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## My Life as a Night Elf Priest

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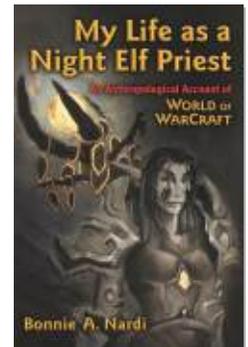
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## CHAPTER FIVE

# Work, Play, and the Magic Circle

Gaming is of course a kind of play. This chapter connects *World of Warcraft* to long-standing debates about the nature of play, in particular, examining issues of play and its putative opposite, *work*, that have preoccupied play theory for decades. Entangled in these debates is the idea of play as a magic circle—a protected space defended against the encroachments of everyday life such as work, school, and domestic duties.

Play theorists have struggled to define work and play. While seemingly straightforward notions, when scrutinized, they seem to dissolve into inconsistency and contradiction. I will inquire into play theorists' notions of work and play, as well as those of *World of Warcraft* players. The analysis is grounded in Dewey's broad concept of active aesthetic experience, of which game play is one example, and draws on the work of theorists whose focus is more narrowly on play and games. The discussion maintains a distinction between "game play"—i.e., the performance of a game—and "games" as cultural entities such as hide-and-seek or *World of Warcraft*. A good deal of games scholarship focuses on *games*, in particular, their structural characteristics, e.g., Juul 2005. For Juul, games are games whether played professionally or for leisure. That distinction is important for me (as I will discuss). The chapter develops a conception of game play as constituted in part by subjective dispositions toward activities involving the cultural entities we call games.

### Work and Play

Dewey contrasted aesthetic activity with the "the toil of a laborer" in which

the wage is the sole reward. Taking certain forms of play as a kind of aesthetic activity, the contrast implies the traditional work-play dichotomy. While it seems only common sense to suppose that work and play stand in relations of opposition, this opposition has been questioned by scholars observing that, on the one hand, video game players often engage in worklike activities, and, on the other hand, sometimes our jobs can be fun (Stevens 1978; Pearce 2006, 2009; Yee 2006; Poole 2008; Rettberg 2008).

*WoW* players seemed to agree with Dewey, as well as play theorists such as Turner (1982), Callois (1961), and Huizinga (1950), that play is not work. Early in my research I was struck by the explicit and emotional juxtaposition of work and play in chat conversations and posts on the Scarlet Raven website. The website had a forum thread in which prospective guild members introduced themselves and applied to join the guild. The following messages were exchanged between an applicant and two guild officers:

Hello, I filled out an application pretty recently [and I have a question] . . .

Okay, gotta get back to work

Thanks!

~Myrna

Reply:

Wait, Myrna. . . what is this “work” you speak of?

I’ll go google that word.

Arian

Second reply:

Im not really sure but . . . but . . . i tell ya, I have heard nothing but bad things about “Work”! If i was you I wouldnt even go there . . .

Takamu

Arian and Takamu bracketed work by putting it in quotes, setting it outside the realm of the game. The pretended unfamiliarity with “work” indicated its disjunction from play and suggested that it might have a pretty bad reputation. In a similar post, Zaq, a bartender, wrote:

since the date [of the guild event] was moved from tuesday to monday, I won't be attending. I do that thing called “employment” on monday.

A player preparing for exams for graduate school explained why he had not been in-game much recently. Darkstorm wrote:

just on the off chance that anyone from [my company] is reading this and knows who i am, i was just kidding before about leaving my job this spring. i love working in accounting. i . . . um . . . set up vendor codes. and i ask for w-9 forms. and i . . . um . . . receive them. and write reports about it. what could possibly be soul-crushingly boring about that?! nothing! hooray for accounting! and hooray for beer! i was kidding about the beer just then.

An uncannily similar piece of dialogue occurred in the opening episode of the popular American television comedy *The Office*. Jim, a young employee, says:

My job is to speak to clients, um, on the phone about, uh, quantities and uh, type of copier paper. You know, uh, whether we can supply it to them, whether they can, uh, pay for it and, um, I'm boring myself just talking about this.

*The Office*, based on a British show of the same name, plays on the boredom of work and the stratagems employed by a group of office workers to make it through the day. Many worker/viewers identify with the acerbic portrayal of the tedium of work and its characterization as “boring.”

In describing Scarlet Raven, a guild leader wrote on the website:

Our main priority is to have fun! World of Warcraft is a game, not a job.

A Chinese player said:

Let the game be a game and not work.

Players commonly gave precise times when they would have to return to work or school, marking the transition out of *World of Warcraft* and back to real life. Guild chat:

Beehive: well people, i think it's bedtime . . . gotta be at work in 6 hours, so i MIGHT need sleep if they're going to get anything outta me. g'night all

Party chat:

Malita: k i have about 10 mins then i have to go to sleep lol school tomorrow blah!<sup>1</sup>

Malita: i have to be up at 5 am, and out at 6 am . . . it's 10:38 now

It was 1:00 a.m., and a player who had to leave in the middle of a quest typed:

Malinstrife: gtg [got to go] really sorry, i have to be at work at 9

Johan Huizinga, a Dutch play theorist, affirmed Dewey's distinction between work and play (1950). Huizinga observed that play is "never imposed by physical necessity or moral duty." In our culture, work, as well as school, are, by and large, involuntary and imposed by a range of physical and moral duties.<sup>2</sup>

But it is also true that shifting subjective boundaries between voluntary and involuntary, work and play, problematize a simple dichotomy. The fluidity of the boundaries is nicely illustrated in chapter 2 of Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer*, "Tom Sawyer Whitewashing the Fence."

