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My Life as a Night Elf Priest

Nardi, Bonnie

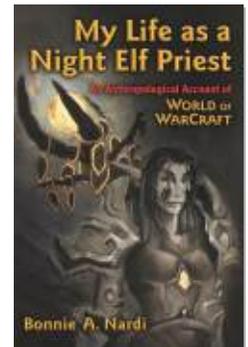
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PART THREE

Cultural Logics of *World of Warcraft*

CHAPTER SIX

Addiction

Having examined theoretical arguments about magic circles, performativity, and so on, this chapter, and the next two, take up broad themes of gaming that are part of academic discourse but also reach into wider arenas of conversation in the mass media and blogs and forums. I begin with the topic of addiction—a perennial favorite of the media and one which seems to crop up often when people ask me about video games.

Many readers will have encountered the notion of video game addiction in newspaper and magazine accounts. Some may know players they believe to be addicted. Players themselves speak of addiction. How exactly should we think about video game addiction? Dewey provides a useful perspective when he discusses the potential for aesthetic activity to become “overwhelming.” I will use this notion, as well as the work of Seay and Kraut (2007) on “problematic use,” to frame my analysis. I extend Seay and Kraut’s work to encompass social aspects of problematic use.

As discussed in chapter 3, Dewey characterized active aesthetic activity as comprised of pleasurable means, successive phases of activity ending in satisfying completion, and collective expression. The final feature Dewey ascribed to aesthetic activity may help us understand why discourse around video gaming includes the term addiction. Dewey argued that aesthetic activity requires *balance and proportion*—qualities that in some circumstances may readily be lost. The passion that animates aesthetic activity contains within itself a dangerous seed; such passion can transmogrify to an extreme state in which it “overwhelms” us. Dewey (2005) wrote:

There is an element of passion in all aesthetic [activity] . . . [W]hen we are

overwhelmed by passion, as in extreme rage, fear, jealousy, the experience is . . . non-aesthetic . . . [T]he material of the experience lacks elements of balance and proportion. For these can be present only when . . . the act is controlled by an exquisite sense of the relations which the act sustains—*its fitness to the occasion and the situation*. (emphasis added)

Aesthetic activity may become overwhelming in circumstances of particular occasions and relations. The potential for aesthetic activity to devolve into a degenerate form of itself is not an inherent quality of any particular aesthetic activity (such as video gaming) but depends on the specificities of a subject's situation.

Obviously, millions of people play video games and are not addicted. We must reach beyond the artifact of the game itself as an explanation for why some people play to excess. It is easy to forget this simple logic under the influence of sensationalism in media accounts that deliver dispatches on the shocking nature of video games: this player sat at his computer too long and keeled over, that one dropped out of school because he could not concentrate on his studies, another abandoned friends and family for the game (see Chee and Smith 2005; Golub and Lingley 2008). Rettberg (2008) observed, tongue in cheek:

[T]he popular media have used the term [*addiction*] while terrifying us with stories of teenage *World of Warcraft* players (these stories are typically set in China, and like horror movies, the victims are always teens) literally *dying* because they *forgot to eat*.

In media accounts, the video game itself is the malefactor. The stories engender what Cohen (1973) called a “moral panic.” As Cohen wrote in his study of Mods and Rockers in 1960s England:

Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person, or group of persons, emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylised and stereotypical fashion by the mass media . . . Socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions.

The notion of video game addiction followed this pattern precisely. In

addition to stories produced by journalists and promulgated by mass media, credentialed experts came forth to denounce video games. Orzack, a clinical psychologist at Harvard, said that she believed 40 percent of *World of Warcraft* players were addicted (quoted in Grohol 2006). Her declaration was widely reported in the media and contributed to the arousal of concern and disquiet about *World of Warcraft* and other video games.

To its credit, the American Medical Association's approach has been more measured. There is no entry for video game addiction in the *American Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. For now, the AMA has stated that there is insufficient evidence to declare video gaming addictive (Addiction 2007). However, its members proposed that the American Psychiatric Association assess whether such a diagnosis should be included in the 2012 version of the Manual.

While this determination is being made, we can turn to Seay and Kraut's (2007) research. To avoid the baggage of the word "addiction," they deployed the term "problematic use." Seay and Kraut defined problematic use as game play that displaces important activities such as schoolwork, maintaining friendships, or family activities.

