PROJECT MUSE®

My Life as a Night Elf Priest

Nardi, Bonnie
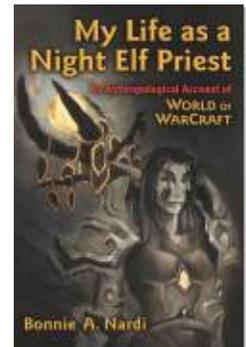
Published by University of Michigan Press

➡ For additional information about this book

PART ONE

Introduction to *World of Warcraft*

Prologue

0/12 19:36:38.533 [Raid] Loro: Now Slams and I have been talking about a lot of events regarding our guild and how it can be improved.

0/12 19:37:14.349 [Raid] Robertoh: rofl why is everyone on tables

0/12 19:38:13.848 [Raid] Slams: I have always found that

0/12 19:38:23.224 Robertoh yells: I will be the right hand of loro. :)

0/12 19:38:47.301 [Raid] Slams: a guild that melds together as friends is one that essentially succeeds.

0/12 19:38:55.099 Noth kneels before Slams.

0/12 19:38:58.342 [Raid] Loro: Exactly slams.

0/12 19:39:15.218 [Raid] Leanallah: i agree

0/12 19:39:18.516 [Raid] Slams: you could essentially play this game alone

0/12 19:39:18.341 Robertoh bursts into dance.

0/12 19:39:34.315 [Raid] Aziki: cant to endgame alone tho :/

0/12 19:39:35.935 [Raid] Eleanor: uhh, Robertoh, did you forget your valium?

0/12 19:39:40.552 Sabina applauds at Robertoh. Bravo!

0/12 19:39:42.314 [Raid] Loro: Robertoh please settle down.

0/12 19:39:57.593 [Raid] Robertoh: :)

0/12 19:40:05.021 [Raid] Slams: While leveling up to get to higher level content is crucial—a strong sense of community is crucial as well.

0/12 19:40:11.816 [Raid] Loro: I find that by partying and questing together, we make the game a little more fun.

0/12 19:41:34.032 [Raid] Loro: social events tend to be successful in
    attracting other members.
0/12 19:45:49.638 [Raid] Slams: See, if our goal as a guild is to have a
    constant flow of 5 man raids . . . we've reached that goal.
0/12 19:46:08.531 [Raid] Slams: If we want to be able to do 40 man
    raids consistently . . . we haven't reached that.
0/12 19:46:52.846 Robertoh begins to eat in front of Sasha.
0/12 19:46:53.222 Noth flirts with Aziki.
0/12 19:46:59.508 [Raid] Eleanor: i think doing raids could be enjoy-
    able
0/12 19:46:59.213 Noth blows Aziki a kiss.

In the spring of 2005, I taught an undergraduate course on social aspects
of digital technologies. The students worked in teams on research projects.
One team reported on massively multiplayer online role-playing games.
I knew nothing of these games. But the students' presentation impressed
me—artistic screenshots, the students' excitement as players, the discussion
the topic sparked in class. Note to self: find out what this is about.

I listened when students talked about video games in casual conversa-
tion. Colorful but unfamiliar names jangled in my brain: *EverQuest, Ultima
Online, Final Fantasy, Guild Wars.* The game that kept coming up was
World of Warcraft. Based on this highly unscientific sampling, I decided to
try out *WoW,* as it is known, to further my broad research goal of studying
social life on the Internet. In December of 2005, I signed up for an account
with Blizzard Entertainment, the maker of the game, and began to play.
I planned to play for a few months until I knew enough to conduct some
interviews. I didn't expect to like the game—I had played board games as
a child and found them uninteresting. I tried to prevent my own children
from playing video games, which I considered a waste of time.

When I sat down with *World of Warcraft,* I had no idea what to do.
Luckily my son Christopher was home from college for Christmas break.
He helped me create an animated character with which to adventure in
the three-dimensional virtual world. Despite my antigame campaign,
Christopher had played text-based online role-playing games, and, although
he was not familiar with *World of Warcraft,* he seemed to understand basic
game semantics. We set forth on a quest. "Click on the monster and right
click!" he suggested. I obeyed. My frantic clicking produced the salutary

effect of killing the monster (which would soon have killed my character). Such activity seemed inordinately silly, but I was secretly smitten with the beautiful *WoW* graphics and charmed to be a character called a Night Elf.

The moment I began to find *World of Warcraft* truly interesting was when two small icons appeared on the top right portion of my screen. I had not placed them there, nor was I killing monsters; in fact I was relaxing in the woodsy hometown of the Night Elves, Shadowglen. My son explained that another player had caused the icons to appear—they were "buffs," or temporary magic spells to enhance my powers. In that moment I became aware of *other players*. I was not alone in the Night Elves' Garden of Eden but surrounded by real human players who would interact with me. I was touched that another player had given me something for free, without my asking or even having a way to thank him.

