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My Life as a Night Elf Priest

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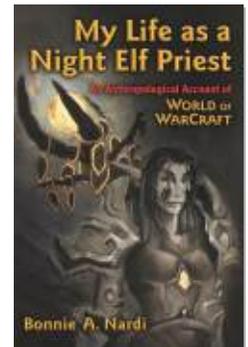
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CHAPTER ONE

What Is *World of Warcraft* and Who Plays It?

Once I got over my initial disorientation in the game, I developed a strong sensation that I had woken up inside an animated fairy tale. I was not just watching and listening though; I played a starring role. *WoW* is a virtual experience like reading a book or watching a movie, but also an active experience like playing a sport. The digital universe couples the richness of the experience of viewing the action in a film or play with the participatory experience of athletics. Many video games are structured around this powerful combination, so perhaps it is not surprising that they have surpassed film in revenue (Bainbridge 2007). Video games have global appeal; some of the most popular titles are from Asia. *World of Warcraft*, produced in California, has more Chinese players than any other national group. *WoW* is played in North America, Europe, Latin America, Asia, Russia, Australia, New Zealand, and elsewhere. It is available in English, two versions of Chinese, Korean, German, French, two versions of Spanish, and Russian.

As someone entirely new to video games when I began the research, I am aware of how foreign they seem to many, even how pointless, simplistic, fatuous. I will attempt to build a picture of the captivation and fascination it is possible to experience in *World of Warcraft*, mindful that the visual allure, and sense of discovery and serendipity that imbue *WoW* play, cannot be captured in descriptive prose. Like Borges's cartographers, one desires to create a map that coincides "point for point" with the richness of the real geography. But that is neither possible nor wise, so I will fall back on a selective portrayal that communicates some, at least, of what it was that got the undergraduates so excited.

A Day in the Life of a Night Elf Priest

To begin, I recount a day in the life of my character Innikka (a pseudonym). She belongs to a “guild” or club of players with whom she plays and socializes. The priest character type in *World of Warcraft* heals players being attacked by monsters or other players, restoring them so that they may defeat their opponents and avoid a trip to the graveyard, the penalty for death. Dead players must run back to the spot where they died to be resurrected.

It is 6:00 a.m. Before facing my emails, I login to *WoW*. I’m checking the stock of a computer character that sells herbs I need for potions produced in the alchemy profession. Dealer Sadaqat, who vends “Potent Potables,” has rock-bottom prices. It’s early, and no one else is around. Sadaqat has dreaming glory, felweed, and netherbloom, as well as some potions I can buy and resell for a profit at the Auction House. I spend about five seconds selecting and purchasing the herbs and logoff.

5:30 p.m. Time for a raid. It’s early in the evening for me, but many people in the guild are on the East Coast, so we have to get moving before it’s too late for them. The raid won’t start until 6:00, but “invites” go out 30 minutes in advance. To make sure I get a spot in the raid, I login promptly.

Raiding is one of the most complex activities in *World of Warcraft*, involving 10 to 40 people who join together to defeat difficult monsters. Careful preparation and tight coordination are necessary. Raiders communicate through *WoW*’s text chat and nearly always use voice chat as well.

I still have fifteen minutes before the raid. I fly into the Terrokar Forest and locate some good fishing spots. In a few minutes I have lots of the Golden Darters needed for the Golden Fish Sticks buff. I cook them up and feel prepared for the raid.

It’s time to head to Serpentshrine Cavern, the site of the raid, for our first attempt at “SSC.” Most of us have read up on the SSC fights in out-of-game forums, blogs, and wikis created and maintained by players. Some of us have watched player-created YouTube videos to get a sense of what lies ahead.

We are nervous and excited. There’s lots of silly banter in the guild chat channel. Players invoke small commands called emotes to dance, flirt, kiss, hug, and execute other amusing actions. I exchange “whispers,” or private

A Player's Bags Carry Their Items: Items in bag slots are labeled with the number of each. A player's gold is displayed; Innikka had 560 gold, 61 silver, and 65 copper at the time the picture was taken.



chats, with several guildmates. We will encounter difficult raid “bosses,” that is, high-level monsters with tricky, powerful abilities. The bosses will “drop” very good “loot”—or treasure—valuable pieces of equipment that empower characters to perform their roles more effectively.