The authors found that players exhibiting problematic use scored low on measures of self-regulation. They argued that lack of self-regulation *precedes* problematic use of video games and that games themselves do not cause problematic use. In a longitudinal survey study of 499 video game users, the authors reported:

[T]he overwhelming majority of those surveyed indicate no elevation in . . . problematic use. This seems to indicate that . . . online gaming is . . . an enjoyable, or at least, benign activity.

This research supports the commonsense notion that problem players bring their problems to the game. As with most things that lead to addiction or problematic use (such as alcohol or overeating), generally the need precedes the object rather than the object creating the need.

"Addiction" is a cultural term in the game community as well as a clinical term used by psychiatrists and psychologists. What do players themselves say about addiction? The term is variably inflected in player discourse. Depending on context, it can be used humorously, to signal membership in an in-group of players (two related uses), or to denote problematic use.

In the following, Mark joked about the “addictive” qualities of *World of Warcraft*:

Mark: I have a really good friend in Germany who actually is another guy that I got into the game.

BN: You’re an ambassador for the game.

Mark: Oh, I’m terrible. I’m like a pusher with crack on these things.

This post from the Scarlet Raven website included a joke about playing *WoW* at work. The word “Addict” was bolded and in blue:

Boss: “So Johnson, what did you accomplish today?”

Addict: “Well Sir, I killed over 60 Orc Shaman and Warriors, I got lucky and got a ‘blue’ off a random mob and I leveled! . . . Er . . . I mean, I answered over 60 phone calls, I got lucky and sent off a ‘priority blue’ email and I finished the TPS report.”

Boss: “Very good Johnson! Keep up the good work.”

For players, the term addiction was often used with a positive connotation. If players said they were addicted to *WoW*, it usually meant they had a deep connection to the game and were members of a group of people who understood its pleasures. A video gamer could claim to be an addict, deliberately choosing a strong term to connote enjoyment of the game and its separation from ordinary activities. One of my guildmates once remarked, “If only real life was this addicting.” A college student said in an interview:

[*WoW*] is fun on many levels, and it’s like a real world because you know you are playing with other real human beings rather than AI [artificial intelligence]. . . . It’s addicting.

On the other hand, players recognized a pernicious side to excessive game play. They used the term addiction to describe players who spent too much time playing. Internet sites provided forums where players, or former play-

ers, could confess their addictions to “Warcrack.” Posts on such sites tended to be somewhat uninformative, enumerating the number of hours spent at the game rather than analyzing why the game involved players so much. But some posters provided insights:

If you make game friends, [playing *World of Warcraft*] is an easy way to waste hours. It’s like hanging out on the corner or in a club, but on a really lazy level. There’s no dressing up, spending money, etc. All of the human interaction for very low cost. And everyone looks so attractive and appealing. Real life is full of faults. The reality is real life can’t compare. Real life is work, plain and simple. (Apadwe n.d.)

This player offered up the same theory as games researchers who describe multiplayer games as third spaces like tree houses or bars (Chee 2006; Steinkuehler and Williams 2006; Williams 2006; Williams et al. 2006). But the player suggested that playing video games was a “lazy” version of such forms of interaction characterized by the unreality of everyone looking “so attractive and appealing.”

The following post satirized the addicted, lonely gamer stereotype:

I’m 13 and im a girl and play wow about 12 hours a day and I also eat alot. It started with me not having any friends at school, so I got wow because I heard people on there were nice. When I made a bunch of friends I started skipping school to play and eventually failed school. My parents were always drinking and yelling at me and when they were drunk one day I got them to get me broadband. All I did is play wow and eat but I tried to stop. I am a guild leader and I have Six 70’s and I raid every day with three diffrent guilds. I have also begun drinking alot while I play sometimes passing out at the keyboard. And I really want to get better with my life its just the game is so fun and really hard to quit. It’s hard to go back to school because my parents have also started to do crack and usually cant take me, and when they can I am usually in a raid or doing PvP. someone on wow told me about this and suggested I share my story. I play a male character because guys dont like me and think im ugly. (Apadwe n.d.)

