

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

THE DIGITAL GAMER
AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION OF ON-LINE GAMING
COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

THE “WORLD” OF WARCRAFT AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION OF GAMING COMMUNITIES

By

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Over the last ten years, society has become increasingly connected through the various digital mediums. It is so ingrained in post-industrial societies that online digital communities are emerging. One such community revolves around massive online role-playing games (MMORPGs). This thesis provides an anthropological examination of one such community that has evolved out of the undeniably popular *World of Warcraft* created by Blizzard Entertainment. Using various anthropological methods, this community is examined by understanding play and game theory, how magic and witchcraft are utilized and portrayed in the “world”, and how it is ties into a greater discourse of post-colonialism and power. Finally, what does this mean to the members of this digital word and if it has any influences on their understandings of the aforementioned topics.

Chapter 1

Introduction to the *World of Warcraft*

A Brief Interlude

Hello, my name is Rannis and I am a level 85 Destruction Warlock. I have fought in the Sunken Temple, deep with-in the Swamp of Sorrows. I have stormed the Black Temple and witnessed first-hand the defeat of its master; Illidan Stormrage. Since my time in this world, I bore witness to the rise of the Lich King in the north and the Cataclysm that struck the lands of Kalimdor when the dragon aspect Deathwing the Destroyer awoke. I have seen much, yet nothing, for I am merely the avatar for which this player navigates through the lands of Azeroth. Welcome to the World of Warcraft.

The above paragraph is my play on the now famous World of Warcraft commercials starring actors such as William Shatner and Chuck Norris. Before I immerse you in this virtual world and subsequently the topic of this research, allow me to present you with a simple question; What is World of Warcraft? Is it a game, community, culture, subculture, or something else entirely? To help you with this, I created a forum on the World of Warcraft's website and asked the same question (<http://us.battle.net/wow/en/forum/topic/6194529599?page=1>). Here were some of the responses from players:

Is it a...

It's a game. It's a distraction. It's a social platform. It's a way of life. It's the bane of good grades. It's how spouses met each other. It's where couples broke up. It's where friends met for the first time. It's where friends went their separate ways over pixel items. It's a promotional tool for other companies. It's a popular media scapegoat. It's a haven

for trolls. It's a haven for players. It's where grandparents share leisure time with their grandkids. It's what you call in sick at work for on patch/expansion days. It's fun. It's frustrating. It's grand in scope. It's repetitive. It's a timewaster galore. It's a moneysaver, since you rarely leave the house or buy other games.

But most importantly, World of Warcraft is a game, and a very successful one at that.

Few games have a lifecycle that spans more than a few years (when their makers either stop patching/improving, or go belly-up entirely). Few software programs last as long as WoW has - compare it to the widely used operating system 'Windows 2000', which lasted about seven and a half years from release to unsupported. I believe WoW has passed that by now (Keb, WoW forum response).

Or is it...

- It is a game
- It is an adventure
- It is a social network
- It is a hobby
- It is a pastime
- It is an emotion
- It is a movement

WoW is to many as J.R. Tolkien's books were to others, it changed so many things, set the bar and fired off the imagination and emotions of so many people.

WoW is an epic creation, no doubt about that and I tip my hat to Blizzard Entertainment, Metzen and the men and women who pour their hours into development (Aeronix, WoW forum response).

Is it just this...

It's another environment in which to interact with things and others. It's one in which you pay \$15 per month to an event planner to make other stuff happen in that environment for you to do, along with the interaction you can have with the other people that are there (Planeshaper, WoW forum response).

Or, can it simply be...

It's a game. That's all it is. It's an amazing game, with a fairly good story most of the time, but don't let anyone make you think otherwise. Said people are practicing escapism to the max. WoW tried being an e-sport for a couple years, but that failed miserably. It's a game, nothing more, nothing less (Ancily, WoW Forum response).

World of Warcraft and its Community

On November 23, 2004, the world witnessed the release of the now well-established Blizzard game *World of Warcraft* (*WoW* as it will be referred to for the remainder of this paper). The massive-multiplayer online role playing game (MMORPG) was next in line of a well-known series of franchises owned by Blizzard Entertainment. At the time of its release, no one knew that it would explode into what we have today; the New Zealand Herald article title sums this up perfectly, “Nine Million Now Live in the World Of Warcraft,” (NZ Herald Staff, 2007). Following this article *WoW* was named the 90th largest country in the world. Today its members, or population, are reported to be over ten million, with some reporting as much as, if not more than, twelve million. *WoW* is so expansive it is played in North America, Latin America, Europe, Asia, Russia, Australia, New Zealand, just to name a few. Chances are one knows someone else who plays *WoW*.

The popularity of these MMORPGs, such as *WoW* and *EverQuest*, coupled with growing popularity of videogames over the past decade, show that there is little doubt that they have become an important part of popular culture. People will wait in lines for hours before a midnight release, just to be among the first to play their eagerly anticipated game. In terms of popularity, the gaming industry now rivals Hollywood, and the intensity and genres of games are as various as their titles; ranging from Facebook’s *Farmville* to the recently released and record breaking *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* by Activision.

As mentioned earlier, *WoW* is considered to be a MMORPG. In essence, they are virtual versions of the more traditional dice and paper based role-playing games such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, or D&D, as it is more commonly referred to. These games are heavily influenced by such works as J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle Earth based books various mythologies, and histories. These elements make the game more visually striking, meaningful, and enjoyable. Typically, these games consist of hundreds of quests which tie into an overall story, usually involving some form of Tolkien-scale war or event. Players can also engage in raids, player versus player matches, festival events, and profession activities. Resource gathering and gold farming is another way players spend their time. *WoW* has been host to two real-life weddings, several in-game concerts, and a funeral mourning service for a server member who died. Unfortunately, this was crashed by a larger guild on that server which stirred a lot of controversy among players. These games have been the causes of death, divorce, breakups, marriages, and new friendships alike. Through a \$14.95 per month subscription fee, people can be transported to the online world of their game where they interact with other people via an avatar.

Choosing an avatar in *WoW* is no easy task and can take some careful consideration, especially when creating a name for your character and physical traits ranging from hair style to skin color. Players have the option to choose between twelve different "races" depending on which faction they prefer, Alliance or Horde, with six per faction. The Alliance contains races like humans, dwarves, nightelves, and gnomes, whereas the Horde contains orcs, trolls, taurens, and the forsaken. Skin colors can range from a Caucasian pinkish color to bright green or blue. From dreadlocks to mowhawks, *WoW* has the hairstyle you want, each tailored to the specific race and gender.

As with many different types of games, players have created their own language which is known by most veteran players of a type of game. While there is some terminology that is standard for MMORPGs, some may vary depending on the actual game itself. For example, “DoT” means damage-over-time for both *EverQuest* and *WoW* players. Variations will come about if there are game specifics which differ. Players also have to learn what socially acceptable and unacceptable behavior within the game is. These learned behaviors, combined with the multitude of other nuances, make these games more complex than a non-gamer, or even a gamer, might think.

As mentioned earlier, the creators have borrowed heavily from various mythologies, stories, and histories. A great example are the World Trees, Nordrassil and Vordrassil in *WoW* both being plays on the Norse mythological Yggdrasil. This facilitates in the emersion aspect of the game. *WoW* is a game which is lived. People identify with their avatars and many play themselves in the game. Their in-game and out-of-game identities become blurred (Boellstroff 2008; Taylor 2006). Through the game, players interact with each other often sharing stories and previous adventures and experiences. Much like Neo-Pagan groups discussed in, *Witching Culture* (Magliocco 2004), *WoW* gamers and MMORPG gamers, in general, are often intelligent albeit socially “young.” I say this because they are more social in their own environment around other gamers. Despite this, they are usually well versed in various literatures, which can be seen in their avatars’ names, and most are educated; the younger players still in school, but, on the path of higher education. Often the more ardent players will wear some form of identifying clothing; whether it being a shirt, pendant, or even wallet. When I was at BlizzCon 2009, in Anaheim, California, I immediately had to purchase a

few shirts and other items. Partly because the imagery looks great, but more importantly, I was also one of the only ones not wearing anything Blizzard-related. Once I did, I was in a far much better position to talk with fellow gamers; or so I thought. In fact, I met one of my informants, who later became one of my best friends, because he noticed I was wearing a Horde t-shirt. This form of coding is definitely used and recognized by gamers.

The Aims of this Thesis

With that said, the study of online gaming has started to warrant more serious attention from the academic community over the last few years (Boelstroff 2006, 2008; Corneliussen and Rettberg 2008; Hendricks, and Winkler 2006; Kelly 2004; Nardi, 2010; Taylor 2006; Williams,). Most research originates from fields outside anthropology, fields such as psychology, mass media, and sociology. Researchers have written on topics ranging from the psychological effects it has on the player to what the game and choices in avatars can explain regarding sexual identity.

Considering there are only two anthropological publications regarding this area that I am aware of (Boellstorff 2008; Nardi 2010), anthropology has been a little slow in recognizing the growing impact online gaming has on culture, let alone in recognizing it as a community of its own. For a field which prides itself on studying cultures, in all its various forms, one would think this area would have been approached sooner. Alas, for whatever the reason may be, it has not until recently. To compensate for this apparent lack of anthropological material on the subject, other areas will be analyzed which play an important role for this particular research. In order to properly understand gaming and

more specifically, online-gaming, I believe using what Clifford Geertz refers to as a synthetic approach (Geertz 1973) to be most useful for anthropology due to its holistic nature. I say this because there is no one field which can truly understand online gaming as a subculture, or an imagined community for that matter. Multiple fields need to be used when trying to understand the “webs” (Geertz 1973) of *WoW* and other games people have committed themselves to.

Through the remaining chapters, I hope to show that anthropology and its emphasis on ethnographic research can be extraordinarily useful to the study of virtual worlds. Chapter 2 will cover my methodology. Even though the anthropological study of virtual worlds is in its early formative years, the long standing tradition of ethnographic research, with an emphasis on participant observation, can provide a unique aspect to the current growing discourse surrounding these relatively new worlds. It is in this chapter that I show that studying virtual worlds, and the games that comprise them, is far more complex than just “playing a game.” These games have evolved to the point where they exist outside of the parameters set forth by the programmers and game designers and as such merit more attention from the academic community. There are currently two anthropological trains of thought on how to approach the study of virtual worlds: 1) study the players in the virtual world with little to no regard for their actual world experiences, characteristics, et cetera (Boelstroff 2008) and 2) combining both the virtual and actual, to include various other platforms (Nardi 2010). Neither is entirely wrong, but, context is key when deciding the approach.

Chapter 3 provides an overview of the various ways in which academia has studied play and the theories which were derived from set studies. In this chapter, I

combine various characteristics of play to present a different definition. Play can be a: (1) voluntary liminal activity (2) where events flow (3) bound by flexible rules (4) which can invoke a wide array of feelings (5) enjoyed for the purpose of competition or self-enjoyment (6) contributing to the social development of an individual, regardless of age. This tweaked definition of play sets the tone for what I call MMORPGs like *WoW*; Imagined Transnational Solidarities. Games, such as *WoW*, are so expansive that they permeate the players' actual-world lives, essentially breaching what Johan Huizinga refers to as the "Magic Circle," (Huizinga 1955). The game has crossed that boundary of just existing in the game. As one player I interviewed, whose character's name is Droma, stated, "*Wow, that blows my mind. I never thought of this s**t like that before. THAT'S AWESOME...*," (Droma, in-game interview).

Chapter 4, which was the first chapter I wrote, discusses the role of the witch in *WoW*. Using the characteristics of a witch, set forth by Ronald Hutton (Hutton 2004), I analyze the various playable classes in *WoW* to determine which one best resembles a classical witch in the more historical and ethnographic sense. By using Hutton's criteria, I determined that the warlock was the most "witch-like" class. This is then compared to what players think of as a witch and what influences their decisions and if the game has any bearing on those decisions. For the players, druids and shamans were the dominant choice, largely in-part due to Wiccan notions of a witch. Players of casters, whom I interviewed, thought the mage was the most "witch-like" due to pop-cultural influences such as J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series and the Warner Brother's movies based on aforementioned books.

Chapter 5 covers how *WoW* utilizes magic in contributing to a more realistic, immersing experience. This chapter serves as an introductory cross-comparative analysis on how the more magical-influenced classes such as druids and shamans are represented in the game versus how they are in the actual world. The second half builds upon this by placing magic in the context of a greater post-colonial analysis of the 12-19th century, played out by the players of the two competing factions; the righteous Alliance and the savage Horde. While analysis was conducted on the individual races and the post-colonial stereotypes they represent (Langer 2008), magic and the contextualization of it in 12-19th century “othering” and execution of peoples whose belief systems were more “primitive” or supernatural in nature had not been touched upon. The third part looks at how knowledge of the game and the various casting classes, and its importance in the lore, affords more power to the player. Ultimately, this contributes to the players sharing in what is known as a magical consciousness (Greenwood 2009).

Finally Chapter 6 concludes this research and I acknowledge those that have helped me on the four year journey. While this thesis focuses primarily on the way in which this game uses and introduces magic, witchcraft, and other supernatural belief systems to a new generation, I hope to also contribute to the established field of play and game study as well as to the growing discourse surround virtual world research and the continuing legitimization of it as an area worthy of anthropological research.

Chapter 2

Methodology

In the field of Anthropology methodology is crucial when conducting research, especially research that pertains to peoples' culture. The researcher has to remain true to their course, even knowing that it might upset people; both members of that community and fellow researchers. Both the outcome and methods are open to professional critique and criticism, weird glances, satirical comments, and so on and so forth. I remember when I was sitting in my Anthropology 490c seminar class in the fall of 2007, my final semester as an undergraduate, deciding on what ethnic enclave I wanted to do my research project on. My fellow classmates all gravitated to the same, albeit safe in my opinion, choices; Chinatown, little Tokyo, the Vietnamese area occupying a small stretch of Reseda Boulevard. Some gravitated to areas of their own ethnic background, while some chose ones they never even knew existed. Regardless of their reasons, they were all ones where the research would fit the "normal" modus operandi for anthropological research; fieldwork consisting of first and foremost participant observation of a native group.

This notion of traveling to an unknown culture, or destination, living among the natives, participating in the daily life of the community all in the name of research was beautifully portrayed in Malinowski's famous opening paragraph for his book *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (Malinowski 1922). Right off the bat he emphasized the importance of the researcher to go and conduct this form of participatory observation. Since the time of Malinowski, Boas, Mead, anthropologists have traveled the world over, documenting the cultures of this planet. However there is a challenge that students of

Anthropology now face; what's new and what do I do. Anthropologist Bonnie A. Nardi stated it best,

“Recently, opportunities for “something new” appear to have foreclosed in anthropology. Anthropologists have documented nearly every culture on earth, and the “primitives” to whom we have been devoted are disappearing into modernity,” (Nardi 2010: 27-28).

Going back to my anthropology class topic, I decided to go outside of the box and chose a computer game. More specifically, I chose to argue that a guild in WoW exuded the same characteristics and provided the same amenities to its members that an ethnic enclave, like Chinatown, does for the members of its community. Some of my classmates thought I lost my mind and some joked that my research was going to consist of playing a videogame and how that is not anthropological research. One graduate student told me after class that day, that anthropologists have to go into the world and study, not play a computer game. Sarcastically, I told him I was going into the world...the *World* of Warcraft. He didn't find the comment as funny as I did and walked off. But what I experienced was a student set in the field's assumed notion of what “counts” as fieldwork. With that said, I am not discounting any student who wishes to follow in another's research and carry it on, but the idea of fieldwork and what constitutes as “legitimate” needs to change. It needs to be, “...aggressively and imaginatively reinterpreted to meet the needs of the present,” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997:39-40). The world and the cultures it comprises are changing rapidly and the field of Anthropology needs to as well. With that said, anthropology has a lot to offer and especially in the study of virtual worlds (Boellstorff 2006, 2008; Golub 2010; Nardi 2010).

