch spel. Ze richt zich op het gebruik van zogenaamde "*walkthroughs",* door spelers gecreëerde handleidingen om zo spoedig en/of efficiënt mogelijk vooruit te komen in het spel, waarmee niet alleen de reguliere vormen van progressie worden omgebogen, maar en passant ook de fictie van de spelwereld uiteenvalt. De tweede casestudie richt zich op een specifieke voor van *individualized group play* genaamd "twinking". Deze enigszins controversiële speelvorm wordt gekenmerkt door het op slinkse wijze opwaarderen van personages waardoor ze vele malen sterker worden dan de competitie. Deze sterkere personages, ook wel "*twinks*" genoemd, bieden spelers een volledig nieuw doel in en richting aan het spel, met name omdat twinks zich niet bewegen op de hoogste levels maar juist actief zijn in de lagere levels van het spel, levels die voor gewone spelers meer worden gezien als tussenstation in plaats van eindpunt. In de derde casestudie staat groepsspel centraal en dan in het bijzonder het gebruik van door spelers gecreëerde vormen van sociale surveillance, het elkaar deels ongemerkt in de gaten houden, via "datamining". Om de sterkste tegenstanders van het spel te kunnen verslaan moeten spelers zeer gecoördineerd samenwerken en leunen hiervoor sterk op modificaties van de userinterface van het spel met sociale surveillance software. De data afkomstig uit deze software vormt niet alleen de basis voor al dan niet gewenste sociale surveillance. Het biedt spelers ook de mogelijkheid een poging te doen om *World of Warcraft*'s verscholen algoritmes te analyseren met het doel meer grip te krijgen op het spel en het gevoel te krijgen de regels van het spel te ontstijgen. De besproken activiteiten in deze casestudies hebben gemeen dat de gebruikte spelerstactieken om het spel naar de eigen hand te zetten gekenmerkt kunnen worden als '*hyperproductive deviance*'. Deze vorm van afwijkend spel maakt op creatieve wijze gebruik van de mogelijkheden binnen de door Blizzard opgestelde regels, vaak in combinatie met externe hulpmiddelen (walkthrough handleidingen, user-interface modificaties), om de dominante spelstrategieën van het spel voorbij te geraken dan wel te ontstijgen. Met deze tactieken vergroten spelers het gevoel controle te hebben over hun spel en/of andere spelers, maar veranderen ook nadrukkelijk de spelervaring wat betreft wensen en doelen. Dat dit soort vormen van afwijkend spel kan leiden tot frictie met spelers met een geheel andere kijk op *World of Warcraft* blijkt uit het volgende hoofdstuk.

In het vijfde en laatste hoofdstuk, getiteld '*Claiming the Game*', wordt het idee dat spelers *World of Warcraft* naar hun eigen hand zetten naar het niveau van *Game Contract* gelicht. Spelers kunnen in grote mate zelf bepalen wat het spel voor hen betekent en hoe het gespeeld wordt, maar dat er grenzen zijn aan het toelaatbare blijkt als spelers contractuele afspraken en/of sociale protocollen doorbreken. Ook dit hoofdstuk bestaat uit een drietal casestudies die elk een ander licht laten schijnen op contractuele conflicten binnen *World of Warcraft*. De eerste casestudie is gebaseerd op een persoonlijke ervaring in het spel: de diefstal van al mijn virtuele bezittingen door iemand die zichzelf op oneigenlijke wijze toegang had verschaft tot mijn privé-account. De casestudie laat vervolgens zien hoe er een zwarte markt is ontstaan waar virtueel geld wordt verhandeld voor echt geld, de zogenaamde *Real-Money Trade* of RMT. Voor de ene speler is het kopen van virtueel geld voor echt geld geen probleem – het bespaart ze immers een aanzienlijke hoeveelheid tijd in het spel. Voor anderen is het een spel-ontwrichtende vorm van vals spelen die tegen elk sociaal protocol ingaat. Bovendien verbiedt Blizzard dit soort handel en bestrijdt het bedrijf een ieder die ze erop betrappen. De discussie rondom RMT is een game of stake waarin niet alleen contractuele grenzen worden overschreden, maar ook de relatie tussen virtueel en realiteit een nieuwe dimensie krijgt. De tweede casestudie van hoofdstuk vijf houdt zich bezig met de creatie van zogenaamde *machinima*; animatiefilms die gemaakt zijn via *game engine* technologie. Het produceren van deze films, zo laat de casestudie zien, beweegt zich vaak binnen grijze gebieden van de contractuele afspraken tussen spelers en Blizzard. Aan de ene kant ziet Blizzard machinima bijvoorbeeld als een zeer welkome aanwinst voor de fancultuur rondom hun spel, aan de andere kant worden veel machinima gemaakt via vormen van softwaremanipulatie die volgens de door Blizzard opgestelde afspraken niet mogen worden ingezet. Deze situatie leidt tot een gedoogbeleid waarin Blizzard de macht heeft te beslissen wat "goede" en "slechte" vormen van appropriatie zijn, terwijl het voor machinima-filmmakers onduidelijk is wanneer ze over de scheef gaan. De derde en laatste casestudie van hoofdstuk vijf is een analyse van een specifiek moment uit de geschiedenis van de fictieve wereld van *World of Warcraft*, namelijk de opening van een grote poort die toegang verschafte tot een mysterieus nieuw land. Aangezien een relatief kleine groep spelers de sleutel kreeg tot deze poort en dus kon beslissen wanneer de poort openging, ontstond er op de server waar ik op speelde een reeks conflicten tussen verschillende spelersgroepen. Dit incident wordt als voorbeeld genomen voor de verdeeldheid binnen de *World of Warcraft*-spelerscultuur die deels voortkomt uit een gebrek aan mogelijkheden tot zelfregulering onder spelers. Hiernaast wordt getoond dat Blizzard door het ontwerp van het spel beperkte middelen heeft om als mediator tussen spelersgroepen op te treden, waardoor