As with many stereotypes, there is a grain of truth informing the images and vocabulary the stereotype invokes—in this case the young person with

huge problems who turns to a game for solace. I interviewed a clinical psychologist, Dr. Jane Kingston, who worked with clients whose use of video games fell into the problematic use category. She reported that problems with video games seem to be triggered by existing problems, as Seay and Kraut found, and that it can be difficult to break the cycle. She described a wife who came to her for help because her husband brought his laptop computer to the social events they attended and played games. He did not see anything wrong with his actions. She told me about a young child who resisted his parents' attempts to limit his use of console games. He brought the console to Kingston's office and threw it at his mother in a fit of anger. Kingston said the relationship between the two had been troubled. A high school student played *WoW* to the point of dropping out of school. Neither of his parents cared that he played *WoW* or that he had left school (shades of the satire). Kingston observed that she was not sure, in this case, whether playing *WoW* was the worst thing the teen could have done. He lived in an area in which marijuana was farmed and freely available, but he had not become a doper. She noted that the lack of services to help the young man, whose parents chose to neglect him, meant that he was at risk for activities potentially more destructive than playing *World of Warcraft*.

Problematic use of video games is sensible only in relation to other competing activities (since gaming does not have drastic physical effects). Addiction occurs when actions that produce a feeling of well-being and can be beneficial or benign under most circumstances (drinking alcohol, gambling, exercise, sports) supplant or threaten other vital human activities. A Chinese player said:

Addiction is when you don't do anything else anymore. When you quit everything for the game. The person gives up other things. If you give up a lot of things for the game, then you are addicted.

The husband who took his computer to social outings, the boy who threw the console at his mother, the student who dropped out of school—all were clearly engaged in activities that lacked fitness for the occasion and situation. Dewey wrote of the *relations* sustained by an act, denoting its relationship to the larger context of related activities. It is this relation that must be examined in assessing whether a set of actions is aesthetic or has overwhelmed us.

As Dewey theorized, aesthetic activity is potentially dangerous because of the very quality of passion it carries. How do players manage this danger? I have encountered a few players who, in my opinion, played too much. It is undeniable that for some people *World of Warcraft* supplanted vital everyday activities. But more often I observed players self-regulating as Seay and Kraut described.

Building on the work of Bandura (1999) and other psychologists, Seay and Kraut identified three components of self-regulation: *self-monitoring*, that is, observing how much one is playing; *evaluation against perceived standards*, that is, assessing whether play is excessive in light of other responsibilities (similar to Dewey's notion of balance and proportion); and *self-consequation*, that is, self-administration of reward or punishment based on the outcome of self-monitoring and evaluation.

The following website post by Kel, a Scarlet Raven college student, depicts the three components of self-regulation in the player's own words:

I suspended my account last night, since school has reared its ugly head. I have to focus everything on bringing up my grades over the next month or so. Hopefully I can get my act together and it won't be any longer than that. Good luck, and hope to see you all around the forums!

Kel observed that he was playing too much and it had affected his grades. The self-imposed consequence was suspension of his account. He identified reward and punishment: he would suspend the account and then reward himself in a month with renewed play if his grades improved.

To expand the notion of self-regulation, let us examine how it emerges in, and is shaped by, social activity. The very fact that Kel publicly posted this explanation of his actions is the first indication that his problems were not an isolated psychological phenomenon but an aspect of a shared community predicament. The community should be informed of, and involved in, his problems. The responses to his post demonstrated healthy community response, legitimating his actions and providing emotional support for the difficulties involved.

One guildmate responded:

Gonna miss ya Kel, but School first. No doubt you'll have your grades back up in no time. Drop in and chat with us here when you can. /hug

Another wrote:

Hopefully it all works out for you and you can get back asap!

Aww, now I'm not gonna get my Belt of Blasting for a while.

Hehe, regardless, good luck on your endeavors.

These players recognized and articulated that other activities should take precedence over game play. They provided moral endorsement of Kel's decision, as well as social support in encouraging him to prioritize activities to maintain an acceptable level of performance at school.

The responses were crafted with humor, as in the second poster's feigned regret at the postponement of the Belt of Blasting (an item Kel knew how to make), as well as affection (“/hug”) and friendship (“gonna miss ya”). The responses likely eased, at least a little, the austerity Kel imposed on himself. While the invitations to return to the game, and to continue communicating through the website, might seem elements of temptation, they also tied Kel to a community that was clearly telling him to back off the game for awhile, making the admonitions more forceful.

A shared morality, which the first response succinctly expressed as “School first,” ratified Kel's decision in the public space of the forum. Such open discussion of a player heading toward problematic use served to make visible to all who read the Scarlet Raven forums the possibility of problematic use, and the guild's moral stance. We may add to Seay and Kraut's formulation a social dimension in which players constructed, through discourse in guild websites, a morality regarding problematic use and a social space in which to express and enact moral principles. This is not to say that all guilds would respond as Scarlet Raven did, but to argue that problematic use finds expression in the collective activity of players and guilds.