SSC is situated behind an enormous waterfall that players can penetrate only when formally grouped in a raid. We run through the waterfall. Promptly someone is comically killed by the “elevator boss”—the player has dashed into an open elevator shaft and fallen to his death. I have read about the elevator in player descriptions of SSC and step carefully to wait for it to rise to our level.

Once on the elevator, we descend deep into the cavern. Finally we are facing the first “trash mobs,” that is, guards who must be killed on the way to the bosses. (*Mob* is a generic name for monster, derived from *mobile*.) Players call them trash because, while powerful, they rarely yield good treasure. We buff the raid with several life-giving, damage-enhancing, mob-defeating spells and proceed.

We immediately “wipe” on the trash—that is, the whole raid is killed. Everyone runs back from the graveyard for another try. We pull ourselves together and successfully kill the guards.

Now we are at the first boss we will attempt, a creature called the Lurker Below. He lives in a pool and must be fished up. We stand on platforms surrounding his pool. We catch the Lurker on a fishing line and begin battle. The raid erupts into a chaos of loud, frenetic activity. *WoW*'s sound effects layer the roars of the monsters, a mélange of auditory signals associated with player actions, the noises of special events such as explosions, and a musical sound track.

Things are going pretty well until the Lurker issues a “spout,” during which we are supposed to dive off the platforms into the water. Some dive too late and are killed. We try to keep going with a diminished raid but lack the resources to bring down Lurker. We wipe and run back yet again.

After wiping, it takes time to reassemble, rebuff, and discuss what went wrong. In voice chat, the raid leaders tell us what to do and provide assessments of our mistakes. We ask questions and crack jokes. My guild, “Scarlet Raven,” is a “casual raiding guild,” so, while people are intent on performing well, there are no recriminations.

After one more wipe, we are getting the hang of the Lurker. We know when to jump into the water and how to coordinate so the minions he summons will not kill us.

This time the Lurker goes down. The raid is deliriously happy. Through teamwork and personal skill, we have survived the Lurker's deadly spouts, geysers, and water bolts—or at least most of us have. The fallen are raised by the healers. A group screenshot is taken of us surrounding the dead Lurker and will be posted later to the Scarlet Raven website.

We roll virtual dice on the Lurker's loot to see who will win it. Miraculously, I win the Earring of Soulful Meditation, a very fine trinket. We congratulate those who won loot and exult in our first kill in Serpentshrine Cavern.

Now it's time to try Hydross the Unstable, so named because he has lost his mind under the duress of a lengthy imprisonment in SSC. The crazed Hydross has several powerful allies at his behest, which must be quickly dispatched. We get ready for a very different kind of fight. The same cycle of wipes and retries ensues. Finally we defeat Hydross.

It has been an amazing evening. It's 10:00 p.m. for me but 1:00 a.m. for

East Coast guildmates. We must end the raid even though there are more bosses to kill in Serpentshrine Cavern. Guildmates say good night.

After all the excitement, I fly back to my quiet post in Stormspire to resume the vigil of the Potent Potables vendor.

A Short *WoW* Primer

Based on a long line of fantasy themes derived from a variety of sources, including *Lord of the Rings* and its predecessors, *World of Warcraft* is staged in a medieval setting. Players create animated fantasy characters that adventure in a landscape of castles, dungeons, ogres, dragons, and beasts (Fawcett 2006; Tschang 2007). Players battle monsters, amass treasure, conduct business at an auction house, practice crafts such as alchemy and blacksmithing, and seek to improve their characters through the acquisition of ever better weapons and armor. Players start at level 1 and can advance to level 80, in a process known as “leveling,” by slaying monsters and completing quests (minigames) that award “experience points.” The character is seen in the third person, usually from behind.¹

WoW is a game of movement. The game geography is huge. Characters travel on foot or by beast, boat, or air through fields, farms, forests, jungles, deserts, mountains, seas, and other distinctive scenery for which Blizzard artists have won many awards. Players quest to find and slay hundreds of different types of creatures from the game’s “bestiary”—creatures dwelling throughout the varied landscapes of the world.

The construction of the world has strong appeal to the modern consciousness—everything is human scale. No building is more than a few stories high. (Some areas are reached by elevator but are only one or two levels once one arrives.) The objects players wear, wield, win, buy, and sell, including weapons, vials of magical potions, fishing poles, armor, crafting implements such as mining picks, and resources like herbs, cloth, and precious stones, are easily handled by the (virtual) human hand.