Aunt Polly has given Tom the onerous job of whitewashing a large fence. This task, imposed by moral duty as well as the potential depredations of Aunt Polly's slipper, has sunk Tom into a "deep melancholy" as he contemplates his foiled plans:

[Tom] began to think of the fun he had planned for this day, and his sor-

rows multiplied. Soon the free boys would come tripping along on all sorts of delicious expeditions, and they would make a world of fun of him for having to work . . .

Freedom and necessity, work and play, seem to inhabit clear categories. But Tom knows that these categories are open to manipulation precisely because they are subjective. Tom's rival, Ben Rogers, approaches, mocking Tom.

"Say—I'm going in a-swimming, I am. Don't you wish you could? But of course you'd druther work—wouldn't you? Course you would!"

Tom contemplated the boy a bit, and said: "What do you call work?"

"Why, ain't that work?"

Tom resumed his whitewashing, and answered carelessly: "Well, maybe it is, and maybe it ain't. All I know, is, it suits Tom Sawyer."

"Oh come, now, you don't mean to let on that you like it?"

The brush continued to move.

"Like it? Well, I don't see why I oughtn't to like it. Does a boy get a chance to whitewash a fence every day?"

That put the thing in a new light. Ben stopped nibbling his apple. Tom swept his brush daintily back and forth—stepped back to note the effect—added a touch here and there—criticized the effect again—Ben watching every move and getting more and more interested, more and more absorbed. Presently he said:

"Say, Tom, let me whitewash a little."

With a bit of intersubjective work, Tom enlists Ben, and then the other boys who come along, to whitewash the fence as he idles pleasantly in the shade. Here work and play are disjoint not by virtue of specific actions that are inherently "work" or inherently "play," but as separable subjective experiences. I see no reason to dispute Tom Sawyer, Huizinga, or Dewey on the subjective voluntariness of play (see also Garvey 1977). Dewey said, "Play remains an attitude of freedom from subordination to an end imposed by external necessity."

While *WoW* was a voluntary activity, players experienced certain aspects of play as worklike. The pressures of raiding and the need to continually "farm" materials for raid consumables began to feel like work for some. Farming referred to repetitive actions undertaken to acquire game materi-

als such as killing the same type of monster over and over again. (The term *grinding* was also used.)

Both Chinese and North American players reported that sometimes *WoW* felt like work. Peng, a 24-year-old employee at a small venture capital firm in Beijing, and Chiu and Lefen, two students from Beijing, were guildmates. In an interview in an Internet cafe, they explained:

Peng: Our guild is like a work unit, you belong to a certain team.

Chiu: You have to participate [in raiding] everyday from 7 p.m. to 12 p.m. That feels like work.

Lefen: It is very exhausting to participate in regular guild activities, especially for classes whose task it is to watch the combat for a very long time. Thus, after finishing a guild activity, we are too exhausted for anything else.

Yee (2006) observed that players may “burn out” as gaming becomes too similar to work.

In a gaming context, the nuances of the word “work” were context dependent. When Chiu said raiding could “feel like work,” he expressed a wearying shift from enjoyment to obligation. By contrast, raiders might also experience the preparation needed for raiding and its seriousness as “dedication” or “hard work.” In this context, “work” was energizing and positively valued; it connoted focus, concentration, and empowerment.

“Work” was sometimes invoked in a celebratory mode to acknowledge teamwork and success in performative activity. The Scarlet Raven website posted raid progress:

From 2/6 in SSC to 5/6 in one week! Let's keep up the hard work!

The guild progressed in one week from defeating two of six bosses in the Serpentshrine Cavern dungeon to defeating five out of six. This rapid progress was hailed as a result of “hard work.” Likewise, after killing Illidan, Nihilum posted on its website:

Half of us don't realize what was behind all of it. Hard, grunt work. The

determination to learn this encounter to its fullest extent. The next day—after 3 hours of tries on Illidan, he finally fell, and his cruel grasp on the world of Outland had been released by Nihilum.

Raiders sometimes likened raiding to the seriousness of a job:

When you are raiding, remember that upwards of 24 other people are counting on you to do your job and do it well

wrote one player on the Scarlet Raven website. (Recall also Sean's reference to "doing a job.") In describing how he felt about raiding and the preparation required, another player, Jerzey, posted:

My raid time is precious (with family and work), so I invest much into the 1–2 raids I can attend and commit to each week. For this I actually work very hard in my other time, grinding heroics for gear, and getting mats [materials] to craft almost half of my raiding gear.

He ended the long post (of which these sentences were a part) with a comment that underscores the subjective separation of work and play:

I hope that made sense. Wrote this from work . . .

When Scarlet Raven experienced the crisis in which players were leaving for hardcore raiding guilds, the guild master posted:

So where does that leave everyone? People are free to remain here or to go their separate ways if they so choose. If guild is more important than raid to you, that is fine. If raid is more important than guild to you, that is also fine. It's your game, you choose how you want to play it.

It is rare to have such latitude at work or school. Mandated activities in these settings entail strict schedules and obligations inside of which people have limited room for negotiation or choice. The guild master's words were not mere rhetoric; players weighed their preferences and desires. Some stayed; some left to participate in guilds structured very differently than Scarlet Raven.

Dewey captured the paradox of the freedom of play and its coupling with seriousness:

Play remains an attitude of freedom from subordination to an end imposed by external necessity, as opposed, that is, to labor; but it is transformed into work in that activity is subordinated to production of an objective result. No one has ever watched a child intent in his play without being made aware of the complete merging of playfulness with seriousness.

In sum, play is, at the highest level, a freely chosen activity while at the same time opening the potential for worklike results. A notion of freedom must be understood in its social matrix, not as a philosophical absolute. Jerzey delimited three categories of activity he managed: family, work, and play. Family and work entailed serious obligations in which he was enmeshed, while the “precious” raid time was handled as an activity subordinate, and requiring accommodation to, demands of family and work.