Work may also preempt play. The following post by Templeton was offered in the context of several guild members having recently taken breaks from the game:

Ok, ok, so I know that it is officially “against the rules” to have any more folks take a break, but I am afraid that it is time for me to take one. Got a lot of RL stuff going one, with a potential change in jobs, other things that

are taking (and need a lot of man hours) time to make sure that they are taken care of.

My account will stay active, because I do enjoy the game, and love raiding, but I have to spend about 3 weeks focusing on these things to make sure that my experience stays fun, and that I can get these things done.

Look for me in a little bit. I will still check the boards [forums], and feel free to PM [private message] me.

I'll be back soon.

Templeton

A guildmate responded:

Well we will be waiting for ya when you get back! GL [good luck] taking care of things, we do surely understand that RL always comes first. See ya soon!

Another said:

You better damn well be back soon!

-Val

PS. On a serious note, RL > WoW . . . take your time getting things worked out!

Pithy, unambiguous directives established a moral algebra: "RL always comes first" and "RL > WoW." The posts expressed friendship, the second in the form of a playful command to be back soon but with contrapuntal advice in the postscript to take time working things out.

Sapem wrote:

I need to start spending more time with my 16 month old son in the afternoons and weekends so ive decided to take a break from gaming for a while

who knows I might come back in a month or so hopefully, I really enjoyed being with u guys

As with Kel and Templeton, guildmates' responses endorsed Sapem's action; for example, Pennit wrote, "Good decision on priorities. Have fun!"

Sapem, Kel, and Templeton were textbook cases of self-regulation— younger adults with the maturity to back away. Younger players sometimes required more external support. Baalzamin, a high-school-age player, wrote the following (slightly incoherent) post:

see you later . . . much probably

yea. . . lots of stuff going on right now, got in trouble for being truent that made me have bad grades (.38 grade point average) that i got in trouble for. just not going to be on wow for a while. . . just letting you know.

it came so fast . . . my dad got home shut the internet off took my computer out of my room took my car keys took me down to my mom's and then took my phone. . . it sucked.

One guildmate responded:

Take a break or quit if ya need, School is much more important than any game and if your grades are slipping then its time to focus on important RL stuff. See ya when you get back.

Another joked but sent a serious message:

I say drop out of school, sell drugs for a living, and play WoW full time . . . err No I dont. Quit screwing your self and get your grades up Bro! Its a video game lol

The responses to the three problematic users were written by different guildmates, but all expressed a common sensibility. All clearly denoted actions deemed appropriate for players spending too much time in *World of Warcraft*.

Problematic use may be mitigated by negotiation with those affected

by a player's actions. Rowena, a graduate student I interviewed, described how her boyfriend would "flake out" on her when they had a dinner date, standing her up because he was playing *WoW*. She negotiated a rule in the relationship in which he would tell her when he would be playing, adding an additional hour to make sure he could fulfill his promise to spend time with her. He accepted this plan to manage game and girlfriend time, and it worked well. The couple later separated over other issues but remained on good terms.

One tank in Scarlet Raven left the game completely under pressure from his fiancée. Months later he returned, saying in guild chat, openly, and with no irony, that he had "my addiction under control." After the absence, he played less frequently and in a more moderate, less competitive way. Previously he had been a raid leader and had always sought the best equipment. Upon returning, his play was more casual.

Sometimes problematic use appeared to stem not from lack of self-regulation but from a vacancy in a player's life. Rowena recounted how her brother Bryce, uninterested in his high school studies, became immersed in *World of Warcraft*. The parents tried everything they could to separate him from the game. He became angry—it was the only time Rowena saw him throw "temper tantrums." She observed that his behavior was to be partially understood as a product of the game being "very motivating," invoking its Skinnerian aspects.

When Bryce went to college, he discovered a love of biology. He reduced his playtime dramatically, finding the balance of which Dewey spoke. Alienation from the high school curriculum created a vacuum in which the stimulation of the game became an attractive choice. Once he moved on to other interests, he had no difficulty regulating playtime.

Often self-regulation is simple; players just know when to stop. Many Chinese players discussed how their *WoW* play changed in response to the scheduling of exams or schoolwork. Typical comments were "Before my exams, I played a lot," "I played more when I did not have exams to study for," "I played a lot during summer vacation last year," and "Now school is going to start and I have nearly stopped playing to prepare."