ze vaak terugvallen op strikte naleving van de contractuele afspraken. Hoewel zeer verschillend laten de drie casestudies in hoofdstuk vijf elk vanuit een ander perspectief zien hoe er binnen en rondom *World of Warcraft* wordt omgegaan met conflictsituaties waarbij contractuele afspraken dan wel sociale protocollen worden doorbroken. Het hoofdstuk laat zien wat het betekent om deel uit te maken van een virtuele wereld waar verschillende belanghebbenden het recht claimen te beslissen welke speelvormen acceptabel zijn, terwijl één belanghebbende absolute macht heeft. Spelers blijken vaak goed in staat hun eigen belangen te verdedigen tegen elkaar, maar tegenover Blizzard is hun mate van invloed aanmerkelijk kleiner.

Door *World of Warcraft* te onderzoeken vanuit de perspectieven van *Game Design*, *Game Play*, *Game Culture* en *Game Contract* laat dit proefschrift zien dat het traditionele onderscheid tussen consument en producent niet afdoende is om de complexiteit van een spel als deze over te brengen. De diversiteit in speelvormen en –stijlen die het spel aanbiedt heeft voor een even grote variëteit aan spelers gezorgd die elk een eigen kijk op – en belang in –het spel tentoonspreiden. Zowel spelers als Blizzard hebben een andere kijk op het spel – wat het is of zou moeten zijn, en hoe het gespeeld zou moeten worden – maar delen dezelfde virtuele omgeving. Controle, macht en eigendomsrecht, zo laat deze studie zien, liggen zo niet bij consument of producent maar bevinden zich eerder verwikkeld in voortdurende onderhandelingsprocessen die ik *games of stake* noem. *World of Warcraft* is hierdoor zelf een game *"at stake"* – het spel staat constant "op het spel". De games of stake die tentoon worden gespreid laten zien dat belangen tussen verschillende partijen kunnen convergeren als uiteenlopen, waardoor situaties van samenwerking, maar ook van conflict kunnen ontstaan.

Het mag Blizzard zijn die de ultieme macht over het spel belichaamt, het zijn de spelers die *World of Warcraft* naar wens toe-eigenen door *games of stake* en hierdoor met regelmaat formele veranderingen in het spelontwerp afdwingen. De voortdurende onderhandelingen die *World of Warcraft* als cultureel object definiëren, zo concludeert dit proefschrift, maakt het spel zelf een *game of stake*. Dit moet niet alleen gezien worden als ontologische claim over deze en vergelijkbare spellen. Het is tevens een metatheoretische claim met methodologische consequenties voor verder onderzoek naar andere vormen van participatiecultuur. Het concept van *games of stake* verruilt de tegenstelling tussen consument en producent voor een nadruk op de belangen en het proces van onderhandeling rondom controle, macht en eigendom tussen de verschillende belanghebbenden rondom omstreden mediaobjecten en –omgevingen. Actieve participerende observatie is een onontbeerlijke methode om deze complexe processen te doorgronden en inzichtelijk te maken.

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CURRICULUM VITAE

René Glas (Amsterdam, 1980) studied film and new media at the department of Media and Culture at the University of Amsterdam, where he first developed a taste for studying games. He graduated in 2003 with an MA thesis investigating the relationship between film and digital games in an effort to (de-)construct the notion of the "interactive film". After his graduation, he went on to become a junior lecturer and, in 2005, started research as a PhD candidate in the same department. His research was supported by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO) and was part of the research project "Tranformations in Perception and Participation: Digital Games". He is currently an assistant professor in New Media and Digital Culture at the Department of Media and Culture Studies at the Utrecht University. He is a founding member of the Utrecht University's Center for the Study of Digital Games and Play.

World of Warcraft has become one of the most significant computer games of recent years. The massively multiplayer online role-playing game (or MMORPG) has introduced millions of players around the world to new forms of community-based play within a constantly evolving virtual environment. The game encourages and facilitates players to appropriate and shape the game to their own wishes and needs, resulting in highly diverse forms of play and participation. Despite – or because of – this freedom, constant negotiations about the rules of play erupt between different types of players and the game's developer, Blizzard Entertainment, as each group has its own stakes in the game. In this study, World of Warcraft is framed as a complex socio-cultural phenomenon defined by and evolving as a result of these negotiation processes between stakeholders, which are called 'games of stake', on ludic, social, technological, and managerial levels. This analysis of games of stake provides insight into the tactics used to gain and/or keep control, agency and ownership in shared but nevertheless contested spaces of interaction. As such, this study is emblematic of the struggles between consumers and producers in our increasingly collaborative and participatory media landscape.

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