Miller (1973) observed that play is characterized by “a degree of autonomy for the actor who manipulates the processes at his disposal.” Vandenberg (1998) noted, “The excitement of play results from the sheer exercise of freedom over necessity.” The voluntariness of play is evident in the relative ease with which people abandon play activities. Players leave *WoW* (and other games) all the time, making deliberate, conscious, thoughtful choices. A Scarlet Raven player posted the following:

Since a few weeks ago, *WoW* has been well . . . boring . . . The hardest part is to say farewell to the friends I've made, so I won't do that until I've made my decision. In addition, i'm thinking about giving away my account, so if anyone wants it, send me an email at . . . @gmail.com. Better not to waste 3 [characters] and I wouldn't feel comfortable auctioning the account on ebay.

The consequences of cutting loose from work and family are much more serious, tied to the “moral duty” of which Huizinga spoke, as well as a great many practical constraints. Freedom in the context of play is not to be taken in a heroic Ayn Randian sense, but certain aspects of contemporary life are chosen; our society is predicated on the buying and selling of “leisure” activities in which corporations compete for discretionary dollars and hours.

Within play, then, elements of “work” enter in two ways. First, play may manifest seriousness and dedication which players refer to as work. Second, play may demand obligatory actions such as farming that are necessary to accommodate the larger play activity—the activity that players find pleasurable. Dewey observed that few aesthetic experiences are “wholly gleeful”; they require some actions that afford less pleasure than others. It is useful here to analytically separate actions and activities in a hierarchical manner, as activity theory does; a pleasurable activity can proceed even as some of its required actions are, in themselves, less pleasurable.

Huizinga further specified that play occupies a “magic circle” separating it from other activity. He observed that play, as a domain separate from work (and anything else), inhabits its own space or “sphere.” Play is, according to Huizinga (1950):

a stepping out of “real” life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition of its own.

Play takes place within a magic circle into which players move in order to adopt a particular, recognizable set of rules and practices (Huizinga 1950). Boellstorff (2008) noted that crossing such boundaries “can strengthen the distinctiveness of the two domains that [the boundaries] demarcate.”<sup>3</sup>

To summarize, play theorists assert that play is characterized by:

1. A subjective experience of freedom
2. An absence of social obligation and physical necessity
3. A subjective experience that is absorbing, compelling, or pleasurable
4. Occurrence in a separate realm sometimes referred to as the magic circle

I add that play requires active cognition and/or physical skill. Juul (2005) described games as requiring “effort.” Malaby (2009) spoke of play as engaging “a readiness to improvise,” indicating active, creative participation on the part of the player. Play happens when the imagination is stimulated, when there is an alertness to the surroundings and sometimes an engagement with physical activity. We may distinguish between, say, a child listening to a story being read and taking her dollies on an imaginary picnic. The activities are not unrelated, but one requires a more vigorous exercise

of the imagination with the possibility of ending up in new places of the mind rather than more predictable outcomes of a story. Both are valuable experiences but distinctive in their potentials.

This notion of play is very broad, descriptive of many activities. *Game* play is a specific form of play, involving all the elements of play and three additional elements: contingency, rules, and “limited perfection.”

Huizinga observed that game play “brings a temporary limited perfection” through activity that involves “uncertainty” and “chanciness.” Players want to “achieve something difficult, to succeed, to end a tension” (Huizinga 1950). The notion of limited perfection recalls Dewey’s emphasis on the satisfying completion of aesthetic activity, but specifies a relation to contingency (“chanciness”). Callois (1961) also emphasized the importance of “chance” in games. Garvey (1977) remarked:

A game has a clear beginning and end, and its structure can be specified in terms of moves in a fixed sequence with a limited set of procedures for certain contingencies.

Malaby (2007) noted that games provide “contrived contingency.” A game establishes a table of contingencies in which players take their chances, through skill and/or luck, to attain a desired outcome. Contingency is necessary for the activity to be playfully interesting and for the gratification of limited perfection that apparently satisfies psychological needs (Huizinga 1950). Play involves a “contest for something,” resulting in activity that is “absorbing” (Huizinga 1950), “compelling” (Malaby 2007), “fun” (Juul 2005), or “pleasurable” (Miller 1973; Taylor 2003; Hayes 2005; Kennedy 2005).

Game play is characterized by:

1. A subjective experience of freedom
2. An absence of social obligation and physical necessity
3. A subjective experience that is absorbing, compelling, or pleasurable
4. Occurrence in a separate realm sometimes referred to as the magic circle
5. Activation through cognitive and/or physical skill
6. Contingency
7. Rules
8. Opportunities for limited perfection

This characterization draws on the work of several theorists. While I believe it is descriptive of *World of Warcraft*, as well as the game play familiar to most readers, whether baseball, bowling, poker, pinball, or Pong, we do not have sufficient cross-cultural data with which to assess whether such a characterization describes play in every culture or even whether every culture has a concept of play (see Malaby 2007). However, I think it tenable to argue that game play is an identifiable human activity whose structure includes both subjective dispositions, such as a sense of freedom, and specific cultural constructs such as rules. Game play is complex precisely because it comprises both subjective dispositions toward activity and concrete, culturally defined elements. Attention to the subjectivity of play is particularly important; the formal characteristics of games, such as contingency and rules, are not the same as the activity of game play. Participating in a lottery to be selected to receive a Green Card (which establishes certain rights for foreign visitors to the United States) involves rules and contingency but is hardly play; getting—or not getting—a Green Card may have extraordinarily serious consequences for individuals and families. One would choose to just get a Green Card if one could, not to enter a space of contingency through a lottery with an uncertain outcome.