The research was more involved than one might have thought. While I didn't travel to some far-off distant land, or even down the street, I did log in hundreds of hours in this virtual world. At the time it was my introduction to WoW, but, not my emphasis. I created my account for the game and chose a character without much thought. I familiarized myself with the game and did enough to become a member of a medium-sized social guild; enough for me to write my paper. When I started my Master's it was initially for Archaeology with an emphasis in Egyptology. I did the leg work, read recommended readings on a certain dig site, submitted my resume, and conducted telephonic interviews with the field site director, to get accepted onto a field team studying the Coptic period; however, due to my other life as an Army officer issues came up regarding security and safety. Unfortunately, I could not get the appropriate clearance from the military to travel to Egypt for a few months. With that dream dashed, I decided to revisit the idea I had for my 490c class the year prior, this time looking at these online games as a culture, or subculture. So, I changed gears and switched my focus from archaeology to cultural anthropology.

Prior to that fateful 490c seminar, I was already an avid gamer; a child of the Nintendo generation. Videogames and computer games, when they eventually emerged, have always been a part of my life. I have owned just about every gaming console to date and even met my wife through a conversation we had about Diablo 2, another game produced by the same company as WoW. By changing gears, this research topic would allow me to continue with my passion for the field of Anthropology and satisfy my military limitations. Having already created an account all I needed to do was reactivate my account and re-enter the WoW. I faced one obstacle: What would my emphasis be?

What was the question I was going to research? As one professor of mine called it, “the why should I give a s**t factor.” It was a daunting notion to think about, one that plagued many of my fellow graduate students. At the time, there was not much in the form of anthropological material pertaining to the study of virtual worlds, let alone video, or computer, gaming culture. With some basic ethnographic tools at my disposal and rather than spending a year pulling out hair to try and find a set question, or path, I decided to dive right in the research and see what would present itself to me. I would later find out from my reading that sometimes, especially when going into a topic with little previous research, that’s what one has to do (Nardi 2010; Strathern 2004).

My methodology consisted of both in-game and in-person interviews, participant observation in the form of playing the game and attending conventions, qualitative and quantitative analysis of forum thread responses, informal conversations with various players, and online research. While I may not have had a set direction, I did put more forethought into how I was going to conduct my research. I started off by creating a character that was more meaningful to me, one I would enjoy playing. I decided on the warlock because I loved the background story and type of spells they use. With my newly created avatar, Rannis, I dove back into the virtual world.

As I stated earlier, it was at this point that I needed to employ more ethnographic methods when conducting my research. There are a couple of schools of thought when conducting research in virtual worlds. One approach, as employed by the anthropologist Tom Boelstroff in his research on the computer game Second Life developed by Linden Lab, is to study the players in the virtual world in situ --that is, by segregating their real world behaviors, nuances, characteristics, et cetera from their virtual personas (Boelstroff

2006, 2008). Other researchers disagree with this and they believe both the virtual and real need to be studied in order to provide an accurate portrayal of virtual worlds and the cultures that revolve around them (Golub 2010; Nardi 2010; Taylor 2006). While both have merit, I think it depends on the type of virtual world and the type of game-user interface it employs. Second Life allows people an exceptional amount of freedom, to the point where people have made millions creating and selling virtual clothes and other items they have created in the game. It can afford one the opportunity to fully conduct pure virtual research. MMORPGs like WoW have more restrictions and, for a lack of better words, are entirely different types of games all together. The conventions, forums, blogs, numerous websites, novels, merchandise, all contribute to the world and the subculture around it.

Due to the expansive and real world penetrating nature of the game, I could not study it in isolation from the actual world. I conducted interviews, some in person, but most through the game. I attended Blizzcon twice; in 2009 and 2011, created threads on the official WoW forum, sifted through hundreds of pages of blog responses, conducted on-line research on the lore that surrounds the games, all of which I will elaborate on further.

Conducting interviews was a nerve racking experience for me. The first in-person interviews I conducted were at Blizzcon in 2009. Up until that point, I had participated in various informal conversations with different guild members. Guilds are comprised of multiple people, people potentially from different countries. I never knew their names and they preferred it that way. At first I did not really know what questions to ask, or, really talk about and found myself just trying to survive and get by in an unknown land.

One note about these games, just like the actual world, there are rules and a different type of language one must learn. It was Blizzcon 2009, where I really learned how much I needed to learn.

Blizzcon, is an annual convention celebrating all things Blizzard Entertainment. There is a sub-culture just surrounding Blizzard's titles. Usually held in the September to October timeframe at the Anaheim Convention Center, in Anaheim, California, Blizzcon is an experience to behold. Gamers from all walks of life descend upon the convention center for the two day event basking in the communitas-like atmosphere influenced by both the theme of the event and the common bond shared by all, that of being a gamer. For the two days, the members of the virtual world reign supreme and partake in the numerous events, contests, and panels held. Every participant receives a goody bag chalked full of game themed swag, from statues of various in-game characters to electronic account encryption keys known as Battle.net authenticators. Many participants wear colorful costumes, some spending a year to prepare for the event. As one girl dressed as a blood elf said to me, "*...are you kidding, it's BLIZZCON. I've been at every one, it's like a part of my life. I look forward to being surrounded by thousands like me, even if it's for a couple of days.*" When I entered the exhibition hall for the first time, I was immediately transported to another world; a real-life gaming world like an inverted scene from the Paramount Picture's movie *Cool World*. The massive dimly lit halls, dry-ice like fog in the air, simultaneous panels being conducted, hundreds of computer monitors, and the long theme park-like lines to try the latest additions to their virtual worlds. I was completely over whelmed and under prepared for this.

Luckily a friend, and former soldier of mine, was also attending that year from Arizona. While I was waiting to meet up with him, I decided to try and interview some of the people standing around outside the entrance doors. Most were too busy discussing the latest information from the panels they sat through, or sharing their experiences of trying the latest expansions to their beloved games, to bother talking to someone who barely came off as an insider...me. The ones that were kind enough to humor me spoke a language I did not understand. In WoW and other like games, acronyms are essential. Everything from the name of an instance, like BT for Black Tower or afk for away from keyboard, is compacted into some short little acronym. It is to the point where an entire sentence in an in-game chat screen can be, "*afk brb bio,*" which translates to, be right back, away from keyboard, going to the bathroom. My lack of basic language knowledge aside, I didn't know half of what was being discussed: dungeons and instances I was unaware of, skills and abilities I knew nothing about, in-game locations I could not discuss to. Even though I was a gamer myself, I was still an outsider to this world. With that said, I attempted to start with a question, but, like many interviews the conversation led off in an entirely different direction. After that initial interview, I realized I needed to know more in order to conduct more meaningful interviews where I could ask questions and understand the responses. That night, while sitting in a booth at the IHOP on Harbor Blvd, in Anaheim, my friend emphasized the importance of first really understanding my character and the game mechanics. Even though I had played *Diablo* and *Diablo 2* for years, they were entirely different games. Much to my surprise, our conversation was being overheard by the party behind us, how amidst all the noise and commotion created by the restaurant full of gamers was beyond me, but they heard it none-the-less and

joined in. Like my friend, they told me, “*I need to put the pencil and paper down, unless it was being used to write down talent tree builds and attack rotations, and PLAY the game.*” The roughly 5’8” man dressed as a dwarf inn-keeper and his night elf girlfriend were right. I really did need to learn how this world worked.

After the convention, I returned to my computer and started to really learn what it meant to be a member of this community. I researched various warlock builds, found acronym lists and familiarized myself with the language. Guild members referred me to useful websites and one stay at-home mother of two provided me a list of how to look up my character and other characters to get an idea of equipment and accomplishments I needed to strive after. At the time, I was also working as the loss prevention for a Borders’ books superstore and the café manager found out I played WoW. He had been playing since the game’s release in 2004 and provided me with loads of useful insight. After three years, he became both a valuable informant and best friend. Players of WoW love talking about their experiences with others. While at Borders, I met several customers who were also avid players that provided several interviews for me and regular insight. Ranging from eight years of age to thirty-one, each had something to say. It was through them that I learned another useful way to obtain people’s feedback: forums.

While I did conduct interviews, online forums became a valuable tool. I created several forums on Battlenet’s official World of Warcraft website (<http://us.battle.net/wow/en/forum>). The topics ranged from why people play, to what their opinions are of witchcraft in the game; a rather heated topic, as anything related to religion is, which I will elaborate on in the following chapters. The forums proved to be very useful to me in obtaining qualitative insights regarding my topics of study, because

it allowed members of the community to share their interests and opinions. I read all of the posts, which ranged from four to twelve pages in length and contained, on average, about thirteen to nineteen responses per page. After I read them, I categorized the responses into groups; for example, how many people cited Wiccan beliefs in determining which character most closely resembled a witch, etc.

Between more time spent in the game, my informant customers at Borders, fellow guild members, and numerous online websites, I became a far more knowledgeable member of the community, to the point where I started providing guidance to both players new to the world and new to warlocks.

To help keep track of everything I was doing, I started to keep a log of both in-game conversations, I was having, and of key accomplishments I made in the game. No names were ever recorded, only character names. Whenever I asked someone for an interview, whether in-game or the actual world, I always asked if they wanted to be addressed by their real names or character names. Only two gave me consent for the recording and use of their real name. All the interviews I conducted were handwritten and then transcribed in various Word documents. Thankfully, most were already recorded into the various chapters of this thesis because I suffered two major set-backs along this journey. My car was broken into back in 2010 and my bag containing most of my notebooks of logs and interviews was stolen. That same year my computer was hit hard by some unknown virus which infected not only my hard-drive, but, also my external memory sticks, all of which had to be reformatted. Regardless of the set-backs, I still had plenty of research material left and a multitude of contacts to call upon if needed.

Through my time of research for this thesis, I experienced both the full-spectrum of tribulations and rewards of field research, all culminating at last-years Blizzcon, Blizzcon 2011. Unlike my first experience where I was bumbling around looking like the stereotypical anthropologist with a notebook and pencil writing everything down as it passes by, I was versed in the ways of the community and had the knowledge and experience to navigate through the convention and know what the panelists were discussing. When I would chat with the couple behind me in line to buy merchandise, I could share in the experiences of storming the Icecrown Citadel, home of the Lich King, a major boss introduced in the 2008 expansion *Wrath of the Lich King*. I was able to divulge my anger and frustrations with the group of guys sitting in front of me at the *Diablo 3* mythology panel, about how much I hate it when players “need” an item when they actually don’t. After a boss is killed, they drop epic loot and players have the option to roll for it. They can click on “need” or “greed” if they do roll and the person who rolled the highest number and clicked on needed it will receive it. Some need it when they don’t and then leave. A behavior referred to as “ninja”, which is frowned upon by most of the community. I partook in the anger and joy of fellow panel attendees when the panelists announced major upcoming changes to their beloved character classes and world.

By the end of my research period, I went from barely conducting a ten minute interview to being able to have forty to sixty minute interviews. Casual informal conversations become more informative, like the ones I had in lines during the 2011 Blizzcon. Equally as important, I was able to go back to notes and transcripts, which were not stolen, and make more sense of things, references and comments that meant nothing

to me when I initially jotted them down during interviews or online chats now became meaning. I became a knowledgeable member of the community.

Chapter 3

Anthropological and Non-Anthropological Perspectives on On-line Gaming and Play

Introduction

Most online-gaming research originates from fields outside anthropology: fields such as psychology, mass media, and sociology. Researchers have written on topics ranging from the psychological effects that online gaming has on the player to what choices in avatars can reveal about sexual identity. This chapter is going to examine how researchers, anthropologists and non-anthropologists, have approached online-gaming and how already established theories on the subject of play and game can be applied to online-games.

For this particular research, the chapter will be divided into three main parts: a brief background on games such as *WoW* and *EverQuest* (another game which will be mentioned in this paper); approaches to game studies, both non-anthropological and anthropological; and non-anthropological and anthropological approaches to play. Although this chapter is not an in-depth analysis of the game *WoW* it is important, none-the-less, to know the context in which this game is played and an understanding of just how big these games are. For play, game, and sport theories, which will be looked at, it will be divided into two parts: non-anthropological approaches and anthropological approaches. The two-fold approach to this is partly due to the lack of anthropological research on the subject and since it is a game it is essential to incorporate how various researchers from varying fields have analyzed these game. In this chapter, I am positing that online games, such as *WoW* and *EverQuest*, are in fact a subculture; an imagined transnational solidarity. By that I mean an imagined online-based community that contains

various elements that cross the online boundaries into our real-world lives. Various cultural elements are diffused into this community and integrated into its history, thus becoming a part of the customs, lore, and daily experience that contribute to an ever-changing, enjoyable “world.”

Play and Game Defined

There does not appear to be one, concise definition of what play is exactly and like culture, there seems to be variations; each researcher tweaking the definition. The core definition of play, which most researchers refer to (Blanchard 1995; Lancy 1980; Sutton-Smith 2001) comes from Johan Huizinga (Huizinga 1955). Johan Huizinga defines play as, “a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and the consciousness that it is ‘different’ from ordinary life” (Huizinga 1955:28).

The “...fixed limits of time and space,” (Huizinga 1955:28) context in which play occurs will be looked at first. Both Victor Turner (1982) and Brian Sutton-Smith (2001) would agree that play does exist in a liminal phase. This liminal phase, however, allows players to manipulate the variables (Turner 1982:34), in this case the rules of the game being played. Sutton-Smith and Turner also state that play's existence in a liminal phase is one of the reasons that play is ambiguous and difficult to define (Sutton-Smith 2001: 1; Turner 1982: 54). Sutton-Smith sees play as a biological and psychological function of adaptation to rigid constraints (Sutton-Smith 2001:231). In other words, play serves as way for the human mind to learn how to adapt to rules and manipulate them to achieve

the set goal. This is accomplishable due to the ambiguous, liminal, nature of play. Anthropologists Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Stith Bennett provide focus on another aspect of this liminal state of play. They state that “play is action generating action: a unified experience flowing from one moment to the next in contradistinction to our otherwise disjoint everyday experiences,” (Csikszentmihalyi and Bennett 1971:45). Play arises when boredom sets in and usually takes on a competitive nature (Csikszentmihalyi and Bennett 1971:45-47). What can be derived from this definition of play is the “flow” concept; a concept also shared by Victor Turner who states through flow, “...our minds and will are disencumbered from irrelevances and sharply focused in certain known directions,” (Turner 1982: 56). The flow aspect of play allows events to pass and merge into each other in a manner which is the opposite of our regular lives. The possibility of choices differs and we can become lost in the semi-flexible rules which dictate the boundaries of the playful event or game.

Huizinga states that the goal of play is the event of playing itself (Huizinga 1955: 28-29). Contrary to Huizinga, the anthropologist David Lancy would say that the process of obtaining the goal is play (Lancy 1980), a notion also shared by the anthropologist Stephen Miller (Miller 1973:97). Lancy sees play as a paradox because it falls between opposing and off-setting forces (Lancy 1980:490). The forces mentioned by Lancy are the seeking of novelty and social and environmental pressures (Lancy 1980: 490). Chaotic and immature behaviors are sought out when the body is need of arousal. The opposing forces guide the behavior and need for arousal and refine it into meaningful action and behavior, which both shortens and lengthens the state of immaturity (Lancy 1980:490). Lancy states that there are four main features of play: 1) movements used in

play are also used in other contexts; 2) play is free from purpose or benefit; 3) play is voluntary and; 4) play is in a special benign environment (Lancy 1980:474). Here similarities can be seen between his features and the definitions already provided. Lancy agrees with Huizinga that play is voluntary and exists in a special environment, which could possibly be a liminal environment. The problem is Lancy's lack of goal or benefit. This feature contradicts Lancy's own definition of play as process to obtaining a goal. There is a goal or benefit in play (Miller 1973), as will be shown later on. While the means of obtaining that goal may be the playful aspect, a goal does still exist.

Contrary to the varied aspects and qualities of play, games appear to have a more concise and agreed upon definition. The definition of a game provided in the article, *Games in Culture*, (Roberts, Arth, and Bush 1959) appears to be one of the most agreed upon and cited definitions (Blanchard 1995). Anthropologists John Roberts, Malcolm Arth, and Robert Bush define a game as: "recreational activity characterized by (1) organized play, (2) competition, (3) two or more sides, (4) criteria for determining the winner, and (5) agreed-upon rules," (Roberts, Arth, and Bush 1959:597). Roberts, Arth, and Bush's classification of games into three categories: games of skill, strategy, and chance seem to hold for most games (Sutton-Smith 2001; Lancy 1980; Turner 1982; Csikszentmihalyi and Bennett 1971) WoW is a combination of all three; in that it requires skill to choose the right combinations of gear and skills, strategy is required to complete many of the difficult challenges within the game, and chance comes into play when rolling for dropped items. This concept will be further explored later on.