WoW provides respite from the incessant advertising which is the backdrop of so much contemporary activity. Most of the Internet can no longer be experienced without a barrage of ads; *WoW* has none. It is restful, even old-fashioned. The only claim on the player’s consciousness is the game itself, allowing the kind of immersion one imagines Victorians attained



Innikka

with their hefty novels into which they could sink for hours of commerce-free entertainment. This focused experience provides a refuge—an “escape,” as players say—from modernity. It is one of the ways in which the game creates its own reality apart from contemporary life, moving the player away from the ordinary into the alternative reality of a fantasy space.

WoW is a *virtual world*—a set of linked activities chosen by the player and carried out within a three-dimensional virtual space.² The goal of most *WoW* activities is to develop a character, enabling it to perform more and more difficult challenges. The orientation toward character development oddly echoes another Victorian meme; Victorians also worked at “character development,” which for them meant striving to improve moral sensibilities. The notion that one’s “character” can be shaped and refined through deliberate activity is a powerful motivational field in which cultures, or sub-cultures, may organize themselves. Many video games take up this theme; Hunter and Lastowka (2004) observed that in games such as *EverQuest*,

Dark Age of Camelot, and *Ultima Online* “the clear goal is to become a more powerful [player].”

WoW researchers are often asked, “But isn’t *WoW* just killing monsters”? Media discourse around video games often centers on questions of violence, so it is a natural question. While my work is not about violence, I want to clarify for those not familiar with *World of Warcraft* that it is not a violent game in the tradition of first-person shooters or certain strategy games in which realistic violence is central to the games’ visceral appeal.³ Killing monsters is an important activity in *WoW*, but it is in some sense an abstraction, a way to keep score. Play theorists observe that play often involves a contest. The Anglo-Saxon *plega* meant game, sport, fight, or battle (Turner 1982). A game requires something to battle against. *WoW* monsters are cartoonish, often silly, and in no way terrifying or realistic. They waddle, many are corpulent and ungainly, they emit gurgling noises when they die—and of course they will soon be back for the next encounter. *WoW* has none of the graphic visceral realism found in other video games such as blood splatters or frightening weaponry.⁴

Taylor’s comment (2003a) about violence in *EverQuest* could also describe *World of Warcraft*:

While combat in the game is on the one hand quite extreme (you kill monsters and potentially other players) and on the other also muted (there is graphically no blood or gore), my sense is that the enjoyment of violence takes place at an abstract level. It is closely tied to the skills involved to take down a mob, the precise timings and movements required, the skill of playing your class well in a battle situation, the adrenaline rush involved with a fight and the general ability to even engage in this type of activity . . . In this way the actual fight is as much an opportunity to demonstrate the valued qualities of game mastery as anything.

Players can create multiple characters. Ducheneaut et al. (2009) found an average of eight characters per *WoW* account. Usually one is the “main” character and the rest “alts” or alternative characters. Eight characters may sound like a lot, but many players focus on their main and play other characters only briefly to try them out or occasionally for a change.

Players may join guilds—named groups with officers and a chat channel—so they will have others with whom to play. In the opening vignette

in the Prologue, Innikka's guild is having a meeting. Guilds range in size from a small handful to several hundred players (Ducheneaut et al. 2006). A character can belong to only one guild. Many players are guildless at the lower levels (and some beyond). Guilds become more important as players gain interest in certain of the more challenging activities in the game or in leveling quickly by grouping with others. Officers control guild membership. They can induct new members as well as remove players. In the vignette, Loro and Slams are guild officers trying to move the guild toward more organized activities to engage new game experiences.

Much sociable chat takes place in the guild channel. Most is game related although players may remark on their local weather, mention that they have a test to study for, or supply other small details revealing something of their personal lives. *World of Warcraft* is not a chat room, however, and personal information in the guild channel is limited. Some guilds have websites with forums and player profiles, some with photos and personal information, so players may get to know quite a bit about each other. Many players know each other in real life; however, they speak infrequently about their real lives in public chat channels. Players get to know more about one another through whispers. A feeling of intimacy may develop, but it remains private; the guild as a social unit is devoted to the game itself along with a lot of jokey banter.