How do game play and active aesthetic experience relate to one another? Neither fits neatly within the other; they crosscut. Dewey's notion of aesthetic experience, while broad, does not subsume all game play. It incorporates two elements missing from a baseline definition of game play; aesthetic experience involves a collectivity and it is phased. Game play should include a game such as Solitaire, for which a significant collective element is absent, and it should include playing slot machines, an activity with a simple repetitive structure. We must, then, stretch across two related theoretical approaches to understand the activity of playing *World of Warcraft*, seeing it broadly as aesthetic experience and more narrowly as a kind of game play.

With these conceptualizations in mind, let us return to the *WoW* players and their discussions of work and play. The explicit separation of work and play in player discourse is especially notable in light of the sizable numbers of students and working-class people playing *World of Warcraft*—those most likely to be confronted daily with boring, insufficiently rewarded activity. Player discourse expressed a desire to “step out” of “real life” as, in part, a response to the boredom of school and work embodied in their lack of both

playful and aesthetic elements. At the end of August, as school approached, guild chat featured laments about the impending doom such as:

Leorith: night ppl [people] c u [see you] after the first day of hell i mean skool

A Chinese player said:

When I stopped playing *WoW* because of my exams, I felt like I did not want to stop. The way of playing is very creative.

Darkstorm called his job “soul-crushingly boring.” Nylere, a druid in Scarlet Raven, wrote on the guild website:

I am stuck back at work, and it’s blissfully quiet enough for me to do some research on becoming a better [player] . . . I found the following page to be incredibly helpful and by far the most comprehensive so far [http://elitistjerks.com/f31/t17783-druid\\_raiding\\_tree/](http://elitistjerks.com/f31/t17783-druid_raiding_tree/). It even goes into gems, flasks and enchants! (. . . I am bored, lol!).

Nylere, who was employed in a low-level job so undemanding that she had time to surf the Internet, became absorbed in the “incredibly helpful,” “comprehensive” website about her character class, druid. She juxtaposed the action of studying the website to being “stuck back at work” and “bored, lol!” Her statements separated work and play, consistent with other players’ characterizations. Even though she was “at work,” she removed herself through immersion in the gaming website. Her actions demonstrated the dedication and seriousness of play as she did “some research on becoming a better player,” delving into the particulars of her character’s options for “gems, flasks and enchants!”

A guildmate indicated that he was not afraid of homework as long as it was interesting:

Carloh: i do more homework for wow than I do for school lol

Another player, surreptitiously reading humorous posts on the Scarlet Raven website while at work, wrote:

And I am now laughing so hard I'm drawing stares from the other cattle in the cube farms . . . I'd better stop.

The bleak image of “cattle in the cube farms” is a devastating comment on modern workplaces, making a desire for vivid, challenging play spaces unsurprising.

Darkstorm's account revealed his work as entirely routinized, without contingency or challenge. While not all jobs are as boring, many do not provide regular, orderly satisfaction of needs to succeed at something difficult. Activities at work and school not only fail to yield perfection, they are cessations not consummations, as Dewey said—activities in which the actions needed to attain ends are not in themselves absorbing or compelling.

The activity of “gold farming” nicely exemplifies the riddle of work and play. Gold farmers play *World of Warcraft* (and other games; see Dibbell 2006; Steinkuehler 2006) as a job, generating game gold to sell for real money (Dibbell 2007). But are they *playing*? I argue that gold farmers are not engaged in the same activity as players who voluntarily play for what they call fun. Game lingo reflects this disjuncture; the very term *gold farmer* is intended to establish a firm boundary between ordinary players and gold farmers.

Gold farmers may find gold farming preferable to other work that their education would enable them to obtain (Dibbell 2007), but that does not mean they are playing. As with the Green Card, it is useful to distinguish the formal characteristics of cultural constructs (such as *World of Warcraft*) from a more complex entity identifiable as play involving a subjective disposition yielding absorbing or compelling activity. Dibbell reported that the Chinese gold farmers he interviewed were entirely focused on farming—during 12-hour shifts they repetitively killed the same monsters. Farming was not subordinate to other exciting game activities; it was all the gold farmers did. Confinement to farming activity was, of course, not the pattern of normal *World of Warcraft* play among gamers.

Gold farmers worked “twelve hours a night, seven nights a week, with only two or three nights off per month” (Dibbell 2007). It is difficult to interpret such a pattern of activity as playful. Dibbell reported that gold farmers sometimes played *World of Warcraft* as a leisure activity after work. While the lack of leisure time in the gold farmers' schedule makes this a surprising claim, assuming that at least some gold farmers played *WoW*

after work, Dibbell's story of a gold farmer known for after-hours play is telling—the player did not farm after his shift, but enjoyed difficult dungeons, testing, and showing off, his performative abilities.

Professional gaming appears to blur the lines between work and play. Work that is subjectively experienced as deeply pleasurable may merge, at least sometimes, with play. Paid work, however, tends to rapidly develop strong elements of obligation—obligations to make money, to be accountable to interests such as corporations, universities, advertisers, or family members, and obligations to be performed at certain times and in certain places, with constraints imposed by others. I continued to be impressed by *WoW* players' self-determination in deciding if, when, and how to play *World of Warcraft*—something rare and difficult with paid work.

Rea (2009) discussed gaming in Korea, including its amateur and professional aspects. He noted:

The Korean language encodes a strict conceptual boundary between what counts as “work” and “play.”

Gaming was unambiguously identified as play, but some young players aspired to gain paid work as professional gamers, who are celebrities in Korea. Rea designated the activity of these young gamers “aspirational gaming”—not yet paid but directed toward the object of professional status and high income. Rea (2009) observed:

In order to hope to become a pro-gamer, one must begin honing one's skills early and invest a considerable amount of time practicing, often in PC Bangs [Internet cafes]. I call this phenomenon “aspirational gaming,” meaning that it indeed does count as “work” in the Korean context because it is an activity performed by those that aspire to become professionals.

