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My Life as a Night Elf Priest

Nardi, Bonnie

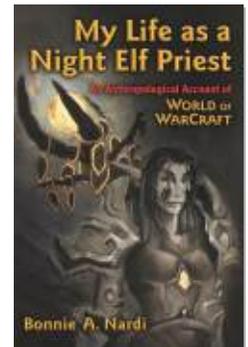
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CHAPTER EIGHT

Gender

From the moment one creates a character and must choose its gender, gender is always present, in varying ways, in *World of Warcraft*. This chapter examines how gendered experience in *World of Warcraft* was constructed in two distinctive ways: through patterns of discourse and through the design of the game. I argue that discourse practices created a “boys’ tree house” but that the game itself countered with surprisingly feminine, domestic nuances.

The discussion is based on my participation in several guilds on North American servers. I believe my data are descriptive of gendered practice in most North American guilds. However, specialized guilds such as Christian guilds, gay guilds, guilds of professional colleagues, and so on, may enforce different rules of discourse. I eagerly await future analyses of gendered practice in such guilds, as well as those from other parts of the world. My observations on discourse in battlegrounds, general chat, and other public chat channels were consistent across the servers on which I played.

The Boys’ Tree House

[13:53] Dan: So how did you get into this game?

[13:54] Mrs. Pain: my husband

[13:54] Dan: How old are you by the way?

[13:54] Mrs. Pain: 39

[13:54] Mrs. Pain: I am a mother of 2 girls

[13:54] Mrs. Pain: and a wife of 21 yrs

Many female players, such as Mrs. Pain (interviewed by an undergraduate in instant messaging), found their way to *World of Warcraft* through husband, boyfriend, brother, cousin, or male friend. Other female gamers had been playing competitive video games for years and played *WoW* as one of many games. A few female players were introduced to *WoW* by female friends or relatives.

What did female players find when they stepped into *World of Warcraft*? Competitive video gaming is typically associated with males, and *World of Warcraft*, despite the presence of a healthy minority of females, was a male-dominated space. It was not an unfriendly dominance; female players were talked to, listened to, included, and aided, just as male players were. But the social space was maintained as one in which males set the rhetorical tone. Sexualized, homophobic language was normalized in text and voice chat (although stopping short of what would probably take place in a men's locker room). Male players casually mentioned things like blow jobs and buttsex. They spoke of raping, or being raped by, mobs or players in battlegrounds and arenas. They used words such as douche bag, pussy, cunt, and pimp. The term gay was a generically derisive (and liberally invoked) adjective. Males called players fag, faggot, or homo if displeased or as a joke. Male players sometimes taunted other males by referring to them as "little girls."¹ I label this discourse "male" because it was primarily (though not exclusively) males who engaged it.²

Female players, numerically a minority, and more conservative in speech, were, I argue, a presence in a boys' tree house.³ Discourse was led by males; they used sexualized and homophobic language more often than females and language that female players nearly universally avoided such as mentions of rape and the use of words like cunt and homo. However, the boys' tree house in *WoW*, while male oriented, was a complex space; males maintained control through the use of aggressive language, but the tree house allowed females more latitude in speech and action than everyday life typically does—latitude they often leveraged and enjoyed.

My observations on male rhetorical practice in *WoW* are consistent with those of Golub (2007) who studied a North American raiding guild. He reported a typical incident of sexualized language:

At one point, one [raider's] microphone sent some noise across the channel. The [male] raid leader asked . . . "John . . . is that a dick in your mouth?"

Golub (2007) was quite clear on the use of masculinist talk in *World of Warcraft* and that such talk was “transgressive” with respect to the larger culture. Apart from this work I have found few analyses that highlight the casualness and prevalence of this style of discourse which I encountered everywhere in *WoW*.

Kavetsky (2008) studied gendered language in a raiding guild. She reported:

[T]he guild’s leadership emphasizes a “family-friendly” atmosphere—a trait noted by virtually all those interviewed. This does not mean that there are no off-color jokes (these are predominantly men in their twenties and thirties, after all), but rather reflects an attempt to create an environment where a variety of people feel comfortable.

Kavetsky did not explain what kinds of language the guild accepted from “men in their twenties and thirties.” She reported that males used language that females did not use but was silent on the nature of the language and its impact, naturalizing it with the parenthetical “men in their twenties and thirties, after all.” Her topic was gendered language in *World of Warcraft*, so we might expect analysis of how male joking was handled within the “family-friendly atmosphere.”⁴

Discourse inhabited its own sphere in *World of Warcraft* in text and voice chat. The free expression permitted in these channels enabled males to establish rhetorical practice as they liked. Voice chat was, of course, completely outside any means of official discipline, and while game masters took action when racial slurs in text chat in public channels were reported (which happened rarely), there was little they could (or wanted?) to do given the much higher prevalence of sexualized, homophobic terms.

The following is an anecdote that I believe captures the way in which rhetorical practice was deployed to position women in the tree house.

One evening I was playing in a 25-man pug composed of a core of players from one guild and an assortment from other guilds, including me, to make up a late-night run. After a wipe, as we were regrouping, the raid leader asked in voice chat if there were any real life females present apart from the one he knew. Though it was clearly a setup, I answered (for Science of course) “Ya, me, Innikka, I’m female.” The raid leader said he had gotten

a fortune cookie at lunch in which he was promised a wish. “Innikka, would you please immediately email me naked pictures of yourself?” he asked. I replied, very truthfully, “I’m pretty sure you don’t want pictures of me.” He said, with mock sadness, “Ah, I knew I would not get the wish the fortune cookie promised.”