Non-Anthropological Approaches to Gaming

The majority of research done on online gaming lies in fields such as mass media, communications, sociology, psychology, and information technology fields. With all those fields, the majority of the research focuses on the establishment of these games as communities that can be interpreted symbolically. The remaining researchers approach gaming from a more functional aspect, looking at how games serve as tools for identity exploration.

Through games, players create symbolic identities for themselves. (Chee et al. 2006). The symbolic identity is incorporated into the social structure, thus contributing to an ever-changing community, complete with its own culture (Chee, et al. 2006; Eladhari 2007; Taylor 2006; Waskul 2006 and; Williams et al.2006).

The researchers primarily focus on how the interaction between the players and the game contribute to the creation and establishment of these games as communities; going beyond their innate quality of being social environments. Taylor (2006) shows that these virtual environments are fueled by the player's choices. Waskul (2006) states that it is the blending of the fictitious boundaries and a player's persona, that transforms the action of just playing a game into participating in a larger community; a view also shared by Chee, Vieta, and Smith (2006). Williams, Hendricks, and Walker (2006) write along the same lines as Waskul, and state that the community is forged from the individual identities.

T.L. Taylor, studying internet and multi-user interfaces, approaches online games as ever-changing communities due to the incorporation of the players' identities. In her ethnographic study of online gaming, *Play Between Worlds*, Taylor states that online

games are social spaces played in real time, fueled by the individual choices of the player. Doing her research on *EverQuest*, the MMORPG predecessor to *World of Warcraft*, she noted that, “there is no single-typed EQ player, nor any single way to play,” (Taylor 2006:9). Essentially, what Taylor is saying is that these online worlds are not self-contained environments. The players bring real-life constructs into their shared virtual world and a new culture grows out of this --one which new players must learn. Events that transpire in this new environment become just as meaningful to the players as their real-world lives. Players incorporating their own identities, behaviors, and curiosities into the game contribute to a more enjoyable in-game experience. The sociologist Dennis Waskul, would agree with Taylor’s analysis and says, “...players find themselves a part of but one infinite game,” (Waskul 2006:36).

Waskul states that the players can incorporate their real-life identities into the game (Taylor 2006) because the fictitious boundaries between the person, player, and persona blend together in the game, thus resulting in a much larger, or “infinite,” game (Waskul 2006:35-37; Williams et al. 2006). Essentially, online games are programs created by professional programmers and designers. These games require people to play them and are inherently social environments (Taylor 2006). Therefore, it is only logical that real-world societal aspects will be played out in these games. Games, which according to Waskul are separate from normal life and exist “...in the liminal margins between the people we think we are and the personas we play...what we think we are and what we aspire to be” (Waskul 2006:36). Although he is referring more towards old fashioned role-playing game avatars, not virtual ones, the point still holds. Virtual media researchers Patrick Williams and Sean Hendricks and M.A. Linguistics student Keith

Walker, take Waskul's concept of the avatar one step further by stating that it is through the names of the avatars that other players learn about each other and their playing methods (Williams et al. 2006); contributing to the "shared community" aspect of online games. Online games provide a conduit for one to act and express behaviors in ways he or she may not necessarily be able to in his or her real-world environment. Conversely, the player can be him, or herself. This dichotomy contributes to the player's in-game identity.

In the article, *Online Gaming and the Interactional Self*, written by Florence Chee, a Ph.D. candidate studying online gaming as an emerging culture, Marcelo Vieta, a social and communications researcher, and Richard Smith, a communications researcher, Schutz's phenomenology of intersubjective interaction's theory is used to illustrate the idea that players' identities are permeable and that these online communities are as real to the players as real life (Eladhari 2007; Taylor 2006; Waskul 2006). Intersubjective interaction theory was proposed by the philosopher Alfred Schutz. The intersubjective interactive theory states that one can be seen as an act through an "other." This is important to online games because players communicate and interact with each other through avatars. The authors show that the online lives and off-line lives of *EverQuest* players are not that distinguishable and the imagined online gaming communities are, "no less real," (Chee et al. 2006:160). Rather, the two worlds, as it were, blend together in much the same fashion as Waskul (Waskul 2006) describes. Players interact with the avatars of other real people, thus creating a real, shared community (Williams et al. 2006). MMORPGs are not dysfunctional to society, instead, they act as, "...ways of reenchanting life and of sustaining meaningful community experiences," (Chee et al.

2006:154). This is done through the notion that people engage with one another to achieve mutual goals and actions; Schultz would call this purposeful action “work” (Chee at al. 2006:161-162).

Mirjam Eladhari is a Ph.D. candidate and a lead game designer for the IPERG project. She states that games can tell us a lot about who we are. Through these MMORPGs, players can learn about their identity and even “play” with it (Eladhari 2007:172). According to Eladhari, there are three different groups of players: the player who plays him- or herself; the role player; and the player who develops a persona, the latter being when the boundary between player and character is blurred. These games can then achieve a higher level of immersion and engagement by allowing players to express their true character.

The emphasis on the third type, however useful, contradicts Eladhari's statement that it allows the player to express his or her true character. The player playing him- or herself may be the player's true identity. The game allows the player to be him- or herself, regardless of the need to blend the two identities, player and character, together (Waskul 2006).

Contrary to the symbolic interpretive approaches previously discussed, functional approaches to gaming seem to focus on these MMORPGs as tools for the players. MMORPGs, like *WoW*, function as a means of identity exploration. This can be seen in the works by R.V. Kelly 2, a video-game programmer and concept designer, and Torill Mortensen, whose focuses include mass media and internet culture and communication research. Kelly 2 (2004) shows how these games allow people to explore curiosities or traits that they may not be able to in real life; it functions as a world without

consequences. Mortensen (2007) writes on the same concept as Kelly 2, however, he relates it to the bricoluer quality of the gamer; a concept which will be explained later on.

Kelly 2, as he likes to be called, discusses the addiction and draw of MMORPGs; outlining various social aspects which are found in the game and amongst the players. He shows that there is no one type of player, but, that people from very different backgrounds enjoy these games for any number of reasons. Just as in the real world, players can engage in various economic strategies, thievery, guild partnerships, exploration, and more without the real-life consequences, thus the game can function as an educational tool. He likens it to the Wheel of Karma of Buddhism, Taoism, and Hinduism, in that, one dies and just gets reincarnated. Players stay in this wheel until they have learned everything there is about the game and finally leave (Kelly 2 2004:87). This may be the case for some players, but, not all.

Instead of likening Kelly 2's consequence free environment to religious belief, Torill Mortensen likens the gamer to Levi-Strauss's concept of a bricolage (Levi-Strauss 1978; Mortensen 2007:196-197). The term bricolage simply means taking what is available and adapting it to serve multiple purposes. Since these games are "virtual worlds with endless repositionings," (Mortensen 2007: 197) gamers have no real consequences; players can, "use the means at hand for their own purposes and been seen as a bricoleur," (Mortensen 2007: 197). To take this one step further, they do this taking what the environment offers and trying new ways of completing a task by mixing and matching both already available items and gear with alternate paths and methods.

Kelly 2 also sees these games as being used to fill in gaps in peoples' lives and are a haven for people during times of war and economic down turn (Kelly 2 2004:63-

64). While one can do a lot in these games, they are not necessarily used to fill in gaps. People are not always turning to online games because of a void in their life; sometimes, people are just looking for a new form of entertainment. Online games are not just a means of escape during times of war and economic upheaval; these games have been popular through changing economies and times of peace with no indication of that changing in the future. Fantasy in general seems to appear during challenging times (Mortensen 2007), however, role-playing games have existed for decades in one form or another.

Anthropological Approaches to Gaming

Anthropological approaches to online gaming revolve around one researcher, Tom Boellstorff. Tom Boellstorff approaches the understanding of virtual worlds and on-line gaming by applying a postmodern perspective. Tom Boellstorff's, *Coming of Age in Second Life* (2008), is the first anthropological ethnography on the study of virtual worlds. The title itself is a play on Margaret Mead's famous book, *Coming of Age in Samoa*. Boellstorff argues that ethnography and anthropological methodology can play an important role in "...charting emergent forms of cybersociality," (Boellstorff 2008:24). Ethnographic methods such as participant observation prove useful in understanding cultural assumptions, and surveys and interviews are used to understand how beliefs and practices are used in individual interaction (Boellstorff 2008:76). He argues that these virtual worlds are not just copies of the real world, but that, identity and community are redefined in them on their own terms (Boellstorff 2008:63). In order to understand this concept, it is best to look at it with the understanding of how "world" is

defined by Boellstroff. A world, in this sense is a "...large-scale social context with visual and interactive components, somewhat like environment and space," (Boellstroff 2008:17). These games are a dimension of human life which represents Pierre Bourdieu's habitus; "a system of internalized structures, schemes of perceptions, conceptions, and action," (Bourdieu 1977:86 as cited in Boellstroff 2008:72). Virtual worlds may mimic real-world events, identities, and concepts, however, while playing these games, players often reinvent themselves in-game. Thus creating a new structure that people experience life through and is a difference that can only be seen in the virtual world (Boellstroff 2008:63). In essence, human beings are virtual beings, in that "...virtual worlds show us how...our lives have been virtual all along...we experience life through the prism of culture," (Boellstroff 2008:5).

Non-Anthropological Approaches to Play

Non-anthropological approaches of play can best be seen in the often cited works of Johan Huizinga's, *Homo Ludens* (1955), and Brian Sutton-Smith's, *The Ambiguity of Play* (2001). Both researchers provide similar, yet different functional approaches to the understanding of play. The approaches are similar in that both Huizinga and Sutton-Smith discuss the importance of play as a function for personal development and cultural development and the approaches differ in the scale of Huizinga and Sutton-Smith's applications of play's function and role.

Through his book, *Homo Ludens*, Johan Huizinga, a cultural historian, shows how play serves a purpose beyond just recreation, elevating it to a "significant function," (Huizinga 1955:1). Huizinga refers to man as Homo Luden, or, Man the Player

(Huizinga 1955:ix) because culture and play are intertwined. For Huizinga, play does not exist in culture, rather, it exists of culture; culture is played out by man and continues to change through man's play. For Huizinga, play is not an aspect of culture, but a prime-mover in the change of culture. As Boellstroff also argues (Boellstroff 2008), we are merely actors playing out cultural norms. Therefore for Huizinga, play is something beyond the notion that play is just a recreational activity, it can serve a higher function (Huizinga 1955:1) for humanity as a whole. This is the main problem with Huizinga's approach. Play is too overarching (Sutton-Smith 2001: 79-80). For Huizinga, play constitutes every aspect of humanity. Play is voluntary, rule binding, set aside from ordinary life, and played out in specific locations. Huizinga states that play is "a contest for something or a representation of something," (Huizinga 1955:13); a concept also shared by Sutton-Smith, although Sutton-Smith sees that play as a contest is only one form of play. Out of this status, reputation, and other gains emerge; a contradiction to his notion that there is nothing to gain from play (Huizinga 1955:13). Play also contains its own opposites: feelings and traits one would not necessarily relate to play, such as "painstaking," (Huizinga 1955:44). If play is set apart in a special marginal time (Huizinga 1955:20,28) then it cannot consist of most of human interaction (Turner 1982).

Despite some of the shortcomings with Huizinga's concept of play, *WoW* and other similar games do contain many of the elements he lists. Playing these games are, essentially, a contest with others. People compete against one another in arena tournaments and in hopes of winning valuable loot items. Players will compete with each other to see who can get to the max level the fastest or obtain an item faster and they will create their own contests with each other. This competition and variation adds to the

overall game-play experience. The results of this competitive play are represented through one's acquired skills, statistics, and gear.

Like Huizinga (Huizinga 1955), Sutton-Smith argues that play is far deeper than the obvious (Sutton-Smith 2001: 1). Sutton-Smith moves away from Huizinga's large-scale approach and states that play lies in a "smoke" of ambiguity. "Smoke" is what I have applied to Sutton-Smith's ambiguous quality (Sutton-Smith 2001) because of the difficulty researchers have in identifying play (Miller 1973: 88; Sutton-Smith 2001: 3) when it otherwise might be easily identifiable. By ambiguous, Sutton-Smith means play does not have one form, but, many depending on the players (Sutton-Smith 2001: 2-3). Through play, children and adults alike acquire skills necessary for development and progression. For Sutton-Smith, play is not as overarching as Huizinga's concept of play, although he acknowledges Huizinga's groundbreaking research on play (Sutton-Smith 2001:79-80). Sutton-Smith breaks down the various forms of play into several categories, or rhetorics; each with its own criteria and traits.

These rhetorics are: the rhetoric of play as fate, which are games of chance; rhetoric of play as power, these are sports; the rhetoric of play as identity which are celebrations and festivals; rhetoric of play as imaginary constitute fantasy games; rhetoric of play as self comprises of leisure, solitary, and extreme games; and rhetoric of play as frivolity are games which are considered foolish (Sutton-Smith 2001:10-11,215). With this rhetoric breakdown, play can range from the football player to the football fan sitting in the bleachers rooting for his, or her, team to beat their friend's team. The diversity of play is influenced, in-part, by the diversity of its players (Sutton-Smith 2001:5).

World of Warcraft players have a negative stigma about them (Taylor 2006). Sutton-Smith's work is important in that, it shows how players, whether solitary or not, gain power, status, and prestige within these games. Players learn how to communicate with other people, manage finances, networking, teamwork, strategy, researching, and even exploration and map reading. The aforementioned aspects of the player can be related to Kelly 2's notion of games functioning as educational tools (Kelly 2 2004) and Mortensen's likening of the player to a bricoleur (Mortensen 2007). *WoW* and other MMORPGs require a certain level of skill beyond clicking a button. While they detract from some of the imagination required of traditional role-playing games, it does enable one to acquire new skills and real-world abilities. This is why it and other similar games would fall under Sutton-Smith's rhetorics of progress, power, identity, imaginary, and self. Through these games, players learn adaptation and socialization associated with the rhetoric of progress. They can gain status and a sense of victory, which are the functions of the rhetoric of power. For one player I interviewed, Aruchnaat, gaining new equipment in game is "really important to have a tiered [sets in *WoW* are divided into tiers] set because not only does it give me awesome attributes, but, it also shows other players that I am badass!" When I was at Ft. Jackson, South Carolina, a fellow soldier and *WoW* player introduced me to new ways of identifying which set pieces I should be going for. With his help and fellow guild members, I was able to continually run through dungeons until I obtained the gear I needed in order to participate in larger more prestigious raids and dungeons. In *WoW*, if you are undersped, like I was for some time, raid leaders and other members will not allow you to join in on the coming event. With the rhetoric of identity, players develop a sense of cooperation and *communitas*

with other players; especially during guild recruitment (Turner 1982). The players' very nature places them in the rhetoric of imagination. As for the rhetoric of self, they can be solitary games, or, extreme depending on the player. By playing as oneself, which many do, one achieves a peak experience (Sutton-Smith 2001:215).

Anthropological Approaches to Play

For anthropologists, play has yet to create a discrete theory that answers the many questions that plague anthropologists as to why we play (Roberts, Arth, and Bush 1959; Lancy 1980; Blanchard 1995). In order to understand online games it is essential to understand how play and games have been studied considering, *WoW* is a game which is played, or, lived by many players (Boellstroff 2008; Taylor 2006). While online gaming is essentially in its infant years for anthropological inquiry, play and games have been given attention.

Functional approaches to play seem to focus on the adaptive qualities of playing. Playing serves as a way to develop new skills and learn to survive in society as one matures. This can be seen in the works by David Lancy (1973) and Stephan Miller (1980). Miller looks at play as a means to develop combinatorial flexibility and sees ends-means coordination as a driving force behind the continuation of play. Combinatorial flexibility is the ability to combine activities that would otherwise seem unrelated. By ends-means coordination, Miller means that the act of playing results in the achievement of certain goals and that the importance of the actual playing outweighs the importance of achieving the goal. Lancy approaches it as a process essential for development.