The actions of gaming were the same for aspirational gamers as for any young player, but their disposition toward gaming activity was markedly different, oriented toward the object of professional play. Rea observed that aspirational gamers had a clear object in mind; they were keenly aware of the rewards of a life as a professional gamer:

Professional gamers, recruited from around the country usually through

success in local tournaments sponsored by PC Bangs, can make six-figure salaries and receive corporate sponsorship and room and board from the leagues they join. The top pro-gamers occupy celebrity subject positions similar to music and movie stars and are even seen as sex symbols by Korean youth.

For some Korean youth the object of going professional, expressed in a vivid scenario of life as a pro, moved gaming from play toward a form of education in preparation for a specific kind of work and career.

### **A Partial Separation of Play and Not-Play**

The notion of a magic circle asserts that play is separate from the rest of life. Malaby (2007) suggested that play is “*relatively* separable from everyday life” (emphasis added). Taking up this more qualified notion, I will discuss ways in which *WoW* game play impinged on nonplay and vice versa. Malaby reminds us that play has consequences outside itself and cannot, by definition, be entirely separate. Castronova (2005), for example, examined ways in which activity in virtual worlds extruded into the economy and polity outside the worlds, such as people selling characters on the Internet or litigating issues related to game activity. Play does not, and cannot, exist in an imperturbable magic circle; it is always in dynamic relations of tension to other activities in which a player might engage. Play is calibrated against competing activities, as we saw in Jerzey’s accounting of his time. Play is linked to the demands of the body, to others in the player’s social environment, and to notions such as work, which it partially defines. Let us examine how these links were manifest in *World of Warcraft*.

*WoW* was so absorbing that it was sometimes difficult to find time to eat, drink, and go to the bathroom while playing. When these activities became urgent, players typed “bio” into the chat line, a signal that collaborative play must cease for at least a few minutes while the needs of the body took precedence. The mind encased in the body came into play as well. Game activities entered the conscious and unconscious mind outside playtime; players said that they daydreamed about *WoW* when not playing or dreamed about it at night.

Game play was entwined with the demands of others in the player’s

social milieu. Players spoke of “spousal aggro,” or “family aggro,” metaphorically invoking the term for the game mechanism by which monsters are engaged in hostile interaction. In the context of family and friends, *aggro* signified that play might be interrupted by the needs of others who were not-playing, and who might evince a certain level of hostility. In the wee hours one evening, a player in *The Derelict* who had laboriously assembled a pug had to leave shortly after we began to play.

Gork: sorry guys, gotta go. gf [girlfriend] pissed

In a more positive vein, Sutton-Smith observed that play may result in “adaptive potentiations” in which people take vocabulary, practices, and attitudes from play into other arenas of life (1975). We form the “A Team” at work to tackle a difficult problem or use sports metaphors to describe our actions or urge people to adopt a “winning attitude” (see Dutton 2008). Sutton-Smith argued that differentiated spaces of play encourage potentiations to emerge. People enjoy opportunities to “step out,” to be creative, to think outside the box, to experiment, to fool around with doing things differently.

A website in which players discussed how *WoW* linked to the rest of life included the following post showing a way in which *WoW* game mechanics could inform personnel management practices:

When I was assigned to an HR [human resources] project in the company I work for, I noticed how *WoW* can be useful in real life. After much debate, we realized we could structure our career plans as talent trees on *WoW*—as people studied and made progress, they would improve certain “talents” that were linked—so after being considered fully prepared in a certain “talent”, a person could pursue two or three different specialization paths related to that talent, with an increasing salary the “deeper” that person went in one of the trees. They could also go for a “hybrid build”, incorporating talents from different trees. Career choices became pretty much like deciding if you’re going to be an Elemental/Enhancement/Restoration or Hybrid Shaman!

Since *WoW* is a big hit among the people who work at this company, everyone quickly understood the concept and what they needed to learn in order to evolve and grow within the company, and where they could

eventually get if they invested their time and effort in developing certain talents.

The only hard part was convincing the “conventional managers” that they would have to respect in order to understand these new ideas ;)

Posted at 9:35AM on Jun 14th 2007 by Kabbalah (Schramm 2007).

Talent trees allowed players to specialize a character by emphasizing and strengthening certain abilities (Choontanom 2008). Kabbalah formed a creative link between game mechanics and workplace needs in imagining how talent trees could be used to structure employee advancement. This is a striking example of taking a game construct—a talent tree—and transporting it to a new arena of activity. Such transposition embodied a cultural critique of an existing practice; Kabbalah not only examined current practice and saw that it could be improved, she called out “conventional” managers in need of “respecting” if they were to see the larger issue her suggestion addressed. In this way, play may be subversive, moving to arenas in which its modes of activity suggest new ways of acting (see Turner 1982).

There is another sense in which we may argue that work and play are only partially separated. Conceptually, work and play are linked; as opposites we use them to define one another. Does this opposition come into play in active relations *between* work and play? How does one affect the other? These are complex questions, but I believe farming in *World of Warcraft* entails an interesting interplay between work and play. I focus here not on gold farming but the native player practice of farming.

As noted, farming boils down to a lengthy set of repetitive actions with little contingency. (Juul 2005 observed that such actions are often part of games.) Killing mobs to gain gold or specific items dropped by mobs (typically needed for crafting), or repetitively collecting resources such as herbs or minerals, are typical farming activities. A close synonym in game lingo is *grinding*—suggesting the onerous nature of the actions.