Players may maintain a "friends list" that includes players inside and outside the guild. When a friend logs on or off, the system notifies the player with a small sound and a text message.

Parties and raids are temporary groups formed to accomplish a goal such as a quest or raid. They are composed of players with different, interdependent skills. Players choose a "class"—priest, paladin, mage, warlock, rogue, hunter, shaman, druid, warrior, or death knight—each of which has its own distinctive skills. Skills are divided into *damage* classes, whose powerful weapons and spells kill the monsters; heavily armored *tank* classes which use their abilities to gain the attention of the monsters to keep them from attacking others; and *healing* classes which restore players as they are attacked. Healers must ensure the survival of tanks, without whom the group will almost certainly perish (see Taylor 2006).

WoW vernacular names the various groupings with a masculine adjective: 5-man parties and 10-, 20-, 25-, and 40-man raids. Raids are conducted in "dungeons"—elaborate fantasy structures such as a school for

necromancy, a decrepit mansion, the underground control room of a vast reservoir.

Parties and raids have their own chat channels. *WoW* has several chat channels, including general chat which broadcasts to a fairly large geographic area in the game, “yelling” which reaches a smaller local area, and “say” for a small local area.

Characters are divided into races. Medievally accented, *WoW* races are rooted in earlier games such as the paper and pencil *Dungeons and Dragons* and Blizzard’s *Warcraft* series. Race is largely cosmetic (although each race has a few abilities players may deem useful). Players are divided into two “factions,” each with its own races. The Alliance races—Night Elf, Gnome, Human, Dwarf, and Draenei—are generally considered more genial. The Horde faction is a bit scruffier; the Orc, Tauren, Troll, Undead, and Blood Elf races are (except for Blood Elves), rougher, bigger, or more depraved (e.g., Undead cannibalize). Selecting a race is an important decision; players will be looking at their characters a lot. Players consider some races ugly and some beautiful. Ducheneaut et al. (2009) reported that players were very aware of the looks of their characters, noting that “hair matters” and that players carefully chose among interesting features such as horns or facial tattoos (see also Noël et al. 2009). Gender is also an important cosmetic attribute with implications discussed in chapter 8.

The core battle experience in *World of Warcraft* is killing computer-generated monsters. But another kind of contest is popular among a segment of the population—player vs player. In PvP, players can attack and kill the characters of other players.

This style of play is abhorred by some and adored by others. Blizzard thus created two types of servers: “normal” or PvE (player vs environment) servers, where PvP is not permitted except in limited areas, and PvP servers where players can be attacked by other players in most (but not all) of the game geography. Players choose their server type when creating a character. In PvP, players enjoy “pwning” opponents, that is, defeating them, in heated contests. The term *pwn* (pronounced “pone”) comes from *own*, slang for *defeat*, and is said to have originated when a player mistakenly typed a “p” instead of an “o,” the two being adjacent on the QWERTY keyboard. (Pwning is possible in many contexts, not just PvP.)

PvP increases contingency, ratchetting the game experience up a level—players must be constantly aware of surrounding players and ready to do

battle (or flee) at any moment. Nonplayer characters (NPCs) are predictable and can usually be avoided if the player is not ready to fight. But human players bring cunning, sneakiness, and what I can only call orneriness to the game. Players trying to complete quests may be attacked and killed, slowing their progress. “Ganking” is the practice of attacking players at a lower level than oneself (and hence easy to kill) or attacking at sensitive times such as when a player is trying to complete a difficult quest or is almost dead from a fight. An extreme form of ganking is “corpse camping,” wherein a player kills another player and remains by the corpse, “camping” it, killing the player after he resurrects and is in a weakened condition (sometimes repeatedly). These actions are perfectly legal in the game; the prescribed remedy is to get a posse of guildmates and friends to kill the ganker.

A third type of server is devoted to role-playing in which characters speak in a kind of humorous, ersatz Ye Olde English patois (see Kavetsky 2008). I have conducted no research on these servers, and they are much less popular than PvE or PvP servers. However, they have their devotees and are said to attract mature, serious players.