No one commented on this little exchange or laughed. Females were implicitly asked to agree to the condition that they were participating in an activity in which males were the dominant gender. The other woman in the raid was in my guild. She was a skilled player and had been accepted as a member of the late-night group. I was being tested and put on notice that the guys were in charge.

When such an event occurs, there are two choices. The player can play along and continue to play the game or she can leave. There is no opportunity for reasoned discourse or a way to win through humor. No matter how clever a response a player might come up with, the mere asking of the question and her presence as a small minority ensure that she has been called out as the exception.⁵

And anyway, it was just a joke! Vandenberg (1998) observed of play that “The ease with which the real can be rendered not real, by the simple signal, ‘This is play,’ reveals the contingency and fluidity of the social construction of reality.” Such fluidity is a means by which behaviors in which one group acts out at the expense of another can be rendered unaccountable.

Mrs. Pain reported that her daughter refused to play:

[13:56] Mrs. Pain: my daughter tried playing but she thought the
players were too rude

[13:56] Mrs. Pain: I have certain ppl [people] I play with

[13:56] Mrs. Pain: and being an adult I could handle myself

Mrs. Pain accommodated to “rudeness” by cultivating an in-game social network and through the resource of her maturity. Her daughter made the decision to not play.

In the workplace or classroom, in family activities, and in many mixed-gender venues, the kind of masculine discourse that was utterly normal in *World of Warcraft* would not be permitted. Everyday life is rife with male dominance, but it is generally hidden under a welter of coded lan-

guage, polite niceties, and superficial civility. In-game, such dominance was embraced, exaggerated, and given free expression in coarse masculine language.⁶ Vandenberg (1998) noted that in play:

It is thrilling to transform the real to the not real, to journey into forbidden areas of darkness behind the public mask of conventionality, and to become aware of the freedom to do so in the process.

This discussion raises many questions for which I do not have answers. Why did males find it amusing to engage in sexualized, homophobic talk? Why was calling someone a “little girl”—not a “little boy”—so derisive? Golub (2007) reported that such discourse realized “intense camaraderie.” However, this is something to be explained rather than asserted.

Was *World of Warcraft* a social environment in which “a woman today can do everything as long as she does it in relative subordination to a man” (Haavind, quoted in Corneliussen 2008)? Was *WoW* discourse the result of the suppression of certain kinds of masculine discourse in ordinary life in favor of the politically correct? Was such discourse the acting out of young males? Pearce (2008) reported that baby boomer age men in the game *Uru* were less inclined to speak in the ways common to *WoW*. However, I observed men in their thirties, forties, and fifties regularly engaging in masculinist talk in *WoW*, so I am not so sure.

Women sometimes used terms for females such as bitch, slut, whore, and hooker (an apparent acceptance, on the part of the less powerful, of the logics of the powerful; see Freire 2000). They flirted and engaged frequently, and with enjoyment, in explicit sexual banter. I do not want to represent female *WoW* players as shrinking violets because they were not. For some, the boys’ tree house was a space in which they were welcome to speak any way they wanted.

But female players generally avoided hardcore masculinist rhetoric. They did not belittle other players by calling them “little girl” (or “little boy” for that matter). They sometimes used “gay” to disparage (much less often than males), but I never heard a female call anyone “homo.” Female players avoided the language of what one player referred to as “the female denigrations,” by which she meant words such as cunt or slang terms for genitalia such as clit (see Thelwall 2008). Female players did not joke about rape.

It is unclear how female players felt about such language. Since they did not typically employ it themselves, at some level it was rejected. One evening a female player, Karlin—herself given to very colorful language—said in voice chat, with dismay, “Sahm just called us cunts.” Sahm had used the word in text chat. He made a joking apology. Having been called out by a popular female member of the guild, I did not hear him use the word again (although others did).

Sometimes it seemed that male players sustained the atmosphere of the tree house simply by invoking masculinist terms. As a male player, Barbarino, came online, the following comments were made by male players with no rancor:

Jene: barbarino is a slut.

Popzikal: he is gay and faggot

Barbarino did not respond, nor did anyone say anything. It was as though the ether of the chat channel must be regularly refreshed with the recitation of sexualized, homophobic words.

WoW was an arena in which males set the tone for the use of language prohibited in many everyday settings (notably school and work). However, the magic circle may also invite women to “forbidden areas of darkness.” In the private chat channel for healers opened during raids in Scarlet Raven, women sometimes discussed sexual methodologies in humorous detail. There were usually a few males present in the channel, but they said nothing. Having a gender majority and a silenced male population seemed to provide a space in which women took the lead in subversive talk because they could control the terms of the conversation. However, this was largely an invisible, private channel seen by only a few in the guild. In guildwide chat, as well as *WoW*'s other chat channels, males established the dominant rhetorical practice.⁷ Golub (2007) suggested that raiding activity, and its associated rhetorical practice, was “deeply tied to [players’] sense of masculine self-competence and control.” He did not elaborate on this theme, but his comment points to the need for more research to understand how a sense of male self-competence and control plays out in a competitive game world in which females are also present.