Farming could take hours and hours of playtime. I once spent nearly six hours (not at a stretch, thankfully) collecting materials for a set of gear used to fight only one boss, a powerful gal named Mother Shahraz. During this time, Innikka did not die once; she simply flew around Shadowmoon Valley on her mount, swooping down to extract motes of shadow (the required element for the gear) when they appeared on a little map in the corner of the screen.

Given that players agree to undertake such activities, some researchers have suggested that repetitive actions in video games (not just *WoW*) constitute preparation for the work world. Yee (2006) remarked:

... video games are inherently work platforms that train us to become better workers. [T]he work being performed in video games is increasingly similar to actual work in business corporations.

Poole (2008) observed:

[Games] hire us for imaginary, meaningless jobs that replicate the structures of real-world employment ... If games are supposed to be fun ... why do they go so far to replicate the structure of a repetitive dead-end job?

Rettberg (2008) asserted that in players' "subconscious capitalist minds" farming is an expression of the "Protestant work ethic" and, moreover, a "sustained delusion" that play equates to work.<sup>4</sup>

I was puzzled that so many *World of Warcraft* players spent so much time farming and did not complain very much (given that player forums were replete with grievances about minutiae such as the color of the glow of a weapon enchant or the degree to which pieces of armor coordinated visually).<sup>5</sup> The sheer boredom of farming and players' acceptance of it were surprising. Chinese players, too, commented on farming; they used the evocative term "brushing" to connote the execution of small, simple, repetitive game actions.

But from the players' point of view, farming in *World of Warcraft* was a logical activity undertaken for well-defined ends. Players wanted to acquire materials with which to craft equipment or enchantments or make gold with which to buy these items in order enhance performance. We might ask, though, why such an activity was part of the logic of the game at all. Why did Blizzard include so much farming as part of *World of Warcraft*? I cannot agree that video game companies have taken it upon themselves to train us for the workplace. Is farming in *WoW* like being a bank teller or checking groceries or performing secretarial work? If there is a move on the part of game corporations to prepare us for capitalist jobs, such a claim needs to determine for itself how it can be substantiated, how it can be more than a moment of radical mischief.

Rather than games as training grounds for the workplace, a more straightforward explanation is ready to hand, at least for farming in *World of Warcraft*. Farming was woven into the game as a design element to provide game content at a cost that increased corporate profit margins. Farming slowed players so they did not rip through months of careful content development in a few days or weeks. Blizzard's incorporation of farming reduced its need for development by inserting a necessary but time-consuming activity into the game that kept gamers busy. Blizzard did not want to create so much content that the game's scope became unmanageable (such as having 250 levels and items that offer +10,000 stamina). Farming said to players, "All right, you want to be marginally better (enough to pwn them!) than the other players on the server? You want something in return for the hours and hours you put in? Okay, you can get that extra little bit, but it's going to cost you. Go farm." This allowed ambitious players to work hard for an edge.<sup>6</sup>

That Blizzard wanted to slow players was pervasively evident throughout the game. Travel times across the game geography were egregiously long. Blizzard must have received player feedback on this issue because I heard players complain about it *often*, but Blizzard steadfastly required players to laboriously travel long distances. At one point I established a set of metrics for myself involving how much housework I could get done while traveling from one spot to another. For common journeys on mounts that delivered players to their destinations without the need for player control, I could, for many travel paths, unload a whole dishwasher full of dishes, gather up and put in a load of laundry, and take one out of the dryer. That seemed like too much work accomplished while "playing." There were many other mechanisms to stretch out game play such as "cooldowns" on crafting activities, which required players to wait a day before a new item could be crafted (or even longer to "discover" new crafting recipes). Blizzard altered the timing on certain actions in professions such as mining and alchemy (e.g., how long it took to mine a node), so I know they were paying attention to player feedback. But these were reductions in seconds, not minutes as with travel.

While Yee's statements about relations between game play and capitalist labor were broad claims about video game companies' inclinations toward repetitive activities, Poole (2008) was more direct in attributing conscious purpose to the inclusion of these activities, calling them "a malignly perfect

style of capitalist brainwashing.” Even allowing for rhetorical flourish, such provocative words indicate something very wrong with farming. Rettberg’s notion of a “sustained delusion” suggests a major hoodwinking. While I share the interest these investigators have put forward in drawing attention to the surprising appearance of repetitive activity in video games, I have come to see farming in *World of Warcraft* as an activity with its own potentialities and affordances, meaningful inside the magic circle.

To think about farming, let us consider a conception of play as a complex activity expressive of a duality in its relation to ordinary life. Turner (1982) theorized play as underwriting cultural norms and, at the same time, providing an arena of potential cultural critique (see also Sutton-Smith 1975). Play may both conserve and reject cultural themes outside itself, and is powerful precisely because it affords grounding through a capacity to reproduce the familiar while simultaneously yielding the potential for transformative activity.

Farming in *World of Warcraft* transformed the pervasive, familiar cultural experience of boredom—which we all undergo, to varying degrees, in school and at work—into one with positive valences. It allowed players to confront anxieties about boredom and recast and reshape them in a context where they were played out and resolved differently than in ordinary life. In the everyday world, boredom is frequently an isolating, frustrating experience. The end result of perseverance in sticking to necessary but boring activities is too often an inadequate paycheck or report card or just another load of laundry. The culmination of farming in *World of Warcraft*, on the other hand, yielded a meaningful, exciting reward. A new piece of gear or an enchantment emerged as the product of the tedium, advancing a player in the game and enabling measurably better performance. (And it might be sparkly, too!) The reward directly addressed a player’s object of performative excellence and continual striving to “improve yourself,” as Mark put it.