MMORPGs and Virtual Worlds

Another descriptor for *World of Warcraft* is MMORPG or massively multiplayer online role-playing game. Chess is an early example of a game whose pieces are humanlike characters instead of ciphers (as in checkers). A bit of backstory accompanies the chess pieces, but chess is a strategy game, not one in which players develop a unique character with a particular role, as in role-playing games. In role-playing games (whether pencil and paper, board games, or online), players choose a single character type. In *WoW* they choose one of ten types called “classes” and develop the character as they wish.

MMORPGs are role-playing games with hundreds, thousands, or millions of players. However, the acronym is awkward and not entirely accurate. *World of Warcraft* is a social world as much as a game. It is similar in some ways to environments such as *Second Life* in which participants create characters and activities in a three-dimensional virtual world (see Klastrup 2008).

I will refer to environments such as *World of Warcraft* and *Second Life* as

virtual worlds. In these worlds, participants (1) create an animated character, (2) move the character in a three-dimensional space, (3) have means for communicating with others, and (4) access a rich array of digital objects. As elsewhere, the culture of a virtual world is enacted through human conversation and designed objects that mediate activity (Leontiev 1974; Vygotsky 1986). Virtual worlds perhaps feel more authentically like cultures than chat rooms because of the elaboration of space and objects.

Who Plays *World of Warcraft*?

While in a long line to purchase memorabilia at BlizzCon, an older man and a younger woman stood in front of me. The man (probably recognizing a familiar life form) turned around and said in a friendly way, “What characters do you play?” We got to talking, and he turned out to be the woman’s father. They both played, as did the man’s son. The man said he played “so I have something to talk to my kids about.” The woman had met her husband in *WoW*. They played together casually at first, then started talking in voice chat, then arranged a face-to-face meeting, although they lived across the country from one other. Things went well, and they got married, had a baby, and seemed to be living happily ever after. Baby was in the hotel with hubby and grandma, who also played, so that mom and granddad could have some free time at the conference.

By the time I got to BlizzCon I was not surprised to hear this story. But when I began my research, I assumed that the stereotype of the video gamer as self-absorbed young male with few social skills and little interest in anything beyond gaming was probably more or less true. (“A fat guy living in his mother’s basement” is one satirical stereotype.) I was pleased to run into a much more interesting mix of people. My demographic data slowly accumulated as I got to know players in my guilds and as I chatted informally with players in “pickup groups” or “pugs” (ad hoc groups much like pickup basketball games formed for questing or raiding).

The *WoW* player population had considerable variance in age, gender, and social class. One of my online friends was a carpenter who worked in a factory making windows. Another was an intensive care nurse. An older guildmate had multiple disabling chronic illnesses. He took many medications, some of which kept him awake. *World of Warcraft* was a major part

of his social life, and he played at odd hours, day and night. A former guild master in Scarlet Raven was a graduate student in chemistry.

A student we interviewed in San Diego described the demographic diversity of the 40-man raids he attended.

You've got forty men—well, men in general, but they have women, and children there too, and it's pretty fun. You have a group of people trying to work for the same purpose.

No solid demographic information is publicly available for *World of Warcraft*. The problems of sampling 11 million players playing in seven languages and many more national cultures are daunting. Yee's self-reported data, collected on websites outside the game with a sample of 2,000 players, indicated about 21 percent female players (Yee 2005). My guess is that this figure is probably roughly correct for North American servers but almost certainly wrong for China, where my counts in Internet cafes showed about 10 percent female players. There are no public data of any kind for European, Korean, Latin American, and other players of which I am aware. My goal is not to pin down precise numbers (which is impossible) but to suggest that *World of Warcraft* is more open to females and older players than games such as first-person shooters (see Fullerton et al. 2007) and that *WoW* is a virtual world in which different social classes rub elbows.

How does one determine age, gender, and social class in a virtual fantasy world? Players themselves make this information available. The Scarlet Raven website had a photo gallery, so gender and approximate age were obvious for players who posted pictures. When players spoke on voice chat, gender was revealed. Age was trickier as voice quality was not always clear and age can only be approximately guessed through voice. Social class was often revealed as people used class-specific grammar (for example, uttering phrases such as "I seen the mob"). Photographs on the Scarlet Raven website showed homes and furnishings typical of particular social classes. Occupation is a good indicator of social class, and players often mentioned their occupations in chat or on the guild website. Smoking and social class are correlated (Jha et al. 2006). Players often paused for smoke breaks.