My son's brief tutelage ended as he returned to college. Unlike many players, I was not playing with friends or family members who could guide me through the new virtual world. I was a "newbie" (noob, n00b, nub, more derisively) of the first order. I soon learned that I could have thanked the player who buffed me in a couple ways—by typing a message into the chat window or by clicking on his character and typing a command, /ty, which would inform him of my gratitude. I was very happy to know this when I ran out of game money and had to ask a strange player what to do. He promptly gave me some coppers so I could repair my damaged equipment and go forth once more to slay the Webwood spiders lurking in the forest outside the village.

I have given many hours to the study of *World of Warcraft* since the Shadowglen days. I believe *World of Warcraft* is an exemplar of a new means of forming and sustaining human relationships and collaborations through digital technology. While video games might seem a frivolous footnote to modern technology (and video games researchers still get pitying stares from colleagues), the games have penetrated unlikely arenas of human activity, stirring interest in education, business, the military, and even religious organizations. Educators argue that video games have pedagogical value (Gee 2003; Squire 2005; Steinkuehler 2006; Barab et al. 2007; Fields and Kafai 2007; Ang and Zaphiris 2008; Hayes and Games 2008; Polin 2008; Sharritt 2009). Experiments with gamelike environments for work are under way at the world's largest multinational corporations, including Intel, Boeing, Hewlett-Packard, IBM, and Sun Microsystems (Cefkin et al.

2009; Nardi et al. 2009; Yee 2009). Many organizations have applications in *Second Life,* a 3D virtual world in which participants themselves build applications. An article in the *Harvard Business Review* reported research suggesting that people with experience in *World of Warcraft* make better corporate managers (Reeves et al. 2008). The U.S. Army produced and distributed, free on the Internet, a successful multiplayer video game, *America's Army,* designed as a recruiting and public relations tool (Delwiche 2007). DARPA, the research wing of the U.S. Army, funds research in the use of multiplayer games for combat and noncombat applications. Christian evangelists recruit new members through video games such as *America's Army* (Li 2004) and other games. In short, video games have entered the culture.

Some readers will have encountered *WoW* through media accounts that report the unusual, the sensational, the surprising—addicted players, Chinese gold farmers, online marriages, griefers, hackers, gender swappers. While these memes are not without interest, they do not embody the texture of the everyday experiences and emotions of the millions of players who constitute *World of Warcraft.* I will use the vehicle of the ethnographic monograph to provide a perspective on player experience that taps the ordinary, the mundane, the normal, the commonplace in and around *World of Warcraft.*

WoW players will recognize that references to the game belong to a moment in time. *World of Warcraft* is always changing, with software updates that extend the game with new content. The research for the book began in December 2005 and ended on October 11, 2008, when I attended the final day of BlizzCon 2008 (Blizzard's annual conference). I continued to study *WoW,* but BlizzCon marked the completion of the first phase of the research, and it is that which is reported in this book (with a few exceptions, which are noted).

Aims of the Book

For all that has been written about play, it remains a contentious subject. The first aim of the book is to develop an argument about *World of Warcraft* that examines play as active aesthetic experience, drawing on activity theory (Leontiev 1974) and the work of philosopher John Dewey. I am interested

in the peculiarities of human play. Play links us to the upper reaches of the animal kingdom while at the same time generating distinctive cultural constructs. Sports, gambling, and a multitude of games, from mah-jongg to *Monopoly* to *World of Warcraft,* are some of *Homo sapiens'* most curious productions.

Understanding play in its contemporary digital manifestations is a second aim of the book. I argue that video games such as *WoW* are a *new visual-performative medium* enabled, and strongly shaped, by the capacities of digital technology, in particular the execution of digital rules powerful enough to call forth complex worlds of activity. This new medium orients human activity in a stimulating visual environment that makes possible a release of creativity and a sense of empowerment in conditions of autonomy, sociality, and positive reward. The importance and impact of design on human activities undertaken in the visual-performative medium is a key theme.

A third aim of the book is ethnographic reportage—interpreting experiences of playing *World of Warcraft* for those who will never play but wish to understand something of the role of video games in our culture. This aim shapes Part three in particular, which examines topics such as addiction and gender about which I am often asked when describing my work.

The research was carried out in three locales: the virtual world of the game itself; Southern California, where my students and I conducted interviews; and China, where my research assistants and I spent a month observing players in Internet cafes and talking to them about *World of Warcraft.*