Miller argues that the activity of play, the fun of play, is a function of process which leads people to develop combinatorial flexibility; it is a function of survival. By combinatorial flexibility, he states that since there is no "...unifying pattern to play" (Miller 1973:92), and no unifying activities, people learn through play how to combine unrelated activities. This flexibility leads to a greater adaptability for "...coming up with novel behavior," (Miller 1973:96) because, through play, we learn how to combine activities that some might perceive to be pointless. He also argues that play, with its many developmental uses, helps one achieve goals; an "ends-means coordination," (Miller 1973:95) with the means being more important than the actual end goal. What Miller is saying, is that through play and its adaptive qualities people, especially kids, learn how to navigate through various possibilities or means, to achieve the end goal and these means are what the players find most enjoyable. Now conversely, Miller notes that play, or the means rather, can also be seen as practice (Miller 1973:90-91); a quality which is important to reach the end, especially, in a game such as *WoW*. These qualities not only increase one's adaptability, but also contribute to his or her skill set and intelligence and they can be applied in real-life. As a final note, Miller states that play can also function as a form of pleasure, a "break from the strain of living," (Miller 1973:95). While this is true for most people, play can itself be work with its many rules and varying intensities and what was initially enjoyed can turn into a source of frustration (Turner 1982).

Lancy approaches play as a process for developing and practicing certain skills necessary for survival, its importance in intellectual development, establishing social bonds, and practicing language. In stark contrast to Miller, who sees play as difficult for

researchers to identify (Miller 1973:88), Lancy states that play is easy for researchers to recognize and observe due to several characteristics: repetition of sequences, exaggeration of movements, reversal or inversion of important events, reordering of events and behaviors, resulting in a transformation “from reality to fantasy” (Lancy 1980:473), and play signals such as laughter or smiling which can indicate play.

Play serves to regulate arousal and educate the young (Lancy 1980:479). The arousal regulation is a short-term effect, while education is a long-term aspect. Play also serves as a means for practicing necessary skills and for developing social skills. Similar to Miller’s benefits of play (Miller 1973: 95-97), Lancy states that through play one can develop creativity, adaptability, and inventiveness (Lancy 1980:484). An example is chasing. Chasing requires and develops locomotor skills which are refined through practice. Social bonds are strengthened and forged through play and refraining from play can lessen one’s ability to socialize. This play and socialization relationship can be problematic because it depends on the type of play. For online gaming, socialization is primarily done through avatars. People can develop social skills used in the game, but, may lack person-to-person social skills. Finally, play serves as a way children learn and understand language.

Lancy also notes that while adults promote play (Lancy 1980: 481), play lessens as one matures to adulthood. This is disputable because many adults play sports, role-playing games, video and computer games, board games, and a multitude of other games. Brian Sutton-Smith would argue that attending a sports game, or, watching it with friends is a form, or rhetoric, of play (Sutton-Smith 2001).

Symbolic Interpretive approaches towards play and gamers look at them as symbolic representations of a greater social issue, or, discourse (Danforth 2001; Geertz 1973; Levy 1999; Roberts, Arth, and Bush 1959; Turner 1982). Elements of various games are symbols which can represent different aspects of society and the process of playing them represents the people's attitudes, feelings, and actions towards those issues. Danforth (2001) and Levy (1999) look at play as a representation of social discourse and a form of played-out narrative. While both address different issues from different regions of the world, they show how the playing of games is used to represent societal issues, whether it being ethnic conflicts or societal roles. Geertz (1973) uses the concept of thick description to show that various aspects of a game can be symbolic of some greater idea, behavior, or action. Roberts, Arth, and Bush (1959) illustrate how various types of games can represent humans' relationships with various elements of society and the environment, although they admit those relationships require further analysis. Turner (1982) utilizes his notion of liminality to analyze the existence of play. While many of his aspects work, his notion of gains falls short.

Roberts, Arth, and Bush (1959) illustrate that, "most games are models of various cultural activities," (Roberts, Arth, and Bush 1959:599) which can be models of the social system and can relate to the physical environment and religion. Ultimately, this is partly due to the expressive nature of games. As mentioned, they divide games into three categories: physical, skill, and chance. Physical-based games may lack both strategy and chance; strategy games lack physical skills; and chance may be present, and chance based games will lack the previous two types. While *World of Warcraft* and other similar games utilize both strategy and chance, his examples for physical games are biased because

football is a physical game that requires strategy. Conversely, as Geertz (1973) shows that in the cockfights of Bali, a game of chance, there is strategy which is involved in the betting process; an integral part of the event.

Roberts, Arth, and Bush state that games are representative of culture in various ways: strategy games are representative of social interaction and social structures and appear in complex societies; physical games represent the various attributes of the natural environment; and games of chance represent religion, the supernatural, and our interaction with them. This is problematic because Roberts, Arth, and Bush based their research off of studies done by “primitive” societies. I do not think the correlation between games of chance and the supernatural would hold up in industrial societies today; for example if one loses a role for an item in *WoW*, God or some supernatural entity is not blamed. The player simply gets upset and tries again. There may be some who blame their loss, or gain, on the supernatural, but, the majority does not. The latter two games, games physical and games of chance, do not appear in any one type of society.

Levy (1999) argues that, “play is an activity that calls the social order into question,” (Levy 1999:633); in this case Morocco where he conducted his research. Morocco, which is primarily Muslim, also contains a Jewish population with tension between the two groups. Despite this, the two groups come together to play card games on the beach. Now these card games, or games of strategy (Roberts, Arth, and Bush 1959), are popular and their setting can dictate the dynamics of the game. The card game, played on the beach, acts as an interethnic game, where Jews will put aside their ethnic difference, partner up, and play against another Jewish-Muslim pairs. In essence

they are a medium for Jewish-Muslim relations, where otherwise in society tension between the two groups is prevalent. (Levy 1999:643).

Symbolically, the partnering of Jews and Muslims represents a wish for better relations between the Jews and Muslims. It is important to note that the author only interviewed Jewish people and did not have access to the Muslim population due to being a Jew. This, in itself, is problematic because it only gives one perspective. The mixing of partners is also representative of the social divisions which reside beyond the context of the game. In-game tension and extreme ethnic teasing is representative of the tension which exists in Moroccan society, and in some ways the game contributes to the divide. What can be pulled from this is the notion that a game and the act of playing can be used to bring together people who may not necessarily associate with each other otherwise.

Like Levy (1999), Danforth shows how a game, in this instance soccer, can represent a narrative of social tensions and goals between various ethnic groups. In Australia, soccer as a form of narrative gives meaning to the Australian nation and serves as a form of identity. He states that “sports has long served as an arena for the production of narratives of identity at the ethnic, national, and transnational levels,” (Danforth 2001:369). Prior to soccer, cricket was played in Australia and it served in a positive light and not so positive light. While it contributed to a national identity, it also facilitated ethnic separation. According to Danforth, sports, which are a form of game, can either be used to create nationalism or provide an arena for racism (Danforth 2001:369). The soccer clubs that have formed in Australia are symbols of the various communities and the interaction between them, via the matches, represent the various groups’ identities and wishes. Their wishes go against what the Australian government is

trying to do, create a national identity, resulting in the dismantling of what the Australian soccer commission calls “ethnic clubs” (Danforth 2001:373). Danforth’s reduction of sports serving two uses, the creation of nationalism and racism, is too limiting. Sports and games has already been shown to provide an arena for the development and exploration of identity, social skills, and other educational needs (Huizinga 1955; Kelly 2004; Mortensen 2007; Sutton Smith 2001; Taylor 2006

Similar to Levy and in conjunction with strategy games and their interaction with social structures (Roberts, Arth, and Bush 1959), games can symbolically represent various aspects of society; they can be just as “thick,” as Geertz would say (Geertz 1973), as behavior is. As seen with the cock fights in Morocco and soccer and cricket in Australia, games can be more than just people trying to have fun and, or, make a living. In *WoW*, a player’s avatar symbolically represents him or her, and the game itself can be seen as a dichotomy between varying groups, played out by the subscribers to that community. On writing about the Balinese cockfight, Geertz shows that the action of going to a cockfight is an emotional education for Balinese men; it teaches and reinforces the emotions and reactions of Balinese culture in an external context (Geertz 1973:455). The illegal cockfights are multilayered and contain many symbolic representations. The cocks are symbols of masculinity and represent the owner’s status and self, the cocks fighting represent men fighting and their fascination with the “Powers of Darkness,” (Geertz 1973:417-420). The game serves as a means of reinforcing kin ties through the betting process (Geertz 1973:426). Money is seen as symbol of self-importance, where the status of the owner is on the line even though, in actuality, it is not altered at all, just merely insulted.

There are two interesting concepts which can be taken from this. First, Geertz shows that the betting process can be seen as a form of deep play (Geertz 1973:427), a form of play where high stakes make engagement in the game irrational. Power players, a term that refers to extreme online gamers (Taylor 2006), play games such as *EverQuest* and *WoW* so much and so seriously it consumes their lives. Some people have actually died because they played too much, forgoing food and sleep (Ivanov 2005). Two gamers I met almost lost their marriages due to this extreme form of playing. It was so over consuming, I found myself taking one of their wives and children out because he could not leave the game. To most people this would seem irrational, however, to gamers; power playing may be needed in order to obtain the high status items (Taylor 2006), which brings us to the second point. Items in the game are a form of status and represent the player's self.

For Turner, play is a subjective inverse of an objective realm (Turner 1982:34); it exists in a betwixt and between state. The objective realm is essentially our everyday rule constrained life. Play exists in a liminal state, where, rules do not always apply and ludic activities can occur (Turner 1982:26-27). He states that play is, "...capable of releasing creative powers," and "...is unmotivated by gain," (Turner 1982:37). The problem with this is that there is gain, in one form or another. In *WoW*, gain is in the form of reputation, experience, and equipment and people strive to earn this in the game community. Companies looking for Beta testers to aid in game development will ask people about their experience and gaming history. Even if one has the appropriate computer hardware, he or she may still lack the wanted experience. Players with an excellent reputation in one game may be asked to join a group in a different game.

During this form of play, “flow” can be experienced (Turner 1982:56). Flow is when one event moves into the next one effortlessly. Our actions are then taken over by the activity and we become absorbed into our environment, forgoing our senses. This liminal play is exactly what players experience in *WoW*. The liminal aspect of play is why players can play for hours, while the players only think one or two hours have passed.

It is also worth noting that Turner’s three-stage ritual process (Turner 1982; Turner 2009) is essential when approaching the study of guild recruitment. Upon entering a guild, the prospect has to formally apply via the guild leader or the guild’s website. If chosen, he or she is separated from his or her previous status as a solo player, or if he or she is already a member of a guild he or she is separated from that status. Once selected, the new recruit is required to log in a certain number of hours with the guild conducting raids and will often be on a probationary status. While on probationary status, the new recruit is not typically allowed to compete for dropped items. The new recruit is not a full-fledged member of the guild yet, but, is no longer in his or her previous role either; the liminal phase. What is interesting to note here is that *communitas* does not exist between the prospects and the guild members. There is still a hierarchy which the prospects and new recruits have to abide by. *Communitas*, however, exists between the prospects. Regardless of their roles, levels, or individual rankings they are on even ground. Finally once all the requirements set forth by the guild have been met, the prospects if chosen, are welcomed as full members of the guild; the reintegration period.

Conclusion

What can be said about play? Play may in fact be a paradox and there may not be any one definition. Despite this, another definition can be pulled which combines various elements from those already discussed. Play can be a: (1) voluntary liminal activity (2) where events flow (3) bound by flexible rules (4) which can invoke a wide array of feelings from happy to angry (5) enjoyed for the purpose of competition or self-enjoyment (6) and all contributing to the social development of an individual, regardless of age.

Symbolically, play and games contain a wide range of meanings, from games representing ethnic disputes to social norms. Online games provide an outlet for people to explore themselves in a consequence-free environment. Since people play as themselves, or their idealized selves, the structure of the game moves beyond its original programming. People become attached to their “new” environment and spend a considerable amount of time there interacting with other members of their virtual community. This leads to the establishment of a new virtual community. Since it is played by people with different backgrounds, goals, wants, and curiosities the communities are maintained.

Games have been played for a long time. MMORPGs like *WoW* and other virtual games such as *Second Life* are a form of game which has been gaining in popularity for quite some time in more recent history. They are played by millions of people around the world and an entire community and subculture has formed as a result. Anthropology, and related academic fields, have a lot to provide to the growing discourse of online gaming and these games as virtual cultures.

In chapter one, I stated that the best approach to studying and understanding these types of gaming cultures, or imagined transnational solidarities as I call them, is to use Geertz's synthetic approach (Geertz 1973). While there is no one theory which can be used to study these games as games that are played and lived, there are several which I found very useful. Turner's concept of flow and liminal play are fundamental when analyzing how the action of playing these games and the feeling of immersion that players experience sets them apart from everyday reality and joins them together in the digital world. This liminal state allows the player to experience a different world, one in which the perception of time is lost and the story and imagery can be all consuming; where a more magical consciousness (Greenwood 2009), which will be discussed in the following chapters, is shared and experienced by all. Geertz's concept of thick description and Sutton-Smith's various rhetorics of play are indispensable when analyzing the symbolic representations present throughout the game and what they mean to the members of this community; which will be discussed further in chapters four and five. Furthermore, the rhetorics can also be used when understanding how various ideas such as power and status are entangled within the story and then gained and employed by the players and greater community at large.

Chapter 4

The Witches of Azeroth

Introduction

One fateful Saturday night, twenty-five heroes of Azeroth, including myself, gathered deep within the Dustwallow Marsh. Our goal was simple; to enter Onyxia's lair and defeat the dragon. Representatives from all the classes were present and each knew their role. For some of us, this was our first time entering the infamous dragon's cave. Outside the entrance the players started to cast their buffs on each other, all while the raid leader was explaining the battle plan. As a warlock my role was simple...stay back and deal damage. This was the same for the mages and casting/healing shamans and druids.

Once buffs were done and roles understood, raid party entered the cave. Like an organized powerful horde, we made our way through the cave, easily disposing the guards along the way until finally we descended upon Onyxia herself. The lair was a massive room of molten rock, various hues of brown, yellow, orange, and red to simulate the imagery of a threatening den. In the middle was Onyxia. Named after her onyx like color, Onyxia would be no simple task and the massive onyx colored dragon sitting in her molten cave reminded me of the dragon Smaug guarding the gold deep within the Lonely Mountain. Excited by the feeling of the forthcoming attack, I shouted in the message log, "holy shit...it's Smaug!!!" One person, a mage, responded, "from the Hobbit cartoon right?!" Thrilled that someone caught my reference, I replied, "hell yeah, love that cartoon ever since I was kid." After a few back and forths about our love for the 1970's animated adaption of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, we engaged Onyxia.

All of a sudden my screen lit up with bright colorful lights emanating from all. The tanks were doing a great job of keeping Onyxia's attention and attacks on them. Healers were healing furiously and the damage dealers were living up to their role. Onyxia's life was dropping and we had the upper-hand. All of a sudden, a couple of the healers were killed because they got too close to Onyxia and were taking damage. With the healers gone, the damage being dealt to the tanks was over whelming and they fell. Within a matter of minutes, the whole party wiped out. After we regrouped outside the cave, we discussed what went wrong and how to avoid those same mistakes. A little more experienced now, we reentered the cave and this time found ourselves victorious. For the first time, I killed Onyxia. After the battle was won, the raid leader posted the damage meter, so we could see who did the most damage. I ranked third, beaten out by mage and a hunter; who dealt the most damage in the fight.

Of the top three damage dealers in that fight, two were typical magic using casters. As mentioned in the previous chapter, all classes have some form of magic; it is an integral part of the world. In this case, two of the classes were more traditional magic based classes; a mage and a warlock. At first, I didn't think anything of it; just that I still needed to improve my character's gear and fine-tune his specs and my skills, so I can eventually be the highest damage dealer. An accomplishment I eventually achieved. At the time of this raid, I was taking an Anthropology seminar on Witchcraft. It was an undergraduate course, but graduate students were afforded the opportunity to take the upper division seminars. Magic, witchcraft, and folklore were, and still are, subjects that always fascinated me. Ever since I was a kid, I was always enthralled by the mythologies of old, Briand and Wendy Frouds artwork and their work on such films as Jim Henson's

Dark Crystal and *Labyrinth* entertained me to no end. I will probably never tire of them. Books such as Tolkien's *Hobbit* and the *Lord of the Rings* were highly influential in my personality. Roleplaying games, comics, folklore, and fantasy books, these are what really interested me. So, a game like *WoW* and a class on the subject of witchcraft were essentially no brainers for me. What wasn't such a sure thing was what I was going to write my research paper on. Graduate students are encouraged to write their paper as a chapter for their thesis, if the class' topic applies that is. While I knew my topic would apply, the problem I faced was in what facet it would apply.