My sense is that the statistically modal player in *World of Warcraft* is a male in his twenties (see Yee 2005). But statistics do not reveal the nuances of the social atmosphere created by the presence of male and female, older

and younger players. Scarlet Raven had a couple of young teens whose parents played in the guild. Occasionally the teens would make inappropriate remarks. One would often leave in the middle of a group activity when he had something else to do. While these events were annoying, it was part of the culture of the guild to tolerate the young people. Some of the older members such as an architect and a real estate agent were stabilizing influences, sometimes making calming remarks to defuse a tactless chat comment or ward off misinterpretation. The guild leaders were in their twenties and thirties, and one in his forties. They did not hesitate to remove players who behaved inappropriately. One evening a young male player typed the URL of a porn site into the chat line. The next night I saw him removed from the guild as someone had reported the incident to an officer. Scarlet Raven was far from a squeaky clean guild, but promulgating porn was outside its boundaries.

The presence of female players mitigated rough masculine discourse, toning down, although certainly not eliminating, profanity, homophobic discourse, and sexist comments. Language was negotiated. One evening a female player objected to a male player's liberal use of the F word in voice chat because her young children were nearby. The male player countered that he always talked that way and could not change. His girlfriend, who was also playing, said, "Come on, Tellison. You don't talk like that around my mother." Tellison managed to express himself more conservatively that evening. However, the dominance of male players statistically, and in terms of masculine rhetorical style, was assumed and protected (a topic explored further in chapter 8). When I first spoke on voice chat after joining a new guild, the raid leader said, "Oh, this is a girl." I said jokingly, "Yes, this is a girl, you have to be nice." He shot back, "No, we don't!"

Many players commented on the mix of players as a positive aspect of the game. A student at the University of California, San Diego, said:

And, you know, as far as game play goes, like, there are people with different backgrounds that come together. Yeah, that really amazes me. I don't know what else to say. I mean, if I go on anymore it might sound corny, you know. So, yeah, but it's just that feeling.

Despite the reality of the diverse population playing *World of Warcraft*, the stereotype of the lonely gamer persists. I have been playing *World of*

Warcraft so long that I am startled when people ask about the lonely players who are cut off from “real” social life. (See Ducheneaut and Moore, 2004; Ducheneaut et al. 2006; Nardi and Harris 2006; Steinkuehler and Williams 2006; Williams et al. 2006; Bainbridge 2007; DiGiuseppe and Nardi 2007; Nardi et al. 2007; Lindtner et al. 2008 on social aspects of *WoW*.) In fact, I was inspired to write this book at a New Year’s Eve party a few years ago when I found myself trying to explain multiplayer video games to my puzzled middle-aged neighbors in Half Moon Bay, California (where we spend vacations). Most have PhDs or law degrees and are generally well informed. But they had encountered only media stereotypes about games centered on themes such as addiction and lonely kids with no friends.

Many players played with friends and/or family members (see Taylor 2003b; Nardi and Harris 2006; Peterson 2007). The game was an extension of their existing social lives. This was true in both North America and China. Nightflower, a 53-year-old mother of seven, explained in an online interview:

my oldest son just started playing last week and i am thrilled! he lives in NC [North Carolina] and we haven’t been close for a while . . . but now we talk a lot more ig and irl [in-game and in real life].

One player, who played with two siblings and a nephew, said that they used a voice chat program to talk while they played. It was “like all being in the same room playing for a few hours a day.” He had a brother who played with his wife and their 9- and 14-year-old daughters, re-creating the family through the characters. In one of my guilds, a mother of two who homeschooled her children used *WoW* as part of the curriculum to study typing and math. A married couple I interviewed played together and had chosen the character names Toast and Jam to identify themselves as linked. At BlizzCon I met a woman who proudly said she played “with three generations”—herself, her teenage daughter, and her mother. As will be discussed in chapter 9, in China people often played together in Internet cafes with friends from their immediate neighborhood.

Not only do people draw on existing social connections to explore virtual worlds, the virtual world itself is a stimulus to real world interaction. *WoW* was often a topic of offline conversation for people who played together and even for those who played but not together. One player said

that he had gotten his brother to start playing, “. . . and, as a result we have new things to talk about, like in-game stuff.” Another player, introduced to the game by his brother who was several years older, said, “Now we finally have something to talk about.”