The Interactive Gendered Landscape

Despite all the sexualized talk, possibilities for actual flirtation and romance in *World of Warcraft* were complicated by the real life gender imbalance of players. The Internet is, of course, a great sexual shopping mall, so I was curious about the ways in which males and females negotiated a space in which sex was an entrenched part of the discourse, many young, unattached people were present, and anonymity provided cover for explorations difficult or impossible in real life.

I will argue that *WoW* players evolved two interactive planes in which gendered practice occurred. The dominant plane dampened heterosexuality, creating a relaxed space in which males did not have to worry about heterosexual activity. A secondary plane sustained heterosexual flirtation and romance. The dominant plane, produced and reproduced through the repetition of several practices which I will describe, yielded a stable, predictable backdrop tailored to the desires of many male players. The secondary plane, episodic and erratic, was more likely to entail rupture and tension while at the same time offering possibilities for pleasurable intimacies for both genders.⁸

The Dominant Plane

The first plane was constructed in part through the practice of male players playing female characters. In a North American sample of *WoW* players, Yee (2005) found that 23 percent of real life males' characters were female characters. This choice—to play a female character—precluded a player from presenting as a male who might engage the interests of a female player through a (virtual) male body. Male players playing female characters erased the possibility of flirtations deploying the character as a resource, choosing instead a female fantasy character at which to gaze. Not only did the female character serve its own player's desires, at the same time, it made provision for the gaze of other males. Male players came together for “girl watching,” an activity stereotypically characteristic of all-male groups and consistent with the boys' tree house.

Males getting together to watch girls would be likely to choose attractive female characters at which to gaze, and—no surprise—they did so (see Yee 2005; DiGiuseppe and Nardi 2007). The servers were full of alluring

female Night Elves and Blood Elves, while the homely ladies of the Dwarf and Orc races were rarely seen. Distribution of male characters across the races was more even (Yee 2005). Gazing at female characters was, for males, a significant aspect of the visual experience of play.

When we interviewed males about why they chose female characters, they said two things. “Why not?” and “If I have to look at a someone’s ass for three hours, it’s going to be a girl’s.” (Recall that the character is typically seen in third-person perspective.) The latter comment was a *WoW* cliché and was mentioned in several interviews.

I supervised four undergraduate male players who conducted independent studies on various aspects of *World of Warcraft*. I asked them if I should believe men who said they just liked looking at female characters—was that really the reason they chose them? Was there something deeper? Was an identity workshop (Turkle 1995) taking place in *WoW*? Were males finding their inner female? The students said of males who said they liked looking at their female characters, “Believe them!”

My in-game experience supported this view. Both male and female players acknowledged that males liked looking at attractive female characters. One evening when I had just joined a new guild, I was talking in voice chat and a male player said, “A Night Elf who’s really a girl!” A female player rejoined, “Guys just like Night Elves because of their boobs.”

When one of my guildmates changed his male character to a female (something players could do for a fee), the guild teased him mercilessly about his “sex change operation.” In defense, he typed into the guild chat window, “i didn’t wanna keeping looking at a guy character.” This logic was taken to be transparent and obvious, and no one questioned it.

Through the design of certain of the female characters, *WoW* provided a resource to reproduce a standard gender dynamic, the male gaze (see Mulvey 1975). However, visually, things were pretty tame. While the male gaze was sustained in *WoW*, in particular through the design of the Human, Night Elf, and Blood Elf racials, as well as some of the NPCs, and a few items of “kombat lingerie” (Fron et al. 2007b), for the most part, female characters were relatively modest. Other video games contain far more egregious body and costume designs (see Taylor 2003a; Hayes 2005; Fron et al. 2007b). And though males tended to like Blood Elves and Night Elves, *WoW* offered a range of female character types of varying attractiveness, again unlike many games (see Corneliussen 2008).

Further shaping of the gendered landscape ensued from the common rhetorical practice of males calling each other slut, hooker, whore, or bitch, terms typically associated with women. This discourse had the effect of deleting sexual difference among males and females—such difference being a precondition for heterosexuality—in the first plane, as anyone could be called anything by anyone.

Players usually assumed that other players were male. In pugs, players often addressed me as “man,” “dude” or “bro” or referred to me as “he,” for example, “Ask the priest if he has any mage food on him.” No one that I observed pretended to be a girl when he had a female character; there was no “gender bending” (see Yee 2005).¹⁰

The salience of possible heterosexual encounters further receded in the first plane through the way in which players used flirtatious emotes. Emotes were one-word commands that caused the character to animate and/or voice actions and which output a text message in the chat window. If, for example, Innikka selected another player with the mouse and typed /sexy, the command generated the text “Innikka thinks Zeke is a sexy devil.”

Just as with the terms hooker-whore-slut-bitch, the emotes were used within and across real life genders, blunting heterosexual impact. Common emotes for flirting included /hug, /kiss, /lick, /moan, /whistle, /love, /wink, /grin, /cuddle, /flirt. Players’ habit of invoking emotes between and within genders rendered them “safe,” reducing the risk of making a move that might be rejected; a player could select a player at whom to direct an emote without feeling as though he or she had made a declaration of interest.