While I was participating in the raid on Onyxia, I had *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (Warner Brothers, 2004) playing in the background; my favorite of the series. The raid finished just in-time for one of my favorite scenes when Sirius Black, having just been rescued by Harry and Hermoine, tells Hermoine that she really is brightest witch of her age. It is a perfectly delivered line by the great Gary Oldman, but, it made me think about witchcraft and more specifically the idea and characterization of a witch. In a story such as the Harry Potter novels (Rowling 1997-2007) the idea of a witch and wizard is presented to the reader, or viewer for those who have seen the movies but never read the books, right in the beginning. Harry, the main character, is a wizard and his female friend Hermoine is a witch. So, in this context witch is applied to a human female with magical abilities. While the labeling is apparent and outright in this series, in *WoW* it is not so apparent.

This chapter will be divided into two major parts: how witchcraft has been defined and viewed cross-culturally and, the role of witchcraft and more specifically, which character is the closest to a witch based off of the defined criteria. Unbeknownst to me at

the time, there was already an interest within the community as to what class, playable character, would be considered a witch. On worldofwarcraft.com's forum, a question was posted which simply stated, "which class best resembles a witch," (Coffree, 2008). The responses were quite varied with the majority leaning towards either the shaman or the mage; the warlock received lower votes than either. While all are in fact magic based classes, I believe the warlock to be the closest to the anthropological definition of a "witch."

There seems to be confusion amongst the community as to which class is the closest representation to the more classical ethnographic witch because I think there is a fundamental lack of understanding as to what a witch and shaman are. I intend to add to the current discourse by clarifying that the warlock, not the shaman nor the mage, is in fact the class which most closely resembles a witch. This lack of understanding went so far that some religious players were condemning the game in its entirety as witchcraft and a youth pastor had to publish a statement saying, "...playing the game is not a sin," (Schmoyer, 2007).

By using a cross-cultural approach to the study witchcraft, I will illustrate the characteristics of a witch and show how they resemble the five basic characteristics of a witch (Hutton, 2004). I will then compare those characteristics to the already established history of the various classes in question utilizing a combination of published history (Knaak, 2007); (worldofwarcraft.com) and in-game visuals and class characteristics in an effort to differentiate the warlock from the mage and shaman. Considering the lack of published scholarly written material on the subject of witchcraft in *WoW*, I will be using a combination of ethnographic accounts and other scholarly material on the subject of

witchcraft and official and authorized *WoW* websites and novels. Since I have been a member of this community for some time now, I will conduct some interviews with already established informants and conduct simple on-line interviews with fellow guild members.

My effort in this chapter is not to definitively say the warlock has to be the witch, but, to present a scholarly based research analysis providing an answer to the already public discourse as to which class most resembles a classical witch; beyond the notion that warlocks have to be the witch because warlock means “male witch,” when in fact the word warlock actually means “oath-breaker or traitor” (Russell and Brooks, 2007). There is an apparent lack of research done on this topic and in a community where magic lies at the very foundation of its culture and the growing academic interest in online games there should be attention given to this subject. Regarding magic, since witches employ magical abilities, that will be discussed in more detail in chapter five.

Which Class Best Resembles a Witch?

The members of the *WoW* community are always communicating with each other about a multitude of topics. There are literally thousands of *WoW* related forum topics which have been and continue to be discussed. Three such topics were regarding the role of witchcraft. Two were inquiring about which character best resembled a witch and the third was regarding the role of witchcraft in the game due to religious concerns (<http://forums.worldofwarcraft.com/thread.html?topicId=5974220320&sid=1>; <http://forums.worldofwarcraft.com/thread.html?topicId=4822542457&sid=1>). Witchcraft’s negative stereotype penetrated the game’s community and religious people,

mainly Christians, were concerned that this game was introducing and promoting witchcraft to people. It is important to mention the difference that exists between how anthropologists and fiction writers, such as J.K. Rowling, view the witch and how Christianity has come to view it; as a Satanic conspiracy to bring about the destruction of Christianity and the rise of Satan. This, “myth of evil conspiracy” (Frankfurter 2008:5) is rooted in the rise of Christianity during the Roman Empire period and evolved throughout the Middle Ages. It is in Middle Ages, and the period referred to as the Dark Ages, where the divide between good (God) and evil (the devil) really came to fruition. With a poor charged economic climate and events such as the “Black Death” the people were desperate for answers to their troubled lives. The clergy, who were far more literate and educated than the average person during this time, were able to connect these misfortunes to that of witches and their devotion to Satan.

As I stated earlier, people are very confused as to which character is the witch. Of the 115 responses to the first forum referenced above, approximately forty percent stated it is the warlock. The remaining sixty percent are torn between the mage and shaman class. I think the confusion lies in the confusion between a witch, on one hand, and a shaman and mage, on the other. Contributing to this confusion are the various concepts of the definition of a witch people are using. To better illustrate this point I have provided a few examples of responses from the various forums:

“Well 'warlock' used to mean basically 'male witch.’”

“In actual Warcraft Lore, Witches seem to mostly be mages or mage-like”

“I'd say shaman. Not so much mechanically, but lore-wise definitely.”

“In the game, a Warlock is a wizard that casts demonic magic. A witch was

something townsmen made up to burn their women who cheated on them.”

“A witch is one who derives their power from the elements, nature...has made a promise to never hurt a living thing...a warlock is a liar, an oath breaker, one that will do anything by magic to obtain what they want, including killing”

“ Please get informed. Please. A male witch is a witch. It’s a retarded misconception that a warlock = a witch. Warlocks (both male and female) are those that worship dark power, or dark magic. A witch is someone in tune with nature.”

“Warlock = male witch, why female locks?”

(response) “We have female warlocks because the developers aren’t a bunch of retarded teenage wiccans who call themselves inane names.

<http://forums.worldofwarcraft.com/thread.html?topicId=5974220320&sid=1>;
<http://forums.worldofwarcraft.com/thread.html?topicId=4822542457&sid=1>).

There is an apparent confusion within the community as to what a witch is; or so I thought at when I first wrote this chapter. Due to different representations of witchcraft and magic in various forms of entertainment and non-monotheistic spiritual beliefs, the historical witch has been viewed in different facets. While it is true that today’s Neo-Pagan witch is someone who believes in a unity with nature and is not set on causing harm and disruption, the original intent of these forum topics was to discuss the role of the maleficent witch in WoW. Of the three players I interviewed, all were torn between the warlock and mage; although one could see the shaman as possibly being a witch. Using the five characteristics of a witch, as proposed by Ronald Hutton (Hutton 2004: 420-423), I will show that the warlock is the class which most closely resembles the historic ethnographic witch in WoW; due to the warlocks role and depiction in the game.

According to Ronald Hutton, a witch, from an anthropological and historical perspective, is a, “person who uses non-physical means to cause misfortune or harm to other humans,” (Hutton 2004: 421). Witches typically harm neighbors and kin and are considered a threat to the community. There is a general social disapproval regarding

witches: they work in secret and cause harm out of malice and spite (Hutton 2004; Hammond-Tooke 1974). Finally, they gain their power through inheritance, training, or initiation. In terms of personality, they are selfish, vindictive, anti-social, treacherous, and disharmonious. These characteristics coupled with fear and various forms of imagery and literature fueled the witch-hunts in Europe and the present-day continual persecution and torture of accused “witches” in various parts of Africa. Witches were typically seen as women in Europe, however, this is a moot point when discussing WoW because players are both male and female and can be male or female characters.

Before I discuss the warlock, it is important to have a basic understanding of how a mage and shaman are represented in WoW. I say basic, because shamans and their similarities and differences to their ethnographic counterparts will be discussed more thoroughly in the next chapter where I analyze the greater magical system in WoW. For the sake of this chapter, a small description is important when comparing the various classes. In WoW, the mage is seen as a combination of a wizard and magician. “Mage” is derived from the Latin word *magia* and the Greek word *mageia* (Russell and Alexander 2007:13). According to WoW lore, the first mages were high elves who then taught one hundred humans how to use magic. From those humans, the magical arts spread throughout Azeroth and this eventually led to downfall of magic in the War of the Ancients previously mentioned. Mages are depicted more in line with wizards from fantasy stories like Merlin, J.R.R. Tolkien’s Gandalf, or Terry Goodkind’s Zeddicus Zu’l Zorrandar. These wizards rely on various forms of elemental based magic like summoning ice-storms or wielding lightning bolts while teleporting to different locations. The mage from WoW is no different. According to Droma, a WoW player of four years,

magicians are, “more outlandish in uses of power, like with Terry Goodkind books...fireballs and windblasts. Oh yeah, (hahaha) they can teleport like Harry Potter Wizards.” He goes on to say that, “witches are not at all what a mage is, they [witches] are more incantations than fireballs.” In all, the mage is a powerful class which can be bad, however, not evil in the sense of how a malefic witch from 17th century Europe or Africa.

Shamans of WoW, like magicians, can also be scratched off the list of witch candidates using historical and cultural accounts of witches. The word Shaman is derived from the Tungus word *saman*, or, “one who is excited, moved, or raised,” (Walsh 2007: 13). Essentially, a shaman is a person who can call upon spirits to heal other people. According to Roger Walsh, a Professor of psychiatry and anthropology at U.C. Irvine, a shaman is a person of either sex who, “...have mastered spirits, who at their will can introduce these spirits into themselves and use their power over the spirits in their own interests, particularly helping other people, who suffer from the spirits,” (Walsh 2007:13). Shamans’ primary roles include: healer, mythologist, and mediums for spirits (Walsh 2007:18). However, as you will see in the next chapter, even this definition is contended among anthropologists. In WoW, shamans’ primary roles are village and clan visionaries and healers. They are gifted healers and can communicate with the spirit world. Warlocks were once shamans who lost their connection to the elemental spirits. Shamans rely on various totems, which represent the various spirits’ abilities, when using magic. Aside from magical abilities, they can also be formidable hand-to-hand combatants. The typical player of a shaman is someone who likes the combination of being both a healer and a melee fighter; both considered honorable classes.

The Warlock

Contrary to the belief that a warlock means a male witch, warlock actually means “oath-breaker,” or “traitor;” derived from the Old-English *waer*, ‘truth’ and *leogan*, ‘to lie’ (Russell and Alexander 2007: 12). Warlock as traitor or, oath-breaker actually applies to the warlocks of WoW. In WoW lore, warlocks were once shamans and arcanists who abandoned the original path of magic in pursuit of shadow magic. They broke the oaths usually taken by those who wish to learn the magical arts and started to use magic as means to purposefully inflict pain and death on the people of Azeroth.

The traitorous nature of warlocks is also in accordance with Hutton’s witch personality traits. The warlocks’ abandonment of the original magical paths in pursuit of a newer darker path can be seen as selfish on their part. They did not agree with the results following the War of the Ancients and selfishly sought new magical knowledge, or rather knowledge that is regarded as demonic and forbidden. In-game mechanics and non-player characters (NPCs) treat them with distrust and fear. They are portrayed, both in the game and in the associated literature, as anti-social creatures who do not like others meddling in their business. Their appearance and gear sets are far more sinister and dark than the other classes, with names like dreadmist raiment, malefic raiment, corruptor raiment. In my interview with Droma, he described warlocks as, “(hahahaha)...not very charitable.” Dweezle, had some enjoyable words regarding the warlock: “Warlocks have a negative image due to their sinister nature...locks are straight evil, deemed most evil and nothing else is considered as evil as the warlock.” When I asked him to describe the

warlock he said, “They pretty much look evil...something with batwings is vile and look at their mounts for Christ's sake. It's a foul perception, a rotting fiery demon horse with spikes.” When I asked him to describe the mage he said, “Their garb is always high class, almost aristocratic and never ragged...high detail.” For Dweezle, shamans look more “native,” and they, “look like shamans.” For Aruchnaat, “ummm, personally I think the warlock looks really cool, but, they definitely have a dark, demonic shadow, cast about themselves.” Although they appear more sinister than mages or shamans there are other criteria which makes a warlock the witch of Azeroth.

Social disapproval of warlocks, like witches, is evident. Warlocks, like witches, also train and meet in secret (Ashforth 2005; Hutton 2004; Kluckhohn 1989). On WoW's associated website, WoWWikki, the secretive nature of warlocks is described as the following, “warlocks live on the fringes of society, tolerated but not trusted. Human warlocks meet in secrecy in the basement of Stormwind while Horde warlocks meet under Orgrimmar in the Cleft of Shadow,” (Warlocks, WoWWikki.com). I, myself, play a blood elf warlock and the training room for warlocks in the blood elves' capitol, Silvermoon, is located in a basement behind curtains. This is in stark contrast to other trainers such as mages and shamans who are typically located in the open next to, or in close proximity to other class trainers. The Cleft of Shadow is an underground level in one of the Horde's main cities; Orgrimmar. It is a large room entered by a tunnel. Once inside the player is introduced to giant bubbling cauldrons, sinister looking alchemists, and other magical items. In the Outlands, another explorable continent, the initial warlock trainer is located in a small wooden shack, with a crude pipe chimney, on a hill away from the main center of the camp. Among the Azande, witches were tolerated in

society and were only a concern when suspicions of witchcraft arose (Evans-Pritchard 1976: 4). Like the Azande witches, Warlocks are tolerated as long as they are not destructive to the community. Their power is also recognized among the players and they are always necessary when conducting major raids in the game. Warlocks' similarities to historical witches can also be seen in their ability to cause harm.

Warlocks and mages are both pure casters; like witches neither relies on physical means to inflict damage. Where they differ is in their methods and types of spells. Mages are more elemental and direct, using fireballs and ice-blasts. Shamans rely on totems and physical attacks. Warlocks rely on various curses and damage-over-time spells (DoTs). These spells work over time and cause pain and suffering. In Adam Ashforth's, *Madumo*, Ashforth shows that witches in South Africa cause harm through various spells and employ a number of ways to disseminate their muthi (Ashforth 2005), ranging from placing a spell in beer to hiding the spell in the entryway of house. The spells are not instantaneous in their effects, rather working slowly over time. The affects can range from unusual weather and animal sickness (Behringer 2002) to death.

While warlocks do contain some instantaneous magical attacks like shadow bolt, their usefulness and cunning lies in their spells and curses. These spells and curses include names such as: curse of agony; curse of tongues, curse of elements; curse of weakness; curse of exhaustion; drain soul; drain life; corruption; agony; unstable affliction; haunt; and immolate. None of these sound pleasant, nor, are their effect on another character. If they are successfully cast, the character will quickly lose a tremendous amount of life which could lead to death. The only way to remove a spell is to have a mage, shaman, or priest remove it; however, some can hurt the healer if they are

removed. Some of the spells can spread if one comes into close proximity to a cursed player, they are contagious like some forms of magic. It is this aspect which Dweezle says, “the warlock can change the player...it gives them pride because they do damage from a distance, stealthy and secretive. Even if you kill a warlock their curses will still do damage to you and the player which had the curses cast on can still die. It gives them (the warlocks) pleasure.” I wish I could say I was above this twisted sense of enjoyment, but, it is self-fulfilling knowing they are still losing life, or, their ability to attack is greatly reduced. The Navajo believe that witches are shape-shifters, often taking the form of a coyote, bear, owl, wolf, or other animal to stalk prey at night or investigate the community (Kluckhohn 1989: 26). This ability is given to druids in the Blizzard games, however, this class of character is always associated with good; Dweezel calls them, “a people oriented class like the shamans.” Witches are not alone in their endeavors; they usually are assisted by a spirit, or, familiar.

In discussing the witch's familiar, Emma Wilby's article does a good job discussing its role (Wilby 2000). In defining the familiar she states:

“The term ‘familiar’ was used in the period to both denote the witch’s demonic spirit and, in a more general sense, personal helping spirit, often defined as fairies...however, the term ‘familiar’ will refer only to the ‘witch’s familiar,’ often termed ‘a devil’ or ‘the Devil’ in witchcraft trials and records,” (Wilby 2000:284)

These spirits were typically malicious in nature. Familiars possessed a repertoire of supernatural powers which could penetrate all facets of human life. Usually, the familiar took on the form of a common household animal, such as a dog or cat, however, sometimes they took the form of a little green demon (Wilby 2000:287). The spirits would appear before the witch in times of need and offer assistance. The service of the

familiar, however, was not free. In Irish and Scottish accounts, the familiars would require payment for their services; payment ranging from blood to the witch's soul. This contractual relationship would often make the witch an agent of the fairy, or demon, world. The behavior and use of the fairy was dependent on the user; the witch. They could be used for good or malice intents (Wilby 2000: 299).