The acquisition of the reward—certainly a moment of limited perfection—was also a moment of social consequence. Other players offered congratulations, remarking on the attainment of the new gear in a spirit of shared celebration. In a raiding context, farming mats (materials) was a social obligation. For some encounters, success depended on players acquiring specially crafted gear, as with Mother Shahraz. I once mailed assiduously farmed mats to a player who could craft them for me. He returned the crafted gear in mail with a message saying, “Way to be on top of the



Note Stamina in Base Stats in the box on the bottom left. Stamina is an important stat for warriors.



The warrior adds +3 stamina by equipping the Knight's Gauntlets of the Bear, replacing the Sentry's Glove of the Monkey.

raid's needs Innikka!" I was pleased about this, though farming the mats had been irksomely repetitive. The player acknowledged my contribution to the social group in which we shared activity; the message embodied a small moment of amiable connection expressive of our common performative goals.

Players were required to come to raids with "consumables" such as elixirs and potions. As long as a player was raiding, there would be no end to farming. It was laborious gathering the materials for every raid, but again there was often a social payoff. Players exchanged potions, elixirs, food, and other enhancements to performance, developing exchange partners or becoming known for having unusual recipes or always being stocked up with appropriate consumables to share. The Fish Feast was a nicely communitarian expression of farming; players who fished and cooked could prepare a group meal, providing raid buffs, and a Fish Feast invariably appeared at appropriate moments during raids.<sup>7</sup> Behind each feast was a player who had spent time in one of the game's most repetitive, least challenging activities—fishing.

Repetitive actions in other domains rarely entail excitement and sociability; they tend toward boredom and isolation (housework, homework worksheets, bureaucratic paperwork). In *World of Warcraft*, the narrative and goals of the game world bound people in a shared fantasy in which repetitive actions could be generative of positive meanings and emotions. Within the magic circle, with its distinctive rules and stories not strictly accountable to everyday reality, the flax of boredom was spun into the gold of social capital and emotional wealth. The nuances of farming in *World of Warcraft* extended beyond the fact of its boredom (and a superficial appearance of being just like boredom at work) to its role as a resource deployed in performative development, the satisfaction of sharing in groups, and bonds of collective experience.

Miller (1973) noted that Freud believed fantasy to be "a tool for coping with the frustrating but uncontrollable events that are concomitants of life in society." Gaming may allow players to take up the challenges and disappointments of contemporary life that eat away at all of us, working through them in fantasy. Rather than "brainwashing," repetitive player activity suggests a process in which boredom is confronted and transformed in the hospitable environs of a game world. The game conserves socially valued qualities such as perseverance—which players must exhibit in order to

undertake repetitive activities like farming—while at the same time suggesting the fundamental inadequacy of the typical rewards for such perseverance. The often disappointing results of sticking-with-it in real life are critiqued; a deflating end to long toil is eliminated, replaced with rewards that delight, enhance, and create social cohesion—bright, glowing things moving players forward in the logic of the game.

## The Magic Circle

We have examined several ways in which game play articulates with other arenas of activity; it is not a sequestered activity walled up in a magic circle. But, from another perspective, we must revive Huizinga's notion of the magic circle in its fullness. The magic circle is expressive of one crucial aspect of play; the *meaningfulness* of play is bound within the activity of those who actually play. Miller (1973) observed:

Someone who is left cold by baseball wonders what someone else can see in hitting a ball with a stick and running around in a circle to his starting point.

Every *WoW* player has had the experience of friends and family who do not understand why he or she gets so excited about a video game. From outside the magic circle, we see a person staring at a computer screen, perhaps clicking furiously. The enticements of the game are invisible. Within the magic circle, it's a different story. A player is developing a character, interacting with guildmates, descending into difficult dungeons, exploring new landscapes, watching the (virtual) starry night sky.

Huizinga (1950) observed that the magic circle entails a feeling of being “apart together”; it creates its own collective social order—one from which nonplayers are excluded. The meanings to do with game play are created *within* a play world and are legitimate and coherent only within that world.<sup>8</sup> Interpersonal “aggro” in one sense breaks down the magic circle by forcing players to attend to activity outside it, but in another sense such aggro is the very realization of the separation of players from those not-playing. Nonplayers are apart from the world in which a player's actions are sensible, interesting, compelling, meaningful. The non-sense of the game viewed

from outside sometimes generated agitation, annoyance, even anger. One of my guildmates typed into guild chat:

Bagdieb: i may be a tank, but i still can't handle gf aggro.

The ubiquitous use of the term “escape” to describe *WoW* play alluded to its separateness. Players mentioned such escape in interviews, and I saw it in chat. For example, a member of the U.S. Army with whom I played remarked in party chat (not in response to an interview question):

the game is escape, a great stress relief even my company commander plays lol he is a gm [guild master] for a guild on another server.

Salen and Zimmerman (2005) noted that entering the magic circle means making a commitment to play; such commitment is intelligible only from the player's point of view. “Without the magic circle, the actions of the players would be meaningless,” they observed.

The social order manifest in the magic circle is constituted in (at least) three ways: through knowledge about structures and activities that occur inside its enclosure; in specialized discourse; and in designated spaces of play that mark and confine it. The following are some examples from *World of Warcraft*.

At the “UI and Mods” session at BlizzCon, the user interface design team assembled to discuss design philosophy and take audience questions. The room was packed with hundreds of people. During the Q&A, a player stood up and said:

I'm a hunter and for the love of God can we get the quiver off the bag space?!

The audience erupted in raucous applause. Only *WoW* players would know what the question meant, why a roomful of people would break into cheers on hearing it, and the reasons why a player might invoke the love of God with respect to a change in the user interface of *World of Warcraft*. (The player referred to space taken up by the hunter's quiver, space normally used to hold another bag.) Arcane knowledge is shared inside the magic circle; it defines play activity and separates those who know from those who don't.