For male players, retrenching to the boys’ tree house to watch girls and engage in the activities of the game created a space in which pressure to compete for females was reduced or simply deleted. By flattening the interactive sexual landscape, males established the choice for themselves of focusing on performance, and kicking back to enjoy rough talk, without the need for the sometimes vexing activities of heterosexuality. It took work on their part to make this happen: choosing female characters, using gendered words across genders, and “flirting” with their own gender. The regularity with which these actions were engaged, to the point where they sometimes appeared to be random (as with the comments about Barbarino), suggests that males had considerable interest in undertaking actions to ensure the sustenance of the dynamics of the tree house.

Another practice suggesting a male desire to retrench from heterosexu-

ality, within the confines of *WoW*, occurred during late-night runs. Players sometimes announced in chat that they might be forced to depart in order to attend to their wives' sexual needs ("damn it, she's horny" "my wife, um, needs me"). Although attentive to their wives' needs (possibly to avoid serious aggro), these players were attempting to delay freely offered sexual activity in favor of playing *World of Warcraft*. Sometimes a player left for a short while, presumably to negotiate the timing of the necessary activities. One player returned and deadpanned, "no problem. she's out cold."

The dominant plane was shaped by and for males. How did females fit in? The first plane was not maintained to shield females from the risks of heterosexual interaction as it was for males; female players squeezed into its interstices. Hayes (2005) observed, "Women have different interpretations of and responses to overtly gendered practices within video games." Some females teased males about their proclivities toward Elves. Some ignored the machinations of the tree house and just played the game. Others negotiated the rhetorical space. For example, occasionally male utterances elicited a heartfelt female "ewww" in the chat window, indicating that the grossness of a comment was too much. Such negotiations were relatively uncommon, but when they occurred the impact could be significant, such as Karlin's reaction to Sahn's name-calling—a clear statement of her personal limits.

It is also possible that the actions that comprised the first plane bespoke complex gender dynamics such as males' confused feelings about other males, and fears of homosexuality. I do not have data with which to explore such possibilities, though they are worth pursuing and not inconsistent with my interpretations of the actions of the first plane, which probably operated at multiple levels. Following Bakhtin (1982), we should consider "any written discourse an unfinished social dialogue," and it is my hope that this discussion will stimulate further research analyzing the complexities of gendered rhetorical practice in games such as *World of Warcraft*, a topic oddly missing from the literature.

The Secondary Plane

The secondary plane of gendered activity, a counterpoint to the first, incorporated cross-gender intimacy. In any space with males and females, boy will meet girl. Entangled with the mutations and transfigurations of cross-gender characters, rhetorical practices, and exaggerated gender norms,

were the simple desires of ordinary people for interaction with the opposite sex. It is easy to overlook this pervasive, fundamental reality in academic discussions of “constructing gender” and the like. The flattening of the sexual landscape in the first plane did not eliminate possibilities for flirtation and romance; it merely offered the choice not to worry about them. Flirtatious and romantic activities were, however, definitely present in *World of Warcraft*. For those who engaged them, whether married or not, they offered an aspect of play considerably more difficult to maneuver in real life where such activities are more likely to be taken seriously, leading to the possibility of rejection, aggro on the part of significant others, grievous misconstruals, disciplinary measures at work, or complex love affairs. In *WoW*, people could play at flirting—no/few strings attached. As Vandenberg (1998) observed, play has a built-in escape hatch:

[In play] the real can be rendered not real, by the simple signal, “This is play.”

This is not to say that real romance did not blossom out of playing-at-flirting in *World of Warcraft* or that flirting did not sometimes have serious in-game consequences. Occasionally, in the midst of a thousand ephemeral little flirtations, more serious developments lay ahead.

Early in the interview cycle, I interviewed (separately) a young player and her mother, both players. The young woman, who was married, had met, in-game, a player with whom she had fallen in love. She came to the brink of divorce, planning a trip to meet her *WoW* lover in the foreign country in which he resided. The mother intervened, urging her daughter to stop playing *World of Warcraft* and mend her marriage. The daughter complied and gave up *WoW*. In the interview, she was wistful about the pleasures of the game, into which memories of romance were woven with remembrance of game elements she described having loved.

Other instances of flirtatious activity entailed perils that played out in relation to performative dimensions of *World of Warcraft*.

Sean participated in a raiding guild of undergraduates. Trouble erupted in his guild when a group of male “e-pimps” and their female “e-hos” who “talked dirty” to them, became a source of tension. During raids, the e-hos directed their talk to the e-pimps, ignoring the other males. The neglected males were livid at their exclusion from the lively sexual banter.

The situation was intolerable for them, and discord grew until guild officers threw the e-pimps and e-hos out of the guild. Tellingly, the sexy guildmates were removed not under the auspices of talking dirty, but by being cast as incompetent players who could not raid properly. The gender issues, though obvious to everyone and unmistakably inscribed in the sexualized terms of the conversation, were not brought to bear as reasons for what Sean called the “purge.” Instead, a performative argument was constructed and accepted, legitimizing the purge as a performative deficiency rather than a dispute among the males.

Serena, a young player I interviewed, was forced to call on personal forbearance to accommodate a female-unfriendly practice in her guild of players in their twenties. Women were not allowed to speak on voice chat during raids. It was considered too disconcerting for the males, whose attentional focus, and thus performative excellence, might be disrupted by the sound of feminine voices. Serena was real life friends with many in the guild and enjoyed raiding with them. She accepted the guild policy but felt it was unnecessary.

