My Life as a Night Elf Priest

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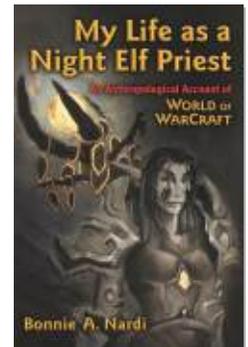Published by University of Michigan Press

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An Ethnographic Investigation of *World of Warcraft*

When I began my study, I had no hypotheses or precise research questions. Unlike research in most academic disciplines, where investigation proceeds according to a scientific procedure involving hypothesis generation and testing, ethnography moves in a "go with the flow" pattern that attempts to follow the interesting and the unexpected as they are encountered in the field. I initiated the research with a desire to satisfy a deeply felt urge of the cultural anthropologist—to journey to a foreign land, to discover and experience the strangeness of a new culture, to find out what the natives are doing and what they think about what they are doing. The impetus to discovery (from the point of view of the discoverer, of course) has fueled anthropology at least since Henry Schoolcraft wrote accounts of Native American tribes 150 years ago. Schoolcraft was the first to systematically record the poetry, legends, and lore of indigenous cultures from Minnesota to the Eastern Seaboard. Longfellow based "The Song of Hiawatha" on Schoolcraft's publications. As Schoolcraft (1856/1990) wrote in a dedication to Longfellow:

> Greece and Rome, England and Italy, have so long furnished . . . the field of poetic culture that it is, at least, refreshing to find, both in theme and metre, something new.

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. The blockage created by diminished opportunities to study cultures untouched by cosmopolitan markets and states has left contemporary anthropology somewhat unsettled. It is not surprising, then, that some turn to what appear to be new cultural forms emerging in virtual worlds. These social milieux offer up a chance to cast an anthropological gaze on fresh sets of natives and their exotic ways (e.g., Miller and Slater 2000; Wilson and Peterson 2002; Golub 2007, 2009; Williams 2007; Boellstorff 2008; Ito 2008; Malaby 2009; Pearce 2009).

Once the anthropologist has located some strangers in a strange land, how does she proceed? Simply by going down the rabbit hole; there are no formulaic plans to follow. As anthropologist Marilyn Strathern wrote:

> Ethnography is . . . the deliberate attempt to generate more data than the researcher is aware of at the time of collection . . . Rather than devising research protocols that will purify the data in advance of analysis, the anthropologist embarks on a participatory exercise which yields materials for which analytical protocols are often devised after the fact. (2004)

As an example of this style of data collection, I have amassed thousands of pages of chat logs recorded with a game function, /chatlog, which creates a file with a record of all chat in the chat window. I do not always know what I am going to do with the logs, but when a question begins to simmer I have rich data to consult.

The "participatory exercise" of which Strathern spoke is referred to in anthropology as "participant-observation." The ethnographer observes the culture in which he is situated but also *participates* to varying degrees. In studying *World of Warcraft,* my practice tilted toward the participant end of participant-observation. It would be impossible to penetrate the game without becoming engaged as a player.

Strathern's commentary builds on the history of anthropology, a discipline devoted to generating deep understandings of human activity and the cultures in which it is embedded. Such understandings require lengthy engagement with social groups and generally involve a good deal of qualitative data. Strathern pointed to the "generation of more data than the researcher is aware of at the time of collection." Anthropologists collect an abundance of materials: texts, audio and video recordings, observations, and any and all relevant artifacts. We attend to important events but also

slavishly observe the everyday, the mundane, the boring (although it is not boring to us). People, objects, and events that a journalist would pass over as lacking newsworthiness we find deeply interesting. Since understandings of a culture develop as we collect data, we often cannot make sense of the data until we have "grown up" in the culture at least partially, gaining enough sense to analyze the materials we have accumulated. A journalist, by contrast, must immediately turn out a "story" with coherence and interest. Anthropologists take time to sink into a culture.

Most anthropological fieldwork requires a budget for foreign travel and the necessity to leave home. It often requires living under difficult circumstances. The cost of entering a virtual world is very low—in the case of *World of Warcraft* 50 dollars for the game CDs and 14 dollars a month for the subscription. No research grants or struggles with a foreign language were necessary to initiate the research. Nor was there a need to cope with disturbing food, large insects, filth, dangerous diseases, or homesickness. My entry point to the field site was a computer on my dining room table where I sat in a comfortable chair and played for many hours. And yet this fieldwork was nearly as immersive as the fieldwork I conducted for my postdoctoral research in Western Samoa or Papua New Guinea, where I accompanied my husband for his doctoral research. I typically played about 20 hours a week. I read fewer novels and slept a bit less. In addition to game play, I read my guild's website nearly every day and spent considerable time reading about *World of Warcraft* on the Internet.