Collective order in the magic circle is expressed through knowledge of the rules of the game. In the previous chapter I argued that rules can be seen as a resource. Schechner (1977) described rules as another kind of resource, observing that the rules of a game are designed to defend the activity against encroachment from the outside. The rules in part establish a magic circle; they create a model world of permitted behaviors. To be part of the world, players must develop knowledge of the rules.

The collective social order is pervasively apparent in player discourse; semantic and syntactic conventions reflect the specialness of play inside the magic circle. (When I first started playing *WoW* I felt I was deciphering a code.) Here are some utterances I collected from *WoW* battlegrounds (contests in which teams play games such as capture the flag):

mage table plz  
 druid buff ftw!  
 help fc  
 omfg get out of mf!  
 f\*ck st --- get bs  
 ZERG AS

Such utterances were meaningful to a *WoW* player; these particular requests expressed actions needed to move collective play forward in ways deemed desirable by the speakers. The utterances are incomprehensible to those who do not play and are, as Huizinga said, apart from the playing of the game.

A collective order is realized in enclosures within which play occurs. Huizinga (1950) noted that activity that involves repetition in a limited space, such as a playground, creates its own order, generating a logic comprehensible only within its boundaries (see also Garvey 1977). Of course physical enclosure is not always necessary; as Juul (2005) observed, people play chess by mail. But it is undeniable that we gravitate toward play spaces ranging from constructs such as dollhouses and model trains (carefully laid out in their own reserved space) to the grand swatches of natural land appropriated for golf in medieval Scotland.

Not only did *World of Warcraft* provide a large, highly elaborated game geography, but a particularly striking feature was “instanced” play—a magic circle within the magic circle. Instances, in which players entered zones

inhabited only by a formal group (a party, raid, arena team, or battleground team) were distinctive enclosures productive of powerful play experience. Players encountered instances early in the game, and they were central to *WoW*'s design.<sup>9</sup> Raiding dungeons such as Serpentshrine Cavern were instanced; it was impossible to even enter them unless grouped.

One of my most frustrating early experiences was a quest in Teldrassil, island of the Night Elves, which required descent into a burrow inhabited by members of the ferocious Gnarlpine Tribe. The quest involved navigating a cave of narrow, twisting tunnels wherein lurked a bewildering number of closely spaced Gnarlpine furbolgs. Unlike the beautiful scenery outdoors, the Gnarlpines' dark, depressing den seemed broken down and shabby. Mushrooms sprouted, tree roots pierced the space from above, worn beams supported the dirt framing the den.

What was this abrupt shift from the lyrical landscape of Teldrassil to the damp darkness of the underground den? Over time I learned that such underground spaces were set-piece stages for critical encounters in *World of Warcraft*. The early quest with the Gnarlpine was not actually an instanced dungeon but an experience prefiguring instanced play, requiring descent into a confined, occult space. Later I would spend a good deal of time swimming to encounters in watery caverns, traversing the partially buried earthen remains of an ancient city, extinguishing fires within a sunken temple, battling orcs in the depths of a burning mountain, fending off death in crypts and tombs, and, of course, avoiding the elevator boss in Serpentshrine Cavern. Instances removed the group from others and sent them far away—usually downward—into private spaces. The descent underground (hence the term *dungeon*) cut raid members off from normal life aboveground and allowed a close visual encounter with a uniquely designed space different from that found everywhere else in the game.<sup>10</sup>

The inclusion of instances was consistent with *WoW*'s design as an arena of performance. Instances eliminated the presence of players who would certainly interfere with performative activity by ganking or otherwise harassing players engaged in the serious matter of downing difficult bosses. Whether intentional or not, cutting players off from all but those in the raid generated closeness and social cohesion; players depended on the group with which they faced the game's biggest challenges. Enclosure in a confined space unambiguously identified, in the context of guild raids, a player's closest partners. Raiding late at night with guild members and no

one else, listening to their voices in voice chat, knowing how they played and tailoring performance in accordance, teasing, joking, and bantering within a small, known group—these actions were productive of considerable geniality and intimacy.

Taylor (2006) suggested that instancing might be less “interesting” than games designed to “facilitate large scale collective action.” While not disagreeing that such action would be desirable in the context of some games, I think the special affordances of instancing were, within the logic of a game such as *World of Warcraft*, generative of an amazing level of amiability and positive sociality. Steinkuehler and Williams (2006) described *WoW* as a “third space.”<sup>11</sup> Third spaces are not venues of large-scale collective action but deliberately small enclosures designed to encourage bonhomie and cordiality among peers. Moments such as first kills, a guild member finally getting a purple she has longed for, or a player managing a tricky maneuver (such as killing the demons in time), are moments of mutual celebration not to be tampered with by players (like the *Lineage* gankers) who would happily disrupt them. The magic circle, rightfully, keeps out as well as keeps in.

Contemporary theorizing suggests that the magic circle is partial. I have identified ways in which *World of Warcraft* interpenetrated real life. At the same time, the magic circle lives, bracketing meanings within an enclosure into which a player steps in order to play. Turner (1982) identified the *limen*, or threshold, as necessary to play and ritual. Players cross the threshold out of ordinary life to engage distinctive kinds of performative activity in a game space in which the rules are different, the culture unique, the rewards sensible only within the enclosure. It is no accident that game spaces delimit clear, identifiable geographies: the baseball field, the basketball court, the boxing ring, the casino, the arcade, the playground, the card table, the tree house, the game board, the golf course, the bowling alley, the *World of Warcraft*. These spaces take us away from work, away from school, away from the ordinary. We enter a smaller, more perfect universe in which satisfaction is not guaranteed, but we gain a pretty good chance of achieving moments of limited perfection.