The warlocks of WoW have several "familiars" at their disposal. Mages have the ability to summon an elemental being to their aid; however, this is only available as a special skill and limited to frost mages. The warlock's familiars are available to all warlocks and are obtained through training and quest completion. The familiars include: a little green imp which comes free to all warlocks; a voidwalker which is an ethereal spirit; a succubus; and a felguard. There is also a felhunter, however, like the mages elemental, it is only available to a certain type of warlock. The summons have their own unique array of abilities and also provide additional bonuses to the warlock. Like a witch's familiar, the warlock's familiars act according to the player's wishes. They can be used for offensive, defensive, or neutral purposes. The succubus, for example, uses her demonic charms to seduce enemies and prevent them from attacking the player. In essence, they become the succubus's slave until the affects wear off. The contractual relationship of the witch and the familiar is not lost on the warlock either. With the exception of the imp, the other summons require a soulshard for their service. A soulshard is acquired by draining the soul of another character and transforming it into a shard. The warlock then sacrifices one soulshard each time he, or she, wants to summon a familiar. One final similarity is ability for a witch to send out his, or her, soul for malicious intents.

M.D.W Jeffrey refers to this phenomena as the “witch’s fire,” (Jeffrey 1949). In Jeffrey’s article, *Witch’s Fire*, he discusses the phenomena known as St. Elmo’s Fire. This phenomenon is nothing more than an electric blue, coronal discharge (Jeffrey 1949: 286). Prior to this recognition, it was associated with witchcraft. The Ga of Gold Coast referred to these lights as the flight of the witch’s *susuma*, or soul (Field 1937: 147). The Azande believed witches would send their souls out at night to run various errands (Evans-Pritchards 1976: 33). The Thonga of Africa also believe in this ability. They refer to it as the, “...fire of witchcraft substance,” (Jeffrey 1949: 288). All of these accounts describe it as a glowing object; typically spherical in nature and sometimes associated with a fiery glow.

Warlocks in WoW have an ability known as the Eye of Killrogg. This is a glowing ball sent by the warlock to observe unknown areas and conduct reconnaissance. In previous incarnations of Warcraft this could be used to inflict harm on others. Just recently it was given this ability again; albeit, in a weaker form. During this time the warlock’s body is left behind and is vulnerable to attack because the player is in control of the eye, which in essence can be seen as the warlock’s soul.

In Conclusion...

Azeroth is a world filled with corpse dust using, weapon rune-imbuing death knights, yew wood wand casting druids, teleporting mages, and devilish warlocks. Amidst all this, there is an interest in the role of witchcraft in the game among the WoW community. Since this is game that played to the point where it becomes a part of the players’ lives and identities, the members of this new imagined community become

curious regarding its various aspects. The majority are torn between the warlock, the mage, and the shaman. Using the characteristics of a witch, set forth by Hutton (Hutton 2004: 420-423) I have tried to show that warlock most closely resembles the witch in history. Shamans and mages, although casters, are not necessarily evil characters and players I interviewed did not consider them in such a fashion. Mages are closer to the powerful magicians of fantasy books, while shamans serve the same role as their real-life counter-parts.

Warlocks are secretive, selfish casters who have no problem with inflicting pain and disturbing order for purposes known only to them. Although they are feared and considered outcasts, they are essential to the world of Azeroth and are therefore tolerated. Whether or not there is a special type of person who plays a warlock would require further inquiry; research I plan on continuing further. By using a cross-cultural, synthetic approach concepts and elements of an online-game can be explored in much the same way as real-life culture.

Back in the beginning of this chapter, I mentioned how at first I thought the members of the community were confused as to what a witch is. While that might have held true in the entho-historic sense of a witch, it may not hold true to what the community believes a witch to be. If one were to view the communities' idea of a witch in WoW as a result of a shared magical consciousness (Greenwood 2009), it is easy to see why the mage and shaman were two of the most popular choices. It is also understandable why those that did choose the warlock as the class that most resembles the classical witch, chose it for the reasons they did; they simply thought it meant a male witch. Today's modern neo-pagan beliefs of a connection to nature and spiritual

practices of a witch coupled with modern day representations of witches in film, television, and literature are so prevalent in today's society that they influence the new generation's perceptions. Today's neo-pagans believe that mankind is connected to each other and to nature...to the world and the universe. Magic acts as both what binds us all, and as a means of knowing (Magliocco 2004:97-102;159). Knowing not just the world we live in, but, ourselves and how we can influence our perceptions and imaginations to bring about change. This understanding of magic and a witch is reflected in the comments from players. They view a witch as someone who is "...in tune with nature," or "a witch is someone who uses magic to protect the earth."

World of Warcraft is a game first and foremost; however as I have been trying to show it has evolved far beyond that. This is largely in part due to the imagination of its players; now denizens of the WoW and greater gaming community. Imagination is a crucial factor in understanding this type of culture and how it has moved beyond its programming and initial intent. "Imagination has a power which enables individuals to escape being swallowed up by a given reality, and it allows them to go beyond a certain situation, a set of circumstances and the status quo," (Greenwood 2009; 157). When one uses one's imagination, engages in an activity such as online gaming, new ideas are formulated and shared, ultimately forming what I think is a shared consciousness about one's society; a new shared knowledge based on experiences and individual knowledge. With imagination it can be taken to a new level. This is why a witch may have certain characteristics when viewing them through an ethno-historic lens; however to many members of this community it is something else.

Chapter 5

The Magical Realm of Azeroth

Introduction

The dungeon was queued and five heroes were to be partnered for the first time; set to explore a dungeon of immense dangers, dark and powerful foes, and all for the sake of glory and riches. Time had passed and the party was formed. A blood elf warlock, an orc warrior, a troll shaman, an undead mage, and a blood elf paladin found themselves at the entrance to the Pit of Saron, where death can come quickly to those who are not careful. The pit is the second wing of the Frozen Halls in the Lich King's Icecrown Citadel. It is here where both Alliance and Horde people are enslaved, forced to mine the precious saronite until death takes them. Unfortunately, death does not last long for them and they are reanimated as undead servants to the Lich King, forced to do his bidding. The lord of this wing is one of the Lich King's lieutenants; Scourgelord Tyrannus and his undead wrym Rimefang. Once human, he is now a death knight follower of the Lich King.

Although grouped for the first time, these heroes were seasoned and immediately buffed each other with various spells enhancing their abilities and vitality, mounted up, and set forth on their quest. Some came for emblems, most came for that rare epic piece of equipment that they needed to enhance their already destructive abilities. The five adventurers regrouped on a small peak overlooking the path that would lead them to the Scourgelord. To the north lay a path guarded by dragon mounted barbarians, men loyal to the Lich King, and giant skeleton task masters. They ensured the slaves were working properly. On their left was their first and immediate threat, a necromancer and his

skeleton minions. Upon encountering their first vile henchman of Tyrannus, each hero knew his or her role. The paladin immediately charged the necromancer and his skeletal minions and acted as a tank absorbing the blunt of the damage. The warrior aided the paladin and provided the melee damage that the paladin might have lacked due to his heavy defensive gear. Meanwhile the casters, each wielders of different forms of magic had their special roles. Not as armored as their melee comrades, they stayed outside of direct combat. The shaman planted his totems around himself and started to heal the warrior and paladin. Meanwhile, the mage and warlock unleashed the full power of their magical abilities. The mage turned one foe into a sheep rendering it useless for the moment. Then proceeded to freeze others in their place and summoned a powerful blizzard over the battlefield, hitting all enemies with powerful shards of ice. The warlock, master of dark forces, cursed the enemies and as their lives were rapidly diminishing blasted them with destructive spells of fire. Within moments the heroes vanquished their foes and proceeded through the dungeon laying waste to all enemies in their path.

Finally, the five brave heroes found themselves before the mighty Scourgelord's field and engaged him in battle. The battle lasts several minutes. Each champion executes their roles perfectly. The paladin and warrior surround Tyrannus and attack him with everything they have, delivering thunderous strikes on him. Meanwhile, the shaman does everything he can to keep them alive, for the Scourgelord hits like a hammer onto an anvil. The mage, changes her attack style and instead of unleashing powerful storms attacks more directly using frost bolts and ice lance. Meanwhile, the warlock cursed Tyrannus the moment he engaged in battle with the paladin. Some curses inflict damage,

which increase over time, and another weakens him against magical attacks. With the curses successfully affecting Tyrannus, the mage and warlock provide wave after wave of magical attacks. Tyrannus is almost defeated when something goes amiss and the shaman is killed. Without the healer, the warrior, unable to himself like his paladin comrade, falls. The mage and the warlock each draw the attention of Tyrannus and teleport out of harm's way; the mage teleported directly, while the warlock relied on a summoning circle he placed at the beginning of the battle. With the paladin regaining control of the battle and the combined damage of the two casters Scourgelord Tyrannus was defeated and the champions reaped their just rewards. At the request of the party leader, the final tally of total damage was revealed. The warlock and mage took the first two places as was expected of them. For in the World of Warcraft, casters are essential when defeating the foes that lurk in Azeroth.

“The practice of magic is the art of circumventing the normal”

(Medivh)

The Last Guardian of Trisfal in the novel, *The Last Guardian* (Grubb 2001), spoke the above quote. In the previous chapter I focused on the warlock, a playable character class in the *WoW*, and showed how it had a lot of parallels to how witches were perceived in society. The warlock, however, is not necessarily a unique class. In this online community, this culture if you will (Corneliussen and Rettberg 2008), magic is an essential part. What sets *WoW* apart from other games and mediums which use magic, is that it is a “world.” As already mentioned, this world, this community, has millions of players worldwide, merchandise, literature, conventions, clothing, and a multitude of

other things enjoyed, used, and purchased by the members of this community. While magic is a thread, which binds this fantasy-based world together, what the players may not realize is just how in depth the use of magic is and the enormous number of parallels that exist between it and actual society. The warlock is but one magic using class amidst a backdrop of druids, shamans, mages, rune and corpse dust using death knights, banshees, spells, battling gods, ghouls, elves, aliens, and much more.

Throughout the course of this, ongoing, research finding the theoretical framework best to tackle the understanding of magic in WoW was quite challenging. My hypothesis is that the various magical and supernatural representations in WoW are more involved than just utilizing fantasy and folklore to create “cool” looking classes and characters, and creatures to kill. This chapter is an analysis of the supernatural in WoW, not just by representation, and how it is tied to the greater mythos of the world. Taking a stab in the dark, I started to read on the relation of magic and religion throughout history and how great minds and researchers from Voltaire to E.E. Evans-Pritchard approached it. I realized this was far too encompassing for just one theoretical theme. Several themes were emerging from behind the dark curtain, which I am going to discuss in this chapter. Furthermore, this chapter will provide an investigation of the various portrayals of magic in WoW.

The Magic of WoW

With a simple gesture of their hands, a wizard can summon forth magic from both nature and places of darker origins. Magic-Users weave magic the way an artist draws a portrait. Muttering a few words and pointing at their foes can hit enemies with the force of a thousand blows or rend the very existence of the planes asunder. Through magic, a person can gain respect, friendship, or money (www.stratics.com).

Magic in WoW draws many parallels to fictional works such as Tolkien's classic *Lord of the Rings* series, or Ursula K. Le Guin's *Earthsea* series. It contains vast lands, traversed by various mounts and zeppelins, great cities of 'men,' mysterious realms of elves, dwarven kingdoms, and so on and so forth. Unlike *Lord of the Rings*, magic has a much larger role in the land of Azeroth; likening it more to *Earthsea*, or J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series. Magic can be taught to all races and within this rich world exists many magical creatures from pixies and other fey creatures to fel magic wielding demons. This section will address how magic is realized in this game, thus setting the mood for the rest of this chapter.

Simply put, Magic in WoW is defined as a force, which encompasses all non-natural effects; it is a field of energy divided into divine and arcane magic. Divine magic is magic derived from the belief in gods, spirits, and nature. Worshipping of divine entities, majority of who are called Eternals, provides the caster with healing abilities. The religions of shamanism, druidism, voodoo, and the holy light comprise divine magic. Central to the practice of divine magic is faith. Practitioners of this form of magic have to constantly prove their faith to the divine. Like snake handling Pentecostals testing and proving their faith to Jesus Christ by handling deadly poisonous snakes, at risk to their own life (Covington 2009), believers of the divine way must constantly test and prove their faith through prayer and trials throughout their whole life.

Opposite to this are the users of arcane magic. Arcane magic is the most common form of magic in *WoW*. According to the lore of *WoW*, arcane magic spread from the Well of Eternity, a powerful pool of water which is connected to the Twisting Nether. When this water was spread throughout Azeroth, arcane magic was born. This form of magic is responsible for mages, wizards, warlocks, and necromancers and any other being able to pull it from the atmosphere; essentially those described in the previous chapter. Unlike the faith driven users of divine magic, arcane users see magic as a tool for their own personal exploitation. Associated with arcane magic are four laws: magic is powerful, magic is corrupting, magic is addictive, and magic attracts the Twisting Nether (Arcane-wowwiki).

These concepts of magic are not original to *WoW*. There are many similarities and differences which can be drawn between them and their real-world inspirations. The most in-depth of these are the divine magics and they will be the focus of this section. Druids are one of the most popular classes in *WoW*. In *WoW*, druids are shapeshifters, able to take on various forms depending on their role or need at the time. They can morph into a bear and become tanks, capable of taking on extreme amounts of damage. They can turn into an oak tree and heal, or turn into an owl-like creature and deal nature damage, or other animal shapes depending on the needs of the players-- animals such as mountain-lion-sized cats or birds, among others. Interestingly, the choices in animals the developers used are typically associated with Navajo witchcraft (Kluckhohn 1989:26) and no historical texts refer to druids as shapeshifters; an image counter to the depiction of druids they use. Paramount to the druid class is the balancing and protecting of nature and the world. Being in-tune with nature and their empathy for animals, is what affords

druids the ability to take on various animal and nature forms, most notably the turning into an oak tree when taking on the role of healer. This happens to be the most common type of druid used by players. What is interesting to note here is the oak tree also, supposedly, bore significance to the druids of real life and it is this tree, which, allows for a perfect starting point to analyze those comparisons and differences.

Historian Ronald Hutton has written extensively on the topic of druids in history. In his books, *The Druids* and *Blood & Mistletoe: A History of Druids in Britain* (Hutton 2007; 2009), he discusses how druids have been depicted throughout time. He achieves this by categorizing them into various types, most notably for this purpose are the patriotic druids and the green druids. Historically, there is a lack of evidence about who the actual druids were. Only a few unreliable Greek and Roman accounts of druids exist. I say unreliable because it was during this time that the Romans were at war with the Celts. According to the few written accounts, druids, or druides, were the priests, judges, and arbitrators for the ancient Celts (Hutton 2009:2). Because of their prominent status within Celtic society, they were prime targets for the Romans during the war. Eventually, they were killed and what remained of the ancient Celtic society was incorporated into the Roman Empire, where laws prevented people from being druids. With only three written accounts of druids, general knowledge of them eventually faded. During the Middle Ages, most people were unaware of that they ever existed. However, starting around the late 15th century European nations entered in what is known as the European Renaissance. Druids became regarded as important ancestors and started to appear in literature and documents were forged by various nations attempting to lay claim that these mysterious druids were their ancestors.

Druids in WoW are considerably similar to the representations of “patriotic druids” described by Hutton (2007:1-3). In WoW, druids are a diverse class. Much like their patriotic counterparts in history, druids in WoW have been portrayed as having many roles ranging from being warriors, healers, wise advisors, and leaders. Not unlike their patriotic counterparts, WoW druids can also be fierce combatants on the battlefield, either during a dungeon or raid, or during player-versus-player matches. Roles aside though, what is a key commonality between patriotic druids and druids in WoW is their spiritual connection to the natural world and the prevention of its decimation at the hands of invaders. .