Comforts of home notwithstanding, I grew curious about the largest group of *WoW* players—the Chinese. I traveled to Beijing for a month in August 2007 (no need to suffer: excellent food and a vibrant city) to investigate play in China. *World of Warcraft* was very prominent in the Chinese gaming scene.

Silvia Lindtner, a graduate student, assisted, conducting interviews in both Beijing and Shanghai with the help of a Chinese American assistant, Jui Dai. He Jing and Wenjing Liang, graduate students in sociology and anthropology at Peking University, collaborated with us, providing translation, analysis, and cultural interpretation. In the United States, I conducted interviews with the assistance of two undergraduate students, Nicholas DiGiuseppe and Tony Vu. Vu conducted interviews in the San Diego area and DiGiuseppe in Irvine. Justin Harris, a graduate student, conducted interviews and in-game observations. Stella Ly, a UCI employee, conducted

observations in her guild. Yong Ming Kow, a graduate student, conducted interviews in China and North America on players who write software modifications. Trina Choontanom and Rubin Singh, undergraduate students at the University of California, Irvine, contributed to the research with studies of player customization. With these students, I have generated around 200 formal interviews resulting in thousands of pages of transcripts, as well as participant-observations from our various points of view.

I know far less of play in China than North America. General observations about *World of Warcraft* reflect North American practice unless noted. Most of what I have to say about China is in chapter 9. I sometimes use a quote from a Chinese interview if it expresses a sentiment common to China and North America.

My research methods were the standard methods of anthropology: interviews, observations, participant-observation, informal conversations, and document analysis. Most of the interviews were conducted face-to-face; I find I learn more when I sit down with someone for an unhurried conversation. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. Some interviews were conducted online. The interviews utilized a fixed set of questions, but, like most ethnographic interviews, they opportunistically followed the contours of the conversation. If the study participant said something interesting, the topic was pursued. I also read many *WoW*-related websites, blogs, forums, wikis, and news articles and watched *WoW*-related videos.

How does an anthropologist go about describing and analyzing a field site? There are two strategies. The first is through the application of theory. In this book I analyze *World of Warcraft* using activity theory and the closely related ideas of John Dewey. The second strategy is the accretion of a multitude of details that impart a sense of the everyday texture of experience in a culture. I present the details of the game in descriptions of the game itself, in specific episodes of activity, and through the words of players themselves.

An important part of my methodology in studying *World of Warcraft* was participant-observation. My primary guild, Scarlet Raven, was home to Innikka. Scarlet Raven comprised a diverse group of people including engineers, programmers, students, retail clerks, restaurant workers, a real estate agent, an architect, a truck driver, a machinist, traveling salespeople, a worker at a health spa, a commercial pilot, a bartender, a firefighter, an emergency medical technician, a stocker at a big box store, a city bus driver,

a man who drove a billboard on a truck through a large city, and many others. There were about 200 people in the guild. Most were male, but about 20 percent were female (guild membership fluctuated). Female members included graduate students, a chef, a receptionist, a veterinarian, and a young girl who played with her brother and cousin.

A second guild, Terror Nova (its real name), on the Eitrigg server, was composed of people with a connection to games research. Participation in Terror Nova helped me keep up with research and was an occasion to play purely for fun. It was not a site of research. The third guild, which I will call The Derelict (a pseudonym), was a small guild of primarily working-class people, military personnel, and students. Scarlet Raven and Terror Nova were raiding guilds, where players took the game seriously and explored high-end content. They used tools that measure player performance and maintained a competitive atmosphere. The Derelict, by contrast, was a guild with limited raiding. I played there for several months to get a sense of dynamics in a small guild. In December 2008, my own family formed a small guild, the Hoodoos, on the Anatheron server for pwnage and family bonding.

Playing in several guilds was enormously time consuming (but fun!). Innikka was always busy, though my other characters led more circumscribed virtual lives. I did not participate in a "hardcore" raiding guild enforcing a strict schedule of required raiding, so even during the most intense periods of play, I maintained flexibility.