Study participants commented frequently in the interviews about the importance of socializing. A student at the University of California, San Diego, said:

Well, I'd have to say, you know, getting with people, grouping, following the pack. You kind of get that—you get a nice feeling, like you're part of something. That's what it is.

Another player said:

It's about interaction, it's about hooking up with people, it's about fighting with people. It's about—you know, that's where you build your game from. It's a people game.

And:

This game is like, you know, real people, real talking human beings, you know. We can process, we can talk, we can think. So, you know, mostly it's about talking with people, hanging with people. You kind of get that—it's kind of like traveling the world without traveling the world, basically.

Those who come to the game on their own have ways of meeting new people in an open environment in which players expect to be approached by strangers (Nardi and Harris 2006; see also Brown and Bell 2004). The following chat log shows portions of an hour's play between my priest and a hunter, Delbarth, who formed a party. We approached a cave at the same time. I was on the quest *Insane Druids*, which required slaying Taneel Darkwood, Uthil Mooncall, and Mavoris Cloudsbreak. Delbarth and I switched from local area chat (the nearby vicinity) to party chat (just those in the formal party) at about 21:38.

1/8 20:59:41.690 To Delbarth: are you doing insane druids?

1/8 21:02:13.481 Delbarth says: do you want to party up?

1/8 21:02:20.599 Delbarth has invited you to join a group.
 1/8 21:02:50.556 Delbarth says: what point in the quest are you at?
 1/8 21:03:02.604 Innikka says: starting
 1/8 21:03:12.441 Innikka says: how about you?
 1/8 21:03:24.256 Delbarth says: I have killed two of them —need taneel still
 1/8 21:03:30.935 Innikka says: ok
 1/8 21:03:32.444 Delbarth says: lets give it a go :)
 1/8 21:03:35.112 Innikka says: k

[many monsters are slain, including, finally, Taneel]
 1/8 21:38:11.186 [Party] Innikka: ok got taneel!
 1/8 21:38:11.809 [Party] Delbarth: oh yeah!
 1/8 21:38:37.388 [Party] Delbarth: I am done with the quest, but you want to keep going?
 1/8 21:38:44.612 [Party] Innikka: yes!
 [several monsters later]
 1/8 21:41:41.345 [Party] Delbarth: you ok with mana?
 1/8 21:41:46.243 [Party] Innikka: yes
 1/8 21:43:53.959 [Party] Delbarth: DING
 1/8 21:44:00.636 [Party] Delbarth: 30th - wooh!
 1/8 21:44:05.665 [Party] Innikka: hurray!

[yet more monsters]
 1/8 21:54:00.856 [Party] Delbarth: shall we keep going?
 1/8 21:54:06.858 [Party] Innikka: yes

[Innikka gets one more of the monsters she needs]
 1/8 21:55:32.578 [Party] Delbarth: thanks for the healing :)
 1/8 21:56:46.311 [Party] Delbarth: I need to stop for the night - my wife is getting ancy :)
 1/8 21:57:03.302 [Party] Innikka: ok. thanks a lot for helping. and congrats on 30
 1/8 21:57:20.881 [Party] Delbarth: thanks for the help, as well - can't do that dungeon solo, for sure!

The players I encountered had interests beyond *World of Warcraft*. I knew

two players who bowled weekly. Members of Scarlet Raven participated in sports, including skiing, football, deep-sea diving, and river rafting. Others enjoyed offroading, martial arts, photography, international travel, and amateur theatricals. One player built a truck. Another was a professional wrestler who posted his (terrifying) YouTube wrestling videos on the website. Another played in a rock band. One player posted a picture of himself with the caption “Here I am in the middle of mixing mud for laying concrete block at a Habitat House in Georgia.” Another served communion at his local county jail, which he jokingly referred to as the “hoosegow.” He was involved in outreach activities for female prisoners. Parents in Scarlet Raven put up pictures of their children on the guild website. The general impression I had of many *WoW* players was that they were active people looking for intense, engaging, online experiences that complemented similarly engaging offline activities.

In addition to people with many varied interests, *World of Warcraft* also attracted parents whose lives were circumscribed by shift work and/or young children. I met several young fathers at home tending sleeping children while their wives worked a shift. One of my guildmates sometimes left for several minutes to care for her young children who were watching television or playing together but needed a snack or other attention. As in many online communities, *WoW* had its share of people with disabilities for whom the game provided sociality, challenge, and variety difficult to attain in other venues.