For the depiction of the green druid, Hutton writes,

“Green Druids lived and taught in wild and beautiful natural places, away from the distractions, temptations and discomforts of civilization. They drew their undoubted wisdom from this close relationship with the natural world resulting in their understanding of it. All this is precious to them, but especially trees, among which they delighted in particular to live, worship and debate” (Hutton 2007:79)

Interestingly enough, there is no direct evidence to support the idea that druids had an intimate relationship with nature, except for a few Roman passages which stated that they used an oak branch at every ceremony (Hutton 2007:79). According to another Roman account, they also had the ritual of oak and mistletoe, which was supposedly a ceremony to cure infertility; more associated with Celtic druids (Green 2005:19). Again, like all other accounts from the Roman period they are regarded as highly skeptical. This skepticism is largely due to the fact that there are no accounts written by the druids, only by their oppressors, such as Tacitus’s famous description, or other parties. Regardless,

druids have become synonymous with nature. This is no different with the druids in WoW.

Druids, especially night elf druids, live in the forests, cut off from most other civilizations. Although the night elves will be explained in more depth later on, they are an ancient playable race allied with the Alliance. Once they turned to nature magic and embraced druidism, they became recluses and lived in the forests. The night elves in WoW and their long lives and experiences have made them to be regarded as a wise and knowledgeable race, adding to the mystique of the druids. Notions such as the druids being considered as secretive and mysterious are also represented in the night elves and how they are perceived by the other races they are allied with. To the other races, night elves are considered mysterious and untrustworthy, to a degree, and this element contributes to the parallel notion of mysterious druids. They protected their forests and nature much like a green druid. The resulting change in belief systems also granted them more knowledge and power. Similar to their real world representations, WoW druids hold trees especially dear to them. Not only do they hold them dear, but their powers stem from a tree, the World Tree; a powerful tree created on the spot of the original Well of Eternity.

While actual accounts of druids are scarce and debatable, they have been a part of how societies identify themselves for centuries. Popular representations such as the patriotic and green druids have immense influence on modern day interpretations, like the ones seen in WoW. Yet, druids are not the only class which is influenced by a real world religion. Both shamanism and Vodou have their WoW counterparts.

Like the druid class, shamans in WoW are a hybrid class. They can be weapon wielding warriors, offensive spellcasters, or healers through the aid of little ornately decorated wooden totems. Unlike totems used by various native North American groups to represent clan lineages or legends, or dedications to special events, these totems represent the elements: earth, air, fire, and water. Originally, shamans were limited to only the trolls, taurens, and orcs (all Horde races), but since WoW's second iteration, players who chose the Alliance can also play as a shaman. Shamans serve as their clan's or tribe's link to the spirits. By communications with the spirits, a shaman can receive visions of the future and use these visions to lead their brethren. According to the lore, shamanism flourished in Azeroth, but went almost extinct among the orcs of the Outlands due to corruption of their ability to communicate with the spirits. This was the case up until the point when Thrall, the orc who would become the leader of the Horde as it is portrayed in WoW, was revealed to be a powerful shaman. Primarily I play a warlock, however, I created a shaman and I was already able to defeat enemies stronger than me with little difficulty, a testament to their power. Even though I may be 'young' to the world of the shaman in WoW, players I have spoken to who play shamans love them and prefer them to any other class in WoW. Shamans are also highly sought after for their healing talents, sometimes being more effective than a priest or druid. Unlike the druid and its real world inspiration, shamans in WoW are more different than similar to their real world ethnographic counterparts.

The word shaman is derived from the Tungus root word, *sa*, meaning to know. Therefore, a shaman, or *saman*, is a knowledgeable person (Kehoe 2000:8). *Saman* also means one who is "excited, moved, or raised" (Walsh 2007:13). So the meaning of the

word can indicate several qualities. Defining the term is no different and is in fact a contentious issue among anthropologists and researchers of shamans. The uncertainty revolves around how the term is applied, with some believing it is too broad and others too specific. Alice Kehoe stated that she believes the term is used too “loosely” and should be used to describe the native shamans of Siberia and not all the groups which have been labeled as shamans by anthropologists and other researchers (Kehoe 2000:14). Conversely, Ronald Hutton presents four definitions of shamans, ranging from the very general (anyone who contacts spirits through altered states of consciousness) to the very particular (a practitioner of the native religions of Siberia and its neighbors) (Hutton 2001:viii). Regardless, what is agreed is that shamanism involves an almost priestly calling where the shaman holds a public ritual consisting of drums, song and dances, and the shaman inevitably entering an altered state of consciousness. Traditional Siberian shamans perform a multitude of services ranging from blessing a hunting expedition to that of ritual healer or diviner.

Like the Siberian shamans, shamans in WoW rely on spirits for their abilities. In lieu of entering altered states of consciousness, which would be extremely difficult to visualize in a game of this structure, they utilize totem poles to provide a unique substitute to the stimulating ritual associated with shamanism. The lights and colors given off by their totems can give that sense, that visually stimulating sense that something is going on and one can get lost looking at a shaman perform their abilities. The other main similarity they serve is that of being able to heal and the fact that most players prefer a healing classed shaman over the other possibilities.

Now, if one uses shamanism in its more generic sense and not specifying it to the traditional shamans of Siberia, Neil L. Whitehead elaborates on another side of shamanism, which is needed to understand shamans in WoW. Observing various shamans in the Amazon of South America, he states that there is a “dark-side to shamanism” (Whitehead and Wright 2004:10). He states that among the shamans in South America, they can use their abilities to cause harm. The Warao of Venezuela recognize four types of shamans: a) priest-shaman; b) light-shaman; c) weather shaman; and d) dark-shamans. The dark shamans use a version of assault sorcery to attack their victims. Warao shamans also employ a hierarchy where the elders are more concerned with maintaining the universal balance and protecting their society from outsiders, whereas the younger shamans are primarily the healers (Wilbert 2004:44).

This aspect of shamanism is very similar to the shamans of WoW and their more assault casting class. Like shamans such as the ones of the Warao, players who decide to be a shaman can spec them to be assault. Essentially, a shaman can be either healer or damage dealer depending on the needs of the group. The hierarchy can also account for a character like Thrall. Thrall is considered to be one of the most powerful shamans in the world of Warcraft and the warchief in-charge of the Horde, essentially an elder. In the upcoming expansion Cataclysm, a cataclysmic event occurs resulting in a rift opening up in Azeroth and Thrall is called upon to use his powerful spirit connections to help aid in restoring and maintaining balance in the world.

While not a playable class, Voodoo in WoW has both similarities and differences to its influence, Haitian Vodou. Voodoo is the religion primarily associated with the darkspear trolls. Like all other Horde races of Azeroth, darkspear trolls are considered

barbaric by the Alliance; just like how real-life practitioners of Vodou were regarded by colonizing powers. Their system is far more complex than their counterparts', druidism and shamanism. They believe in a complex system of spirits called the Loa. This is not too different from the belief in the Lwa by Vodou practitioners (Brown 2001; Dubois 2001; McAlister 1993). Like real Vodou practitioners, voodoo priests of the trolls can be either male or female and become avatars for their spirits to act through. Where the priest (oungan), or priestess (manbo) in Haitian Vodou takes on characteristics of the lwa inhabiting their body, troll priests literally turn into the spirit they have been inhabited by. Both systems provide a sense of unity and survival in lands and social situations different than their own, like the function Vodou serves in the communities of Brooklyn (Brown 2001). While both require sacrifices in order to maintain their relationship to the spirits, troll sacrifices comprise of human remains and blood, not animals or food. Both forms serve to provide help to the community ranging from cures for illness to financial advice. Yet, they can also be used for harmful purposes. In Haitian Vodou, priests can create a powder called kou'd, which can be used to heal or harm (McAlister 1993:20-21). WoW Voodoo has witch doctors, a modern stereotype for both shamans and Vodou practitioners, who through song and dance entice the spirits to inhabit them and create potions and powders to harm or cure. They, the voodoo witch doctors, can also directly attack when inhabited by the loa.

Since the previous chapter of this research was devoted to discerning the difference between the warlock and mage, I do not feel the need to describe them again. Instead the purpose of the section was to draw parallels and differences between these magical beliefs and their real world influences. While most dedicated players to this

game and community are knowledgeable on shamans and druids in *WoW*, they are not as versed in the real beliefs. I read countless times in chat windows that players think real shamans are like they are in the game, or that druids in real life were nature worshipping shapeshifters, even though as I have outlined here that there is no known ‘hard’ evidence to support these claims which have been used for centuries. The use magical based belief systems does not stop with the influences they have on the individual races and playable characters in *WoW*. Magic is actually caught in a greater struggle, one between “right” Alliance and the “savage” Horde.

Post-Colonialism in *WoW*’s magical beliefs

When playing a game like *WoW*, the average player may not realize how much more involved of a story it is beyond what is represented to them through in-game character dialogue and video scenes. Games of this scale have a lot to offer, enough to contribute to the creation of a subculture and an online imagined community, complete with various codings such as identifiable clothing, paraphernalia, merchandise, language, all of which contribute to the creation of an identity. Thus far, magic has been shown to be just as in-depth and layered in this game as it is in real life. Its similarities and differences do not stop with the different magical beliefs systems. They can be taken one step further and placed into a larger picture; that of colonialism and the West’s view of magic during that time.

When creating a character, players must choose to play either a member of the Alliance or the Horde. Essentially, this game revolves around a power struggle between the two factions. Rather than being a game of simple good versus evil, Jessica Langer

states this game represents more of a colonial battle, with the battle existing between the colonizers and the colonized. Races of the Horde are clear representations of real-life groups which have been ‘othered’ by the more ‘familiar’ white Alliance (Langer 2008:87-89). The taurens represent the idealized notion of the ‘noble savage’ with their teepees, totem poles, brave warriors, and peacefully living off the land depictions. Even their appearance is that of a buffalo like being. The trolls are clearly based off of Afro-Caribbean cultures, with their Jamaican accents, and stereotyped voodoo beliefs. While tougher to discern, Langer states that orcs don’t represent a single culture or group, but rather, “colonial depictions of blackness,” (Langer 2008:98). While she goes on to wonderfully describe this other/familiar dichotomy, this scenario can be taken one step further.

During the times of the 12-19th centuries, magic and the way it was perceived underwent changes. Magic became associated with witchcraft and with that fundamental shift those accused of practicing witchcraft went from being excommunicated to executed (Styers 2004:30). This period of time became synonymous with the infamous and brutal witch-hunts, which resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands of people (Mauss 2009; Styers 2004; Tambiah 2006). Magic had become a threat to commerce, society, and the elites, many of whom still dabbled in natural magic such as fortune telling and astrology. The Catholic Church had helped in the influence of deifying magic and magical belief systems. As this died down in the late 18th-19th centuries, researchers started to show an increased interest in understanding why this happened. Researchers of the early to mid-20th century paid more attention to the study of magical religions, however, their analyses of these indigenous groups and their magical beliefs included Eurocentric, white, biases.

This can be seen in their descriptions where they call magical beliefs as “primitive, belonging to “lower races,” or magic as “improper religious practice” (Styers 2004). The question is what does this have to do with WoW?

As already stated, WoW is divided into the Alliance and Horde. The Horde races comprise of orcs, trolls, taurens, blood elves, and the undead. Orcs, trolls, and taurens are three races which not only represent cultures which have been colonized and considered primitive by the western nations, but so do their religious beliefs; orcs with their shamanism, trolls and their Vodou practices, and taurens with their druidism. All three religious beliefs and their people are considered primitive and “bastards” by the Holy Light followers of the Alliance. While the Holy Light is a virtue where belief will connect one spiritually to the universe, the light does originate from some unknown being or force; not unlike the major monotheistic religions which comprise the majority of the world’s populations today. While it is considered a non-theistic religion, it is associated with the humans of the Alliance and the Church of the Holy Light. The humans consider themselves as justified magic users, fighting in the name of the Alliance and the Church of the Holy Light. While the church does not directly have a policy of killing believers in these magical systems, the church’s goal was combating the forces of the horde with their priests and paladins, reminiscent of the crusaders used to protect worshippers of Christianity and combat their enemies in the Holy Land. Through in-game discourse, it can be seen as a war of justified right “religion” versus those beliefs of “lower races,” or “...groups of primitive savages banded together out of desperation,” (Horde-wowwiki).

Magic as a metaphor for knowledge/power

Now that the magic portrayals in WoW and its post-colonial stereotypes have been discussed, it is time to move on to final argument regarding magic in WoW; magic as a metaphor for knowledge and power. Magic as a metaphor for knowledge and power is different than the brilliantly presented concept by Michel Foucault. Instead of the establishment of absolute truths and exerting that knowledge over others in society, thus giving the knowledgeable power, magic and the knowledge of magic is used to gain power. The magic using classes can then act on behalf of those in power (Knight 2009) or take the power for themselves. Now this is not to say that this does not occur, but, magic is more of a knowledge based tool to be exploited for personal gain. Before I divulge more into this Foucaultian application of knowledge and power in WoW, an example from WoW's lore is in order. Allow me to introduce the tale of the human mage turned lich, Kel'Thuzad.

Kel'Thuzad was once an archmage of Dalaran and one of senior members of the Kirin Tor, Dalaran's ruling council. He had been considered a maverick for years due to his insistence on studying the forbidden arts of necromancy. Driven to learn all he could of the magical world and its shadowy wonders, he was frustrated by what he saw as his peers' outmoded and unimaginative precepts. Upon hearing the powerful summons from Northrend, the archmage bent all of his considerable will to communing with the mysterious voice. Convinced that the Kirin Tor was too squeamish to seize the power and knowledge inherent in the dark arts, he resigned himself to learn what he could from the immensely powerful Lich King.

Leaving behind his fortune and prestigious political standing, Kel'Thuzad abandoned the ways of the Kirin Tor and left Dalaran forever. Prodded by the Lich King's persistent voice in his mind, he sold his vast holdings and stored away his fortunes. Traveling alone over many leagues of both land and sea, he finally reached the frozen shores of Northrend. Intent on reaching Icecrown and offering his services to the Lich King, the archmage passed through the ravaged, war-torn ruins of Azjol-Nerub. Kel'Thuzad saw firsthand the scope and ferocity of Ner'zhul's power. He began to realize that allying himself with the mysterious Lich King might be both wise and potentially fruitful.

After long months of trekking through the harsh arctic wastelands, Kel'Thuzad finally reached the dark glacier of Icecrown. He boldly approached Ner'zhul's dark citadel and was shocked when the undead guardsmen silently let him pass as though he was expected. Kel'Thuzad

descended deep into the cold earth and found his way down to the bottom of the glacier. There, in the endless cavern of ice and shadows, he prostrated himself before the Frozen Throne and offered his soul to the dark lord of the dead.

The Lich King was pleased with his latest conscript. He promised Kel'Thuzad immortality and great power in exchange for his loyalty and obedience. Eager for dark knowledge and power, Kel'Thuzad accepted his first great mission: to go into the world of men and found a new religion that would worship the Lich King as a god.

To help the archmage accomplish his mission, Ner'zhul left Kel'Thuzad's humanity intact. The aged yet still charismatic wizard was charged with using his powers of illusion and persuasion to lull the downtrodden, disenfranchised masses of Lordaeron into a state of trust and belief. Then, once he had their attention, he would offer them a new vision of what society could be - and a new figurehead to call their king.

The above passage is an excerpt from the, *History of Warcraft*, on WoW's official website (Blizzard Ent.). Kel'Thuzad would go on to be betrayed by the Lich King and resurrected by the Lich King's successor, Arthas. Kel'Thuzad's story was highlighted because it displays some of the ways in which knowledge and power are portrayed in the WoW; knowingly or unknowingly by the creators and various authors of its history. Among all of Michel Foucault's contributions to the studies of humanity, the study of the relationship between knowledge and power occupied most of his works. For Foucault, power, "*...reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives,*" (Foucault 1980: 39). Power's hold and acceptance by people, therefore society as a whole, is due to its simultaneous and dual nature as a force of repression and a producer of social and behavioral constructs, such as pleasure, forms of knowledge, and discourse. Therefore, power can be seen as a social network which flows through society. Knowledge, when talking about its relation to power, becomes truth. With this, knowledge can then be used to, "*...regulate the conduct of others, entails constraint, regulation and the disciplining of practice,*" (Foucault 1977:27).