A top European raiding guild, Nihilum, was rumored to refuse membership to women. A female blogger/player reported (WorldofWarcraft.com 2007a):

According to GM [guild master] Kungen, there are a lot of reasons they don't recruit females, but the one he highlights is the need for recruits to have a “high abuse tolerance.” And a bit later in the thread, poster Awake adds that female applicants are avoided because of drama.

The construction of drama as a reason for excluding females was consistent with the experiences of Sean's guild, and the rumor was widely believed. However, a member of Nihilum posted, on an official Blizzard forum, that the putative exclusion of women was a false rumor stemming from an “internal joke” within the guild (WorldofWarcraft.com 2007b). The guild member went on to say that although Nihilum in fact had no women, women were free to apply.

The idea of the ban was believed (I first heard mention of it in *Terror Nova*, where it was taken seriously) and generated considerable discussion on blogs and forums. Opinions varied, but some posters endorsed exclusionary practice. One wrote:

It's not a misogynistic ideal for Nihilum to be a guys-only guild; in fact, it's exactly like most sports: there's women's hockey and men's hockey.

In the secondary plane of gendered activity, the tensions of heterosexuality sometimes brought with them old cultural logics even when they distorted conditions under which men and women might share joint performative activity. Physical differences between male and female bodies are presumably the reason for women's and men's hockey. Such differences are not relevant to activity that involves no feats of strength, yet the same argument was made.

That excluding women was a "joke" in Nihilum indicates that the notion of such exclusion was taken to be, on some level, "funny." Would Nihilum have joked about excluding an ethnic or racial group? The guild could not muster a single female player, suggesting de facto exclusionary practice.

Despite the disruptions and tensions occurring in the secondary plane, there was also a good deal of friendly flirtation and real romance. For example, two players, Juli and Nino, whom I had known in Scarlet Raven when they were both single, coincidentally ended up in my new guild, during which time they married. (Although in keeping with the disruptive potentialities of the second plane, an Irish player whom Juli had declared, before her marriage, to have "the sexiest accent," continued to flirt egregiously with her. That she was married seemed to make the flirtation more interesting to him, and I cannot say she discouraged him.)

Much romantic activity undoubtedly occurred in whispers, and of course I have no record of others' whispers. Through my own experiences, it was apparent how casual interactions might move to requests for personal information and expressions of interest. In one somewhat farcical encounter, I inadvertently activated the attentions of a man who was engaged to a woman in the guild whose mother was one of my in-game friends. Let me explain the progression of events (which occurred in the post-Scarlet Raven guild).

Flirtation in *World of Warcraft* often begins with the deployment of emotionally safe, impersonal emotes.¹¹ Although I was known as the guild "goody-goody," and teased as "pure" and in danger of corruption by the sexualized and scatological talk that dominated late-night voice chat, I used the impersonal flirting emotes widely and frequently because I found them funny and everyone enjoyed them. There was one player with whom

I always seemed to trade a long string of emotes; we liked throwing in some of the less common commands such as /ruffle (“Zeke ruffles Innikka’s hair”) and /charm (“Innikka thinks Zeke is charming”).

The guild ran both 10- and 25-man dungeons frequently. I noticed that Zeke engaged Innikka in flirty emoting only in the less challenging 10-man runs. I attributed this to the need for greater concentration in 25-man. One evening, in a 10-man, we needed a character with higher damage abilities for a particular boss. Zeke, a tank, said he would switch to Malore, a mage with high damage. (During a raid, it was possible for a player to leave the raid and the raid to bring in another player.) I whispered to him that I didn’t know Malore was his character. He whispered, “she’s not, i have access to a lot of accounts.” I had played with Malore a few months previously, but she had not logged in recently.

Some time later, Zeke’s whispers grew more personal. I had not seen that there might be anything other than emoting going on, and told him I was married. Zeke then revealed that he was engaged to Malore (whom he had met in *World of Warcraft*) but that the relationship was not going well. The emoting was restricted to the 10-man runs because Mianna, Malore’s mother, attended the 25-man runs. Though things were difficult with Malore, Zeke still felt restraint in the presence of a potential mother-in-law. He had access to Malore’s account because she was his fiancée, and had been vague in answering my question regarding the switch to avoid embarrassment.

Once things were out in the open, we laughed about the comedy of the situation and continued friends. Zeke was not exactly my age, but was older—divorced with a 12-year-old child. On my part, I liked him because he was a good player and always helpful to guildmates (and he was better at the emote game than anyone else). For his part, he said that his feelings were raw from his troubles, and any kind of female approval was a small comfort.

The secondary plane of gendered activity, then, engaged intimacies sometimes no different than those of any online space, affording communicative potentialities from which flirtatious or romantic activities might spring (see, e.g., boyd and Ellison 2007; Bardzell and Bardzell 2008; Toma et al. 2008). At other times, the particularities of the performative contours of *World of Warcraft* shaped expressions of intimacy and the complexities they entailed in the context of game performance. At still other times, con-

ventional cross-gender confusions played out in misreadings schematized by the particularities of social structures (such as guilds and raids) and practices (e.g., sharing accounts) peculiar to *World of Warcraft*.