All names referring to guilds, guild members, and characters (except Terror Nova and the Hoodoos) are pseudonyms. All screenshots are from my research in North America and China, or from the Hoodoos, unless noted.

Scarlet Raven, on a North American server, was composed of members primarily from the United States and Canada but also Scotland and Australia. Despite time differences, the Scots and Australians managed to join in many guild activities and to serve in leadership roles. The Canadian presence was strong, as several guild leaders were from both the English- and French-speaking parts of Canada. The Australians and Scots joined Scarlet Raven through North American friends with whom they enjoyed playing.

My guildmates were incurious about my research. I told them about it, conducted short interviews online with some members, and posted mes-
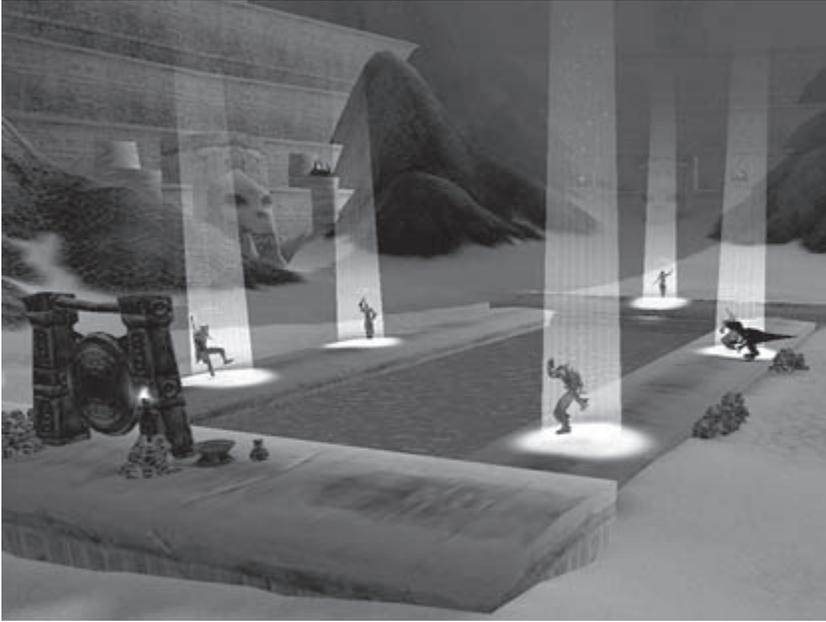
The Hoodoos Visit Zul'Farrak

sages on the guild website. I did not meet any guild members offline. My research was not salient in my guild interactions. I hope making this point goes some way toward answering the question anthropologists are often asked: are you perturbing the culture you are studying by your very presence? As far as I can tell, I have caused virtually no perturbations in *World of Warcraft* apart from stimulating some players to reflect a bit more on their play experiences as a result of having been interviewed. I can identify no risks the research posed.

One of the first things an ethnographic investigation requires is finding a way to enter a new culture. In *WoW* that meant finding a guild since my interest was in social life. Landing a spot in a good guild takes some time if a player is not playing with friends or family. As a low-level, unguilded player, it is common to receive invitations to join guilds as they seek new members. Guilds want to expand to replace players who have moved to other guilds or left the game or to balance teams. I accepted my first invitation at around level 20. I spent a few weeks in the guild but did not feel much of a connection to its members. When a personable young player

with whom I had been chatting issued me a guild invitation, I left my guild and joined his. Loro headed a wonderful guild that had several female players, including a social worker, a journalist from the Philippines, and an elementary school teacher, as well as vibrant personalities of both genders. We had a huge amount of fun PvPing, throwing guild parties, and convening guild meetings in which players humorously subverted Loro's efforts to conduct serious guild business.

As so often happens in *WoW* guilds, interpersonal conflict, i.e., drama, reared its ugly head. One day Loro disappeared without a word. The schoolteacher took over but then broke up with her boyfriend who had gotten her into the game, and left *WoW.* The guild sadly disbanded.

After that guild came a third, in which again I did not make a good connection to the players. Loro, meanwhile, was still around and had been scouting guilds. He joined Scarlet Raven and got the officers to invite me. More drama surrounding Loro ensued, and he left Scarlet Raven (and then the server). But I found Scarlet Raven an excellent group of people with whom to play and stayed for two years.