Kel'Thuzad was interested in the knowledge of magic that the Lich King had. That thirst for knowledge would have given him more power than his magical knowledge granted him. He abandoned his home, social standing, and way of life for that knowledge. In essence, the Lich King had the knowledge giving him the power. It was exclusive knowledge and he made Kel'Thuzad believe that he would share that knowledge with him. The power ingrained with that knowledge allowed the Lich King to regulate and constrain someone, whom otherwise would have been a threat. The potential for that powerful knowledge acted with and amplified Kel'Thuzad's ambitions and being. After the archmage pledges his loyalty to the Lich King, the Lich King then grants just enough knowledge to keep Kel'Thuzad in control. To Foucault, this use of power to completely control and influence Kel'Thuzad's actions in life is a more complete display of power than simply killing him. The Lich King goes on to amass an army of loyal followers who believe his way is the right truthful way and to give it a more appealing fantasy Tolkien style game appeal; powerful way. He does this through Kel'Thuzad. Kel'Thuzad goes forth throughout the land spreading what he believes to be truth and knowledge, provided by the Lich King, to the people. Many start to believe what the powerful mage is saying and become loyal followers. Again, the power of knowledge is seen, in that belief is created through knowledge; granting the Lich King more power.

Now this story does not end here. The story of the Lich King and Kel'Thuzad continues beyond the passages provided earlier. After Kel'Thuzad does the bidding of his new master, the Lich King betrays him, killing him when he least suspects it. Now this is counter to what I stated earlier about the power to completely control one opposed to

simply executing the individual. However, “there is no power that is exercised without a series of aims and objectives,” (Foucault, quoted in Fillingham 1993:144). While the Lich King exerts more power through the use of knowledge, and a little force since it is a game and fantasy story of good versus evil or the ‘familiar’ versus the ‘other’, resistance rises out from the Lich King’s veil of power. This resistance, as Foucault believed, is an inherent part of the system which the power relations create. A young follower and of the Lich King, Prince Arthas, opposes the Lich King in an aim to control that power and the knowledge which the Lich King possesses. Eventually, he usurps the previous king and takes the power for himself and revives the mage Kel’Thuzad, finally granting him some of that long sought knowledge which originally drew him in. While this story expresses one way this knowledge/power relationship can be seen in the game, it is expressed in other parts of the lore and within the actual playable character classes themselves.

As mentioned before, WoW like any other great fantasy story consists of a multitude of races for people to choose from. Even then, they are restricted to only a handful of the races which exist in this imagined online world. Among these races are the night elves and the blood elves. Like the story of Kel’Thuzad and the Lich King, the relationship between knowledge and power can be seen entangled with the history of night elves and the blood elves.

The night elves, or kaldorei, are one of the oldest races in WoW. Like the portrayal of Tolkien’s elves, in his works, night elves existed for thousands of years before the emergence of humans in Azeroth. The kaldorei were an arcane magic using race, tied to the Well of Eternity, the source of magic in Azeroth. Magic, wisdom, and

immortality were granted to the kaldorei by the well. As their knowledge of magic grew, so did their power. In this case, their literal power, not influential power. Over time, some of the kaldorei gained a deeper knowledge of the magical arts and its various forms, granting them power over their brethren. By retaining this knowledge, they exerted power over the others, forcing the rest into a relationship of reliance establishing them as the nobility. This elite mage class then became known as the Highborne. The Highborne spent their time searching for greater magical knowledge to increase their own power. Ultimately this lust for power would be undoing for not just themselves, but, for their whole race.

In the War of the Ancients, an important event in the history of this game, the Highborne seek to control a powerful source of magic and use it to usher their race into a new era. However, the war that ensues and the corruption of magic cause the Well of Eternity to implode. With the well gone and most of their race's numbers dwindling, including the Highborne, the Kaldorei lost their immortality and abandoned their use of the arcane arts, outlawing its knowledge and use. At this point the Highborne, now called High Elves, continued in their search for power and magic, partly due to their reliance on magic to sustain themselves, like a vampire requiring blood to live. Here we see Foucault's notion of the formation of resistance to power playing out. In this case, the resistance is in the form of a split. The struggle for power by the Highbornes led to the creation of a small band of kaldorei which opposed this use and abuse of magic. However, it was too late and the previously described events unraveled.

After having branched away from their ruling class and having lost their arcane abilities and immortality, the night elves moved into the forests to become more in tune

with the nature they abused. Mourning for the loss of their immortality, they searched for ways to regain it when they discovered a new option. Now, more in tune with nature and all their surroundings, the newly named night elves could seek immortality by means of becoming druids, by learning a form of nature magic. Bound by dream and Nordrassil, the World Tree which used the last remains of magical essence from the Well of Eternity, the night elves became immortal druids, sleeping for centuries in a dream state until they are needed. Ultimately they destroy the World Tree to prevent a further demonic threat, sacrificing their immortality once again. In the upcoming expansion, Cataclysm, it seems that the night elves remove their ban on arcane magic and take up its knowledge once more, allowing players to finally play a night elf mage.

Arguments over power caused a split among the high elves and out of this rift the blood elves came about. Blood elves, which vied for the old days used the power magic provided as a tool to regain power and status lost. Unlike most non-demonic forces, they sought the knowledge of fel magic. This knowledge of the dark arts granted them tremendous power, making them one of the most magically powerful races in the world. However, they became outcasts by most factions due to their knowledge of fel magic; becoming both warlocks and mages. In this view magic and the power granted through its knowledge can be viewed as a tool used by the races as a means to gain power and control over others. Knowledge and power with regards to magic can also be seen in the discourse among the actual players.

Players of WoW, thus members of the community which has evolved around this game, can chose to play a casting specific class such as a mage, or a warlock, or a druid. When reading the various chat channels in the games, people express that they love to

play the casters because of their power. Mages and warlocks are among the most powerful damage dealing classes in the game. There is a catch with this though; they have to be knowledgeable of their characters. While I was meeting guild members in Dalaran, the magical, floating city formed and governed by various mages, wizards, and other magical castes, one person asked, “as a mage, how do I get more powerful?” Within seconds the chat was flooded with responses, most along the lines of this one, “...learn to play your character,” or, “become knowledgeable of mages.” While all classes require the player to become knowledgeable of their class in order to achieve more power and status within the game, the two being interconnected, casting classes such as warlocks and mages start out exceptionally weak and require their player to really understand their character. As one player put it, *“I love playing a mage because of the power, in fact I typically play a mage, or a wizard, or some magic casting character because I love the power, but, man do they suck at first...they are soooo weak until you hit that certain level and then you become a powerhouse. But, I had to learn a lot about them in order to get my toon powerful.”* Comments like these combined with the scope of this game with its lore, and dedication requirements from its millions of members show how the concept of knowledge and power are in fact applicable when understanding this online world and its community.

Conclusion

World of Warcraft may not be the first of this type of game but it has definitely reshaped the world of massive multi-player online roleplaying games (MMORPGs). The influences and parallels, subtle or not, help create a mythos in which players become a

participant and member of this fantasy world. Members are playing in a world where magic and the supernatural are at odds with a growing “divine” justified “West.” From references to Norse mythology to Siberian Shamanism, WoW has indeed become a supernatural and fantasy world enjoyed by millions in this modern age. The use of real world influences help create this magic world and assist it in seeming more real to the player. With its battling druids and holy crusaders fighting the armies of the Horde in the name of the Holy Light, players get can easily get lost in this game and exhibit the same qualities as a magical consciousness (Greenwood 2009:4). Magic is further seen as a quest for knowledge and power within the games vast lore. In-game characters have engaged in various wars over centuries to obtain a greater understanding of magic. Furhtermore, this quest for knowledge and the exercising of it as power over other players is employed, in some cases essential, to navigating the game and get accepted into the greater community at large.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

After four years, I still play *WoW*. By the time you finish reading this, the next expansion, *Mists of Pandaria* (Blizzard Ent. 2012), will be downloaded by millions of players around the world; both current players and ones who stopped in anticipation of new content. The ones who come and go don't leave the community of *WoW* and they typically don't leave the greater gaming community all together. They merely move on to the next game. So again, what is *WoW* and what is this greater cyber community that gamers live in?

As I stated in the introduction, the goal of this paper was to contribute to the growing discourse on the validity of academic research on cyber-communities and more specifically, online gaming communities. The holistic nature of anthropology provides the perfect catalyst to approach such a vast topic. Combining this holistic approach with the practice of ethnographic research is essential to understanding the complexities intrinsic to such imagined communities. *Wow* is first and foremost a game; however, as I have showed it is much more than that: it is a world unto itself, played out by the actors that comprise it.

While *WoW*, and other online-games like it, are not the first type of role-playing game they are far more unique than their paper and dice predecessors. Their uniqueness stems from their ability to bring millions of people from across the globe into one new imagined transnational solidary. Remember that I defined these games as imagined transnational solidarities due to the qualities exhibited by these games and their boundless cyber contexts. The players have created a new form of community, or even beyond that

a world, where boundaries do not exist. They don't exist in the geographic sense and they don't exist in the self. Players enjoy logging in for hours on end, fishing, traversing the various digital landscapes, engaging in dungeons with fellow guildmates, or other players, discovering news clues about the origins of Azeroth as digital archaeologists, and then sharing those experiences with others in the actual and digital worlds. Both realities, the digital and actual, contribute to the players' identity. The boundary that exists between them is porous at best; it is imagined.

Just like the actors that play in and comprise the cultures of the actual world (Turner 1982), members of these played digital communities wear signifying items identifying their allegiances to both the preferred community of their choice: WoW, Everquest, Guild Wars, etc, they also wear things that identify their faction: Horde or Alliance in WoW. Players speak a language exclusive to the members of this community; yet the world of online gaming and its culture are open to anyone who wishes to join. Many players enjoy similar interests outside of the game, like science fiction and fantasy, mythology, folklore, comics, anime, art which further enhances their experiences and contributes to this notion of community. This community and the knowledge of it can invert social norms regarding knowledge and power and act as a venue for further power struggles.

Children in the actual world do not have a lot of power, they are at the behest their parental overlords. The child relies upon his, or her, parents to help them navigate their environment as they mature. It is the parents, the adults, who have the power. In the digital world however, this might not be the case. As Foucault stated in one of his later works, "The Subject and Power," power is decentralized and not just inhered in the

machine (Foucault 1982:219-220); in this case the disciplinary machine could Blizzard Ent and parents. Kids, who have more time to spare diving in their digital world, can amass far more knowledge of that world than their older counterparts. This can afford the kids a greater amount of power only when they exert it on their parents and other adults they encounter within the game; a power they would otherwise not have in the actual world due to the kids' possible inability to exert it over the adults. It is this exercising of power over someone else where power actually comes from (Foucault 1982:219). Where the child relies on the adult to provide in the actual world, in the digital the adult might be at the mercy of the child. This not only applies to children, but, to those who would otherwise not have much power, influence, or social status in the actual world. What I just described is but one facet in which the exertion of power over others is seen, both within the games lore and amongst the players. A more knowledgeable and better equipped player will, and has, prevented me from participating in certain events, sometimes simply because I was not as familiar with a certain dungeon as others.

Remember one key aspect to these digital communities: they are played. Like Victor Turner's notion of people being like actors in a greater theatrical drama known as culture (Turner 1982), digital communities formed around games like WoW, are first and foremost games. This is not to say that these communities are games, but rather, these games are communities where play is at their core. With this, one has to identify what play really is. As I mentioned earlier in this thesis, play has been very difficult to define. There are anthropological and non-anthropological approaches attempting to understand this unique and sometimes puzzling phenomenon (Geertz 1973; Huizinga 1955; Sutton-Smith 2001; Turner 1982). Of all the definitions, none are entirely right or wrong, but

rather each points to a very important aspect of play. When trying to understand how play theory can be applied to the understanding of the unique characteristics of online gaming communities, I combined various aspects to create a definition, or guide, which can be used to explain play in the context of gaming. Play can be a: (1) voluntary liminal activity (2) where events flow (3) bound by flexible rules (4) which can invoke a wide array of feelings (5) enjoyed for the purpose of competition or self-enjoyment (6) contributing to the social development of an individual, regardless of age. While this is used to understand the play aspect of these communities, other notions such as the idea of a magical consciousness (Greenwood 2009) can be applied to the game and its effects on players.

WoW, and other games like it are heavily influenced by actual world cultures and the histories, mythologies, folklore, styles, religions, mannerisms, and social norms that comprise them. I explored one aspect of WoW, the use of witchcraft in the enriching of the games lore and imagery; thus contributing to it as a participatory story (Greenwood 2009). WoW allows the player to choose from a variety of races and classes, depending on faction, to create their virtual avatar. Some of these, like warlocks, mages, and druids, are heavily influenced by their actual world counter-parts. Magic doesn't only influence the characters and their beliefs, but, is used in a greater post-colonial backdrop of the righteous, right light of the Alliance and their quest to conquer the savage barbarism of the Horde races and their more magic-based beliefs. Much like Western notions that the beliefs of the indigenous peoples of colonized lands were inferior, so too is it represented in the language and descriptions of the various Horde races. While the various races are each clearly influenced by various colonized and subjected groups, like the trolls with

their heavy Jamaican-like accent and heavy afro-Caribbean influences (Langer 2008:89), it is the in-game discourse that really reveals the battle between the familiar “right” and the “savage” “superstitious” other. This dichotomy of good versus evil, noble versus savage, is presented to the player right in the beginning, in the original introductions for the races. The humans are referred to as the “noble humans” defending their realm from the “savage Horde.” Humans are “steadfast” while the Horde are “fowl mongrels.” The dwarves are “stalward”, the drenai are “noble”, gnomes are “eccentric and brilliant.” While the Alliance is “grand” and “heroic,” and its’ races true and noble, the Horde is portrayed as “merciless” and its races as “primitive.” Orcs may have a proud shamanistic heritage, but, now “...they wait to crush all who oppose them.” The trolls are referred to as “viscous” and renowned for their “dark mysticism and barbarous ways.” Tuarens may be proud and peaceful, but they engage in the hunt. What were once the high elves are now called blood elves, whose thirst for magic leads them on a quest to regain their arcane power. Through the discourse it can be seen that the Alliance is portrayed how the western nations acted in their colonial days, as right and just. While the Horde is referred to in the same “primitive” fashion as the colonized people were.

These classes and the game’s discourse on the subject of magic is one way in which the game contributes to a shared magical consciousness (Greenwood 2009). The game has created a whole idea of magic and witchcraft that is shared and understood by all the players of WoW. Furthermore, this idea was further investigated by how the game has influenced its members’ notions of magic and witchcraft, in this case, the question of which class most closely resembles a witch. Looking at the characteristics set forth by Hutton (Hutton 2004), the warlock would be the class most resembling a witch. However,

this was not necessarily the class chosen by the majority of WoW players, whom I presented the question to and from various responses on blog threads. This is where the concept of magical consciousness enters. Players' choices were influenced from not only pop-cultural representations and perceived notions of Wiccan beliefs and practices, but, from the games evolving story as well. As players dive further into the lore and story behind WoW, it contributes to the creation and perception of what magic is. The players are exposed to this and develop their own ideas. This world-view can only be perceived by the participants playing the game, the members of this community.

This brings the paper back full-circle and the original question comes to fruition; what is WoW? Simply put, it is a phenomenon. It is a game, which has evolved into something more. It is a cyber-world, a community without borders, a game to some and to others part of their identity. Members of this community have developed skills useful in the actual world; ideologies and understandings of topics have been influenced and created by playing this game. Marriages have resulted between players, who otherwise might never have known the other existed. Families have been broken up, and new friendships formed. Mythologies have transformed for a new generation to explore and historical concepts such as religious persecutions played out in a new context. Players are taking ideas and experiences they have honed over the last seven years and applying them in their actual world lives. Identities and consciousness, both shared and individual, have been shaped and influenced all by playing this game.

It is in the aspects mentioned above that further research is needed. There are so many topics one can look at, like how can an actual world construct, such as ethnic cleansing, be used to contribute to a fun game played by kids? Do those kids consciously,

or subconsciously, even know what that is? Furthermore does that have any effect on their actual world perception? How is the evolving cyber-world going to influence the actual world in the years to come beyond social interaction? These are but examples of the myriad of questions researchers, both anthropologists and non-anthropologists alike, will be able to explore in the years to come.

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