In sum, what I have called the dominant and secondary planes of gendered interaction in *World of Warcraft* constructed two distinctive orientations. In the first plane, heterosexuality was devitalized in favor of the comforts of the tree house. In the second plane, heterosexuality was engaged, sometimes in relations of tension and discord, and other times in mutually pleasurable interactions between male and female players.

Gender Participation and Game Design

Chapter 4 inquired into the power of software artifacts to direct human activity. This chapter has discussed the effects of the design of female characters on gendered practice in *World of Warcraft*. Most analysis of low rates of female participation in competitive video games focuses on the design of the games themselves. Many studies note that competitive games often include gendered elements unappealing to women (Cassell and Jenkins 1998; Taylor 2003a; Graner Ray 2005; Hayes 2005; Mortensen and Corneliussen 2005; Fron et al. 2007b; Kafai et al. 2008). These analyses highlight issues such as the kombat lingerie (Fron et al. 2007a) female characters may wear, and hypersexualized female body types (Taylor 2003a; Hayes 2005; Fron et al. 2007b). The harsh masculinity of environments depicted in game spaces is seen as off-putting to women (Fullerton et al. 2007). The studies point out that game designers are nearly all male (Graner Ray 2005; Fron et al. 2007b; Consalvo 2008) and that advertising at trade shows is often designed around the girl-watching theme (Fron et al. 2003a). Some games contain elements particularly disturbing to women, e.g., in *EverQuest* there are moments at which a player must run around acquiring gear to cover nakedness (Klastrup 2004, cited in Mortensen and Corneliussen 2005). Other design elements reinforce a surly masculinity—such as *Neverwinter Nights'* brothels (Mortensen and Corneliussen 2005).

What about *World of Warcraft*? Did its design discourage female players? About 20 percent of the North American *WoW* population was female (Yee 2005)—a higher proportion than in many competitive video games such as first-person shooters (Kennedy 2005). But still, nowhere near 50 percent.

This middling number—20 percent—says that something was happening in *World of Warcraft* that fostered a higher than usual number of females. But it also says that something else was happening that kept the figure well under that expected in a random distribution. I believe that *World of Warcraft's* design contained elements of strong appeal to women (and, in interesting ways, men), but that the gender conventions of the boys' tree house forestalled some female players. In addition, the sheer amount of time it took to play *World of Warcraft* may have affected female participation.

I will never forget how enthralled I was when I first approached Darnassus, capital city of the Night Elves. Outside its walls were beautiful meadows colored emerald green and a particularly striking purple-violet. I hadn't expected to find my favorite colors in *World of Warcraft*, especially in such exquisitely complementary shades. I felt at home. I felt dazzled, I felt that the game was designed for me. While appreciating that men may also like these colors, I consider them feminine—they appear in female clothing, jewelry, and upholstery and curtain fabrics; they are not typically associated with the material world of males.

Rather than being expressive of stereotypical masculinist sensibilities, *WoW* was more nuanced, introducing elements appealing to women (and many men) in both game activities and the presentation of the game space. Fullerton et al.'s (2007) description of masculinist games establishes a baseline with which we can compare *World of Warcraft*. They wrote of masculinist games:

Thematically, these games revolve around narratives of warfare, anti-terrorism, invading aliens, zombies, science fiction, combat with robots. Aesthetically, their settings tend to be highly rectilinear, typically manmade spaces, often the bruised and embattled remains of an urban environment, warehouse, office building, space ship, space colony, or high tech laboratory gone horribly wrong. They are typically constructed of hard materials: cinder block, metal grid work, HVAC infrastructure, with heavily mechanical components, reinforced by the sound effects of footsteps echoing on metal or concrete floors. They are often bleak, militaristic, post apocalyptic or futuristic. Spaces are dimly lit and color palettes are dark and monochromatic.

Few women and girls are attracted to game spaces depicting disorder, terror, and violence. Nothing about *World of Warcraft* matched this description

(with the exception of some dark lighting, and that was polychromatic).¹² On the contrary, varying palettes of tertiary colors, the sounds of water or frogs croaking, beautiful night skies, the use of curves and soft shapes, and snug inns, shops, and storefronts, constructed a visual experience congenial to most female players. Although *WoW*'s audio could be cacophonous during battle, it was also the case that in Karazhan harpsichord music was heard. Medieval tunes played in the cozy inns of the capital cities (where one could seat one's character before a roaring fire). Symphonic music in many parts of the game geography was reminiscent of the scoring of feature films, creating a cultured atmosphere—in contrast to the desolation of the games Fullerton et al. describe.

A favorite *WoW* activity was the acquisition of small cuddly pets such as piglets or baby elephants. Such pets would be unthinkable in masculinist games. Seasonal changes in *WoW* graphics included decidedly feminine elements: season-appropriate wreaths, candles, and garlands of flowers festooned the capital cities. Artistically, *WoW* was a long way from menacing footsteps echoing on a concrete floor.

A feminine element of domesticity suffused *WoW*; it was especially evident in the capital cities, which provided a *home*. After bruising battles, a player returned to the safety of, say, Ironforge or Orgrimmar to replenish supplies, auction off loot, bump into friends, watch duels, admire the rare mounts of lucky players. These spaces were the staging ground for seasonal decorations and activities such as the Lunar Festival (around the time of Chinese New Year), Halloween, Christmas, and the Midsummer Fire Festival. The capital cities were clean, orderly, and in perfect repair. They exuded stability and good governance. The masculinist spaces described by Fullerton et al. (2007) were, by contrast, always on the verge of chaos and destruction—hardly places in which to find the colorful decorations beautifying capital cities during holiday events in *World of Warcraft*.

WoW was populated by powerful male and female NPCs. Some of the biggest bosses were female. Corneliussen (2008) observed, "The relatively large number of female NPCs indicates a willingness by Blizzard to break with traditional ways of gendering computer game universes." Male and female characters deployed the same powers, delimited by class not gender. There were neither princesses to be rescued nor dashing male heroes saving the day. Despite *WoW*'s medieval accents, standard gendered fairy tale tropes were turned on their head. Princess Theradras, for example, was a

wonderfully hideous, misshapen gal who put up a tough fight and whose desirable loot made her fun to kill—the opposite of a damsel in distress safe inside a tower awaiting her prince. The male Blood Elves, about as close as *WoW* got to handsome princes, were not the manly studs of fairy tales but amusingly effeminate boy-guys, animated by feminine gestures.¹³

In a popular Web comedy series, *The Guild*, produced by actress, writer, and gamer Felicia Day, the following dialogue (season 2, episode 10) dramatized the opening for female players created by *WoW*'s feminine elements. (The game in the series is a *WoW* knockoff, and the characters play together in a guild called The Knights of Good.)

Codex, the main character, is having a party at her apartment. She is infatuated with a neighbor, Wade. Wade shows up with a tall, self-confident girl, Riley, who makes Codex feel even more insecure than usual. (Codex and her friends refer to Riley as Stupid Tall Hot Girl.)

Riley: Wade said you were a gamer. That's bitchen! It's so hot to meet another girl who games. It's tight. What games do you play?

Codex: Uh, you know, role playing games mostly.

Riley: Oh (sneers). I'm an FPS girl. Halo, boom, headshots! I'm ranked and stuff.

Codex: Well, I kill stuff too, it's just I wear prettier outfits.

Codex references *WoW*'s feminine aspects through her invocation of “prettier outfits.” She's been owned in the interaction by the competitive girl ranked in a masculine game but manages to point out that she “kills stuff too.” Codex's comment exemplifies the truly disparate elements that come together in *World of Warcraft*: killing stuff and pretty outfits (as well as the other feminine elements they stand in for). The outfits Codex referred to were not male-fantasy kombat lingerie; *WoW* gear included, among many lovely designs, beautifully flowing robes for mages and priests and elegant pants and tunics for rogues and druids.

Game activities, especially crafting and gathering, were cross-gendered. Ducheneaut et al. (2006) reported that 30 to 40 percent of players' time was spent in formal groups, a reasonable proxy for competitive play. When

A *Halo* character



A *World of Warcraft*
Blood Elf



not in the formal grouping of a party, raid, arena, or battleground, and thus engaged in competition, players were busy in varied activities, including buying and selling at the Auction House, crafting gear, collecting materials, brewing potions, cooking, making bandages, fishing, and farming.

In ordinary life, many of these activities are associated primarily with one gender, such as cooking (female) or blacksmithing (male). In *WoW*, both genders engaged in them. It was notable to see grown men (or rather, their characters) sitting before virtual fires frying up fish or baking chocolate cake. Or to come upon the character of a female player smelting metal or heaving a mining pick. Male players tailored elaborate colorful robes for themselves while female players stood before forges pounding out swords. Cooking, sewing, and collecting herbs are traditionally feminine activities while engineering, blacksmithing, and mining are typically masculine. *WoW* offered players the chance to *play at* these gendered activities, allowing them to move back and forth across boundaries of male and female. Players chose activities because they made sense for the development of their characters, contributing to their performative abilities. This motivation obscured and downplayed, but did not remove, gender attributions (see also Corneliussen 2008).¹⁴

Just as male players got down with cooking and making jewelry, with picking flowers and working at handicrafts, so female players enjoyed the chance to be tough, to talk about, and engage in, killing and pwning. Taylor (2003b) reported of her *EverQuest* study participants:

I have been struck by how often women remark on enjoying jumping into the fray of fights, taking on difficult monsters, and, as one user put it, “kicking ass.”

I questioned a female rogue in Scarlet Raven, an older woman who called herself the “Guild Grandma”:

To Jacqui: how come you chose rogue?

Jacqui whispers: don't like being so squishy and I lov being in the middle of the fight. and I can take shit down easy on rogue!

WoW subverted gender norms by offering activities with traditional gen-

der connotations that were presented as simply things to do to improve your character, or merely to play, like Jacqui taking shit down. Players ran back and forth across invisible gender boundaries unselfconsciously engaging transgressive practice—not *qua* transgression, but in conformance with the logic of the game—to enhance performance. Corneliussen (2008) remarked, “Gender is present in *World of Warcraft* in many ways, but it is not necessarily insistent or obvious.”

By contrast, masculinist shooter games such as *Quake* overtly reinforce hyperreal gender norms (Fullerton et al. 2007). Any female player is by definition a visible rebel. Kennedy (2005) studied female *Quake* players. One of her study participants said:

Next time we played together over a LAN [local area network] connection I held up my end and I could see that the blokes were really surprised and even a bit fed up that I was “fragging” them so successfully . . . I LOVED IT! (Amanda/Xena)

Kennedy observed:

These female players—who take pleasure in the mastery of the game which is seen as requiring skills which are clearly demarcated as masculine—are aware of the transgressive nature of their pleasure.

Amanda’s character Xena developed “masculine” skills that she deliberately showed off in the public arena of LAN play. The skills were unambiguously perceived as masculine. In *WoW*, collecting herbs, cooking, and so on were not gender marked. Nor was killing things.

WoW players had no need to form opinions about gendered game activities or even think about them; they simply assumed the activities as being necessary to play. Within the game, the activities were an aspect of the gender-neutral performative activity of improving a character. The covertness of the gender inflections released players from obvious reflections on gender while allowing them to perform, in play, cross-gender activities. *WoW* was, then, quietly subversive in its gender dynamics, enabling the unremarked enactment of cross-gender activities as an aspect of character development.

Females nearly always chose female characters in *World of Warcraft* (Yee

2005; Kavetsky 2008). The reasons were unclear. Female players said they wanted a character who represented “who I am.” They were vague in their answers while men gave simple, crisp responses to questions about character choice. Graner Ray (2004) received the same vague answers from female players she interviewed, e.g., “Playing a male character just doesn’t feel right” (see also Taylor 2003a).

It seems, then, that *WoW* enabled males to get a kick out of cooking or picking flowers and, at the same time, to indulge in masculinist language far beyond that permissible in many everyday settings. Females reinscribed conventional female preoccupations in choosing female characters, but they simultaneously participated in a social order in which they could talk about killing and pwning and engage in over-the-top flirtation and sexualized talk.

These juxtapositions seem like contradictions. But play permits us to abandon acquiescence to a consistency demanded in everyday life. In play we move to a space in which we can be more than one thing, however opposed those things might be in the logics of ordinary existence. When inhabiting the magic circle, we thrust out in both directions, engaging, in exaggerated form, quotidian conventions, while at the same time crossing over to “forbidden areas of darkness.”

The complexly gendered game space of *World of Warcraft* offered something out of the ordinary for both males and females. Given the huge popularity (and presumed profitability) of *World of Warcraft*, we can endorse the rightness of Fron et al.’s (2003a) argument:

Far from being a commercial death knell to the video game industry, [designing beyond the standard male stereotypes] can actually serve to expand the game market to be more diverse, inclusive, and welcoming across a broader demographic range.

World of Warcraft—with its candles and flowers, its domestic coziness, provisions for safe flirtation, and topsy-turvy accountings of traditionally gendered folk tales—seemed to move toward a play space of the kind envisioned by Fullerton et al. (2007), a space “where everyone can feel included, inspired, enlivened, and entertained.” Hayes (2005) observed that “games that combine elements associated with more stereotypically masculine and feminine pleasures and strengths may ultimately be the most stimulating

and . . . valuable games.” It seems that *WoW* has realized such a space, combining masculine and feminine elements in its design, appealing to women more than most competitive video games.

Why, then, aren’t even more women playing *World of Warcraft*? While female gamers are visible and their presence should not be ignored (see Bryce and Rutter 2005; Taylor 2006), in *WoW*, they are still a minority.

I do not have a ready answer to this question and can only say that it requires more research. The answer is likely to be found in a tangle of gendered practices and ideations, including the fact that women feel they do not have enough time to devote to a game like *WoW*. Systematic research is essential for looking into this question, but in describing my research in casual conversations women often responded that they did not have time for such a game. Female disinterest in competitive gaming is also likely part of the story—an aspect of deep, little-understood cultural predicaments. The need to accommodate males’ sexualized, homophobic rhetoric was surely a constraint for many females. In battlegrounds when (probably young male) players were typing vagina, pussy, and faggot into the chat window just because they could, I was reminded of Mrs. Pain’s daughter.

We must also ask why women themselves have not created games that meet the requirements delineated by Fullerton et al. and Hayes (see also Flanagan and Nissenbaum 2007; and Flanagan et al. 2008). It is not up to men to do this for us. “Girl games,” such as *Purple Moon*, essentialized stereotypical female elements. This strategy proved a failure, and “Today, there is no pink aisle at most local games stores,” as Jenkins and Cassell (2008) pointed out.

Perhaps as women come to see themselves more boldly, as they acknowledge a need for fun and permit themselves the recreational time men take as a given, they will come to competitive gaming as Mrs. Pain did:

[14:03] Mrs. Pain: alot of the players I play with are guys

[14:03] Mrs. Pain: and are alot younger then me

[14:03] Mrs. Pain: but I have formed a friendship with them

[14:03] Dan: Do you think age matters in games?

[14:03] Mrs. Pain: NO

[14:04] Mrs. Pain: I think ppl who don’t know me have a certain stereo type of me

[14:04] Mrs. Pain: they think A. I am not a woman

- [14:04] Mrs. Pain: just pretending to be one
[14:04] Mrs. Pain: or B
[14:05] Mrs. Pain: Iam big, fat and ugly
[14:05] Mrs. Pain: it is impossible to think that a woman and mother
could enjoy herself?
[14:05] Mrs. Pain: what once you hit a certain age the fun stops?
[14:06] Mrs. Pain: and you cant juggle your life to fit in games
[14:06] Mrs. Pain: once they get to know me
[14:06] Mrs. Pain: they love me
[14:06] Mrs. Pain: well most
[14:06] Mrs. Pain: lol