Scarlet Raven was a little older and more mature than many guilds. "Mature" is a relative term; you had to be 18 to be in the guild. Even this restriction was only a rule of thumb, and the guild had some younger members who were the children or relatives of older members.

Many guild members were parents with small children. It was not unusual for game play to stop as a player settled an infant who had awakened or took time out to bandage a skinned knee. Part of the guild ethos was that members had real lives, so such actions were to be tolerated politely and patiently. In hardcore guilds, this would not be the case. Many Scarlet Raven members were professionals who traveled; they had little time for play when away and were not always available for group activities—again something that would not be possible in a hardcore guild (see Taylor 2003b; Malone 2007).

The following quote, from a discussion on the Scarlet Raven website, gives a sense of the kinds of materials anthropologists deploy to communicate understandings about a culture. (Spelling and grammar will be unchanged when I quote from websites and chats.)

Windsong: Before I got WoW, I had a lot of fun with my PS2, Xbox, Gamecube, and PC games. I loved checking out the latest games, and I

played lots of RTS [real time strategy games] like Dawn of War and Battle
for Middle Earth. Since WoW, I ain't bought a damn thing. Battle for
Middle earth has both a sequel out now, and an expansion coing out xmas,
and i won't buy either. I love Neverwinter Nights 1, had all expansions and
tons of downloaded content. I won't buy the new one either. Other games
are enticing, but in WoW what you do is persistent. It stays around. You
can share your achievements with others. I mean, I heard that Oblivion was
a simply awesome game . . . but I can't see the point anymore of playing a
game where you increase level, get new cool looking armor and weapons
that do neat stuff and you play your game on your own.

Here, I can not only show off my neat new gear that I can use now that I
leveled yadda yadda, but I can use it to help your character through a tough
[fight], and have a shared experience. The multiplayer experience really is
the reason I can't stop playing this game.

Windsong was a reflective, articulate player. He posted regularly on
the guild website. He did not "speak for" other players but expressed what
I have heard dozens of players express in varying ways. Moreover, this text
was addressed to guild members, not to me as an anthropologist.

Methodologically, there was not a great deal of difference between my
work on *World of Warcraft* and my previous work. The ethnography involved
considerable face-to-face contact in interviews with players and observa-
tions of players in homes, dorms, and Internet cafes, so it was not purely
virtual. My goals were to understand the natives and try to make sense of
their activities, as in any ethnography.

One difference in studying *WoW* was that the research inclined toward
the *participant* end of participant-observation. I learned to play the game
well enough to participate in a raiding guild. I looked just like any other
player. For many practical purposes, I *was* just another player. I could not
have studied raiding guilds without playing as well as at least an average
player and fully participating in raids. By contrast, when I was walking
around villages in Papua New Guinea or Western Samoa, I was obviously
an outsider whose identity required explanation. When I investigated tech-
nological practices in a neurosurgery operating room, I donned scrubs, sat
in the operating room, and looked like a doctor but, thankfully, was not
given the opportunity to remove any brain tumors! Online, my *WoW* char-
acter appeared as any character, and I was a full participant in game activi-

ties. Pearce (2009) suggested the term *participant-engagement* to describe this style of work in which the researcher is deeply immersed in native practices.

Blending in, however, is not necessarily characteristic of research in virtual worlds; it does not distinctly identify "digital ethnography." In research I conducted in *Second Life* with IBM, my participation as a researcher was made clear to others to the point of having a halo over my character's head to identify my special status. Boellstorff (2008) and Pearce (2009) were identified as researchers in the virtual worlds they studied. It may be more natural to set up shop as an anthropologist in non-game worlds; in a game world, the overwhelming need to *play* dominates interaction much of the time. While it is easy to blend in online, the researcher's position with respect to those being studied depends on the nature of the virtual world and the activities under investigation.

A limitation of my research is lack of knowledge of the culture of Blizzard Entertainment. *World of Warcraft* is a product of that culture, and nearly everything that happens in *WoW* is linked in some way to Blizzard. As of this writing, Blizzard had not opened its doors to ethnographic examination as Linden Lab did (see Malaby 2009). I utilized whatever traces of Blizzard culture I could muster: aspects of the design of the game itself revealed corporate preoccupations, employee posts on official Blizzard forums demonstrated the shaping of corporate-player relations, and BlizzCon was an opportunity to hear what Blizzard movers and shakers had to say in media interviews and panel discussions.