One of the most striking things about *World of Warcraft* was the way it brought together social classes for authentic shared activity. I realized how limited my own social universe was when I began to perceive that I was spending many pleasant hours with people very different than I. One player was a military wife whose husband had been to Iraq three times on the front lines. Another lived on what he called a “hamburger farm,” raising cattle in Missouri. Many players worked weekend or late-night shifts. One would log on telling us he smelled of grease from working in his brother’s restaurant. A player who had been fired from Home Depot complained that his manager did not appreciate him even though he “did all the heavy lifting.” This comment made me feel a little guilty since I use the expression “doing the heavy lifting” jokingly. For my guildmate, the words were not an arch jest but expressed a difficult physical reality. Through voice chat, I experienced varied North American regional accents (those so care-

fully cleansed from the mass media) from places like East Texas, Alabama, West Virginia, and Quebec.

A 21-year-old psychology major one of my research assistants interviewed commented on the diversity of players in his guild and how they had become skilled at designing and maintaining his guild's website.

And most of them [don't do anything technical] for their living; most of them it's just random, you know, MAE [mainstream American English] teachers, and you've got all these crazy, you know, like, bus drivers. People from different backgrounds basically, just doing this amazing thing and they're not even computer technicians. They have no knowledge whatsoever, they just, you know, read the website and they come up with a really cool look or like a really flashy guild forum.

I found the following guild description on the Internet, posted on a guild website.

Our guild is . . . growing daily as people see who and what we are: A group of players who casual Raid with a small core Elite Raid Group. We are all working class, have kids, family or other RL [real life] stuff to distract us from WoW. Afkkids is common for us and no one complains, even when we have to AFK 20 minutes as someone has to put their Kids to bed.

(AFK means away from keyboard. /afk returns a message to anyone who sends a message that the player is AFK.)

The glue that brought people together was the game itself. As a guild master in Scarlet Raven remarked on the guild website:

Basically, Scarlet Raven is one big extended family. Some of us barely know each other. Some of us know each other in real life. Some of us know each other only in game. Some of us have spent years playing together. The one thing we all have in common is that we enjoy WoW and although we may sometimes stumble as a player, as a guild, even as a real life person, what makes Scarlet Raven a success is that we get back up, work out a solution, and we push onwards to the next obstacle. All while maintaining an enjoyable balance of gaming, community, and everything in between.

Some guilds were built around shared characteristics such as a religion or sexual orientation. There were Christian guilds, gay guilds, location-based guilds, family guilds, military guilds, guilds of coworkers, and guilds of professional colleagues. Such guilds tailored play to suit their values. Christian guilds, for example, usually requested that players avoid foul language (such avoidance not being the norm in *World of Warcraft*). While *WoW* has a profanity filter, even with the filter on players still see messages such as “that was f@#%\$* stupid.” In Christian guilds, no player ever need see such a message, at least not in guild or private chat. A list of Christian guilds at the CGAlliance website (CGAlliance n.d.) included evocative guild names such as God’s Humble Servants, Mustard Seed Conspiracy, Carriers of the Cross, Servants of Faith, WWJD, The Forgiven, The Narrow Path, and Troop Agape.

A spoof at a widely linked website that pokes fun at fundamentalist Christians satirized Christian gamers and the lonely gamer stereotype:

I think the reason so many people are open to hearing about Jesus in the World of Warcraft is because the majority of people who play the game are lonely kids who don’t have any friends. I doubt any of them play sports so you can pretty much guess that there are lots of gay boys and fat little pale-faced Wiccan girls on the servers who hate themselves and escape into virtual characters so they don’t have to deal with their pathetic lives. When they hear that someone loves them, even if it is just the Lord Jesus Christ, they always want to hear more! (LandoverBaptist n.d.)

The spoof playfully twists the characterization of gamers as isolated losers seeking solace in a video game. As more diverse populations take up video games, the notion of the lonely gamer, and games as the last refuge of the socially unfit, becomes parody, satire. My data, and that of others, suggest the fundamental wrongheadedness of the stereotype; instead of a withdrawal into fantasy worlds, we see the extrusion of the worlds into ordinary life as family and friends play together, as players gather in Internet cafes, and as they meet and socialize with others online.