Players sometimes used the word addicted to describe a playful relation to the game. Cultural terms such as addiction stretch, exaggerate, and distort what they express. But they are not random; they loop back on standard meanings of the words they playfully twist. Addiction in this con-

text connoted not clinical illness but attachment to the game, the forgoing of activities that competed with *WoW* (such as television), and, ironically, freedom in choosing if, when, and how to play. When a player playfully said, “I’m addicted!” he declared his attachment to the game while at the same time signaling, through deliberate, ironic use of a loaded word, that he knew what he was doing. There was a kind of extreme autonomy in pretending to flirt with addiction—staying outside of it while engaging, with passion, an activity a player loved.

What kinds of activities did players forgo when devoting hours to *World of Warcraft*? One thing given up by some (though not all) *WoW* players was television. In the interviews, many players reported that they had stopped watching or had reduced viewing time:

Mark: And, you know, my evenings. I clear time in my evenings. You know, I don’t watch TV particularly.

BN: So, have you stopped watching TV, or do you do that less?

Mark: Not as a consequence of *WoW*, but as a consequence of gaming, yes.

On a Blizzard website in which players discussed how *WoW* affected their lives, one poster wrote:

I’ve met quite a few couples who played together at night, which to me was better than TV together. It’s certainly better than one partner viewing porn or entering Second Life. (Second Life n.d.)¹

Some players reported that they had largely abandoned, or seriously curtailed, exposure to media such as television and books. More research is needed to establish the extent to which *WoW* displaces competing activities (see Bainbridge 2007). Careful investigation is necessary to discover the nuances of new behaviors. For example, players sometimes watched television while playing *WoW*, especially during activities that did not require much concentration (such as fishing).

Players often developed playlists, replacing *WoW*’s music. (I was always aghast when I heard this because I loved the *WoW* sound track.) In addition, many players drank alcohol and smoked marijuana while playing *World of*

Warcraft. I was alerted to this early on by my undergraduate students and began to notice guild and character names that clearly pointed to substance use. Players often spoke of drinking and smoking while playing. In guild or party chat they joked about the drinks they were mixing or how many beers they had had or talked about paraphernalia such as bongos. I mention these activities to propose that more research is needed. The level of escape or stimulation, or some other dimension, attained by immersion in a video game, layered with the altered consciousness of drugs or alcohol, suggests not necessarily addiction but the construction of a complex experience achieved by artful composition of a heterogeneous mix of technical and organic resources. This is not to say that drunken facerolling is a sophisticated form of play, but to indicate that the subtleties of the magic circles into which we propel ourselves are not yet understood.

Turkle (1984) spoke of the “holding power” of video games, observing (1998):

The term addiction is most usefully saved for experiences with substances like heroin, which are always dangerous, always bad, always something to turn away from.

I think, though, that we must leave open the possibility that addiction, or problematic use, perplexes because it may arise when we are overwhelmed by the passion of activities we are deeply attached to, which, on their own, are not “always bad.” It is precisely the regulation of such activities that engages public discourse, as well as private anxieties about friends and family members who appear to be overwhelmed. The potential for positive aesthetic experience to overreach itself into undesirable states of excess entails an ambiguousness with which we continually wrestle.

It seems important to question rhetorical moves that designate some activities as worthy of moral panic while leaving others aside, for example, calling out video games as addictive while giving obsessive sports fandom a free pass even though such fandom may affect marital or family life. Why do politicians (on a fairly regular schedule it seems) demonize rock music while ignoring elaborate supports for activities, such as gambling, which are, in some cases, ruinous to families?

Whether we entertain notions of problematic use or addiction, normative questions follow. Is playing *World of Warcraft* better than competing

activities such as watching television or viewing movies or reading books? How does *WoW* compare to a steady diet of romance novels or frequenting the sleazier parts of *Second Life*? What if a player (like Bryce) has not developed other interests? Does *WoW* prevent people from getting dead drunk? Players need at least some cognitive capacity, so even though they may play and drink the game could provide a moderating influence. *WoW* might even have unusual redeeming social value; one member of my guild, a felon with several convictions for car theft, said that playing *WoW* kept him from returning to prison.

Just what should people be doing instead of playing games? The notion of video game addiction provokes as much moral as clinical inquiry. There is no normative answer my investigation can suggest, but I hope it brings forward discussion of what it is that people are giving up to play games, the vacancies in their lives they may be attempting to fill, levels of stimulation they appear to be seeking, and how we might think about ways to intelligently assess the impact of video gaming on the larger life of the culture.