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## My Life as a Night Elf Priest

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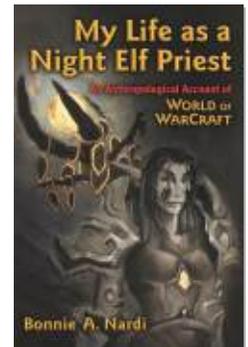
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## Coda

“Are you still studying *World of Warcraft*?” one of my colleagues at a conference questioned me rather sharply. He was not an anthropologist (who would not ask such a question, at least not in that tone), and his query reminded me of anthropology’s commitment to the long haul, and of my allegiance to activity theory and Dewey’s work grounded, as they are, in a belief in the fullness of time. Taking the long view has informed much of what I have written about *WoW* in this book: examining players’ own commitments to staying with the game to improve their characters; the development of activities like theorycrafting and modding that, over time, moved players into new relations with the game; understanding actions such as interpretation and construction in the context of larger moments of activity; seeing *WoW*’s Skinnerian rewards as thrilling in their own right but also aspects of a player’s bigger plans to move ahead in the game; investigating trajectories of “addiction” in which players reflexively shifted their activities, informed in part by community response to their predicaments; and considering national cultures and gender as they intersected the game at this particular time in history.

Part of my wholly unexpected enthusiasm for *World of Warcraft* arose from long-standing frustration with the passivity encouraged by our society, from television to high culture. I enjoy both but feel they are not “attributed their right proportion” to use Kallinkos’s phrase. Video games, at least good ones, engage and stimulate visual, cognitive, and social capacities. The visual-performative medium captures, in cheap commodity form, some of the satisfactions of exciting real life activities such as Burning Man or ballroom dancing—activities that require resources of time, money, and access to engage. Many of the babysitting parents, soldiers, soldiers’ wives,

students with little money, and chronically ill whom I met in-game were ace players; they had mastered a difficult game and worked it into lives which would not, at least in the immediate future, accommodate similarly engaging real life activities.

I see *World of Warcraft* as a work of art. Can a medium be an artistic production? I think it can, and that is just what Dewey was arguing with respect to “active aesthetic experience.” Dewey spoke against the cordoning of art in cultural fortresses, a protocol requiring people to trudge, periodically, to museums, to pay homage in respectful, passive silence, to art such as paintings hanging on walls. While it is true that the black box may sometimes seal off game designs that can be altered only slightly more than famous paintings, the defining difference between the orderings of a museum and a video game is the game’s production of active, performative experience. The beautifully arranged pixels on my *World of Warcraft* screen served as a backdrop for *my* activity. The pixels demanded no obeisance; they were, on the contrary, there to showcase me. The artwork in *WoW* exuded a touching humility; even in the far corners of the geography where play activity was light, the designs were often superb. I sometimes went fishing in the outermost areas of the Borean Tundra in part to see wonderfully rendered Viking boats plying their way to harbor. The boats were not only well drawn, but animated with a swiftness and distinctive movement that provided visual delight.

The rules in the black box are sometimes viewed as inducing quasi-fascistic dominance for which appropriate response is celebration of those who act in defiance of their power, or of those who move on the margins to smooth the dislocations that rules inevitably generate. While not denying the importance of the rebels hacking round the rules, and the game masters and guild leaders striving to assuage player dissatisfaction, these participants have submitted, in a sense, to the game and its rules, which orient their activity. The legitimacy of the rules is endorsed through the very engagement of these actors even as they probe for ways to exploit weaknesses or labor to relieve disappointments.

The supremacy of rules can be a good thing. Digital rules, in the context of excellent design, nurture us by providing reliable experience preserved through mechanical encapsulation and execution. Changes in rules must be handled carefully; we are still working through issues of governance

and management of virtual worlds, finding ways to incorporate the many, varied voices of participants, as well as the corporate interests that bring us the worlds in the first place.

At the same time that digital rules powerfully direct and orient experience, there is significant participant contribution to experience in virtual worlds. In *World of Warcraft*, this contribution was particularly apparent in gender relations. The game itself was surprisingly feminist, but player culture masculinist. There was something really good for female players with the pretty outfits and baby pets and exquisite color palettes, but from the point of view of actual play activity, I would not call *WoW* “a playground for feminism” as Corneliussen (2008) did. There was far too much talk of rape and reference to players as fags and homos for that.<sup>1</sup>

At the same time, the focal concern with performance in *World of Warcraft* meant that female players had opportunities to unambiguously display mastery on a level playing field (see Wine 2008). Without the intrusion of the physical body suggesting a logic of segregation as in sports, video games offer opportunities for gender-neutral skilled play. Such play was not always the outcome, but there were many, many fine moments in *World of Warcraft* when it was.

Games are cultural entities, but they do not come to life until actually played. Games are things with formal rules and spaces; game play is the activity of playing. The two are different, and we must be aware of the subjective dispositions of those playing which determine whether a set of actions—even actions involving a cultural construct we define as a game—is play or not-play. Thus I developed a somewhat complicated notion of game play incorporating the work of several theorists that emphasized subjective disposition toward gaming activity as critical to understanding what it means to play a game.

Of course we are not searching for categorical purity (a sterile exercise bound to end in failure). Some game play, such as gambling in Crete (Malaby 2003) or cockfighting in Bali (Geertz 1977), seems playful in varying degrees; according to Malaby and Geertz, the displays of masculinity entangled in these activities drew on deep anxieties, and the need to constantly reassert masculine identity verged on a kind of social obligation. But the research also identified the deep pleasures of gambling and cockfighting, and these activities remind us that no activity is always manifest

in its purest form. Analytical categories are intended to slice into the chaos of something as complex as game play, not to suggest that activity can be pristinely realized in each instance.

Encountering *World of Warcraft* caused me to reexamine cultural categories of work and play. From my earliest *WoW* research, I saw that they were extremely salient categories for players. Nonetheless, the concepts are slippery. Is farming for six hours to obtain one set of gear really play? When you look closely, work and play are troublesome concepts; proposals to abandon them as analytical categories are tempting. But I think it useful to have ways to distinguish between, on the one hand, Ito's amateur anime producers, Steinkuehler's overachieving druids, eggheaded *WoW* theorycrafters, and players staying up late with their guild to finish off a difficult boss—and most of what we do in school and at work. School and work need not be activities we would rather just get through without performing the actions if we could—but they are. Most of the time. In explaining resistance to the adoption of gamelike environments at work (such as *Second Life*) one study participant said:

And some of the resistance is the fear that it looks like a game and therefore people are scared that it looks like they are messing around . . . You should have boring flat text and a spreadsheet in front of you, otherwise it's not work. They view work as a task placed in front of them—usually an onerous one. And usually in text or with some numbers. And anything else is obviously playing and playing is bad because it's not work.

Work is boring partly because we design it that way out of a belief that it *should* be boring.

Although the theories of Huizinga, Callois, and Dewey are from the last century (and Tom's fence two centuries ago), their thoughtful understandings continue to inform us of why players happily do “homework” and “research” on *World of Warcraft* but describe work and school as boring and soul crushing. The actions required do not satisfy in themselves, nor do they end in moments of limited perfection. Perhaps it is a dream to suggest that they might, but the research of education theorists studying games, as well as pioneers such as Bainbridge, who holds conferences in *World of Warcraft* (see Bohannon 2008) and *Second Life*, indicate that we are not yet finished defining what work and school might be.

There is much more to say about *World of Warcraft*—about guild politics, player forums, identity formation, hax and exploits, twinks, surveillance, game lingo, learning to play, knowledge management, *WoW* trading cards, and dozens of other *WoW*-related subjects. But as Borges’s cartographers learned, the perfect map is perfectly useless. Lest “succeeding generations come to judge a map of such magnitude cumbersome, and . . . abandon it to the rigors of sun and rain,” my labor draws to a close. I inscribe a few more marks, small moments of the research about which I felt “absurdly pleased,” to borrow a phrase from one of Tolkien’s creatures:

[14:07] Dan: What do you like about the games you play, you already said you like making friends and what else?

[14:07] Mrs. Pain: hmmm

[14:08] Mrs. Pain: and its not just about making friends cause I do have a very busy social life and many friends

[14:08] Mrs. Pain: I think its kinda an escape

[14:08] Mrs. Pain: escape

[14:09] Dan: escape from what?

[14:09] Mrs. Pain: time to relax and have fun

[14:09] Mrs. Pain: from the kids

[14:09] Mrs. Pain: my busy life

[14:09] Dan: So kind of like a stress release?

[14:09] Mrs. Pain: I actually game unstead of watching tv

[14:09] Mrs. Pain: ya

[14:09] Mrs. Pain: away to get away and have fun with some friends

[14:09] Mrs. Pain: but I am still home for my kids

[14:10] Mrs. Pain: and I am in the same room with my husband who is a gamer

Multiplayer video games have pushed “cyberspace,” “hyperreality,” “virtuality,” the “metaverse,” and “life on the screen” smack back into real life, generating hybrid physical-digital spaces of visual-performative activity. This blend is most obvious in the Internet cafes of China and elsewhere, but also present in dorms and homes in North America and Europe. Mrs. Pain explained the lure of the virtual in its manifestations as “fun” and “escape” while observing that she was “still home for my kids” and “in the same room with my husband.” For her, games supplanted television, another

mode of escape, enabling an active engagement with friends and spouse. Dewey hoped that aesthetic experience would permeate ordinary life. Mrs. Pain's gaming is perhaps an exemplar of the kind of active aesthetic experience situated in an everyday environment that Dewey spoke for.

A young female warlock who regularly topped the damage charts in battlegrounds wrote of a possible future for video games. She produced the following abstract for a paper for her MBA program (Ly 2008):

The popular massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG), World of Warcraft, is used as a tool to discuss new developments concerning computers in human behavior. MMORPGs are relatively a new breed of computer games. Some critics may be skeptical of how computer games relate to real-life situations in business and work environments. However, this paper demonstrates that by examining MMORPGs, insightful considerations can be revealed involving computers in human behavior in the following two areas: 1) how virtual scenarios can be applicable as the best kind of job training for managers and employees and 2) how human behavior and interaction can be studied through MMORPGs. World of Warcraft incorporates aspects that exist in the realities of business and work environments. These aspects include hierarchical organizational structures, the specific duties each player is expected to perform, the management of teams to accomplish common goals, and the development of interpersonal skills as well as relationships.

A generation schooled in navigating the social hierarchies of guilds, meeting the challenges of pulling remote players together for coordinated teamwork, taking seriously the need for individual competence, and learning to make friends in cyberspace is positioning itself for a world in which work becomes increasingly global, travel is restricted by the disappearance of fossil fuels, and people are happy to have a good-looking avatar stand in for them in colorful virtual spaces more stimulating than the visually dead cubicles of many corporate work spaces.

And from China:

Chen: I learned several things about the West. *WoW* has a Western story, which is different from Eastern stories and history . . . The game belongs to the whole Western culture. Mages, druids, and so on originate from

Western myths, and are relevant to the whole Western myth of the story. Some *WoW* races like gnomes, dwarves, and elves, and also dragons, are described in European myths.

BN: Doesn't China have dragons?

Chen: Dragons are different with us. Western dragons are evil while Chinese dragons stand for happiness.

Games are venues for unselfconscious cross-cultural encounters afforded by software artifacts that embody but at the same time transcend culture. Just as Chen found interest in encountering European dragons and the novelty of gnomes and dwarves, so may we in the West delight in knowing of happy Chinese dragons. They may come to us as future commodities in video games, just as mythological creatures of the West have made their way to China through *World of Warcraft*.

Language travels in games, too. Rea taught children English in Korea in 2006–7. He reported the appearance of an English gaming term in *Sudden Attack*, a first-person shooter produced by GameHi, a Korean entertainment company, and its subsequent deployment in quite a different context (Rea 2009):

[I was] surprised . . . when one of my third-grade students yelled “fire in the hole!” before launching a ball of paper across the room at one of his classmates, mimicking the tossing of a grenade in *Sudden Attack*.

Finally there is the need to remember the sharp edge of play against ordinary life—its improbability, even absurdity. Much academic scholarship on play is so serious, so removed from the lightness of play, as to render the phenomenon under study nearly unrecognizable. When reading learned treatises that treat multiplayer video games as objects of study (such as this one), it is good to keep in mind that no matter how much we analyze games as spaces in which to create new work relations, as possible platforms for education, or as encounters with other cultures, contemporary multiplayer video games captivate because they are the site of a great deal of good old-fashioned frolic and tomfoolery.

Such as the following.

My son Anthony, his fiancée Jackie, and some of their friends started playing *World of Warcraft*. My son emailed me:

Jackie was jealous that our friend Duke's character Kwimbae has more gold than our elves (Kurhah and Zaurak), so she sent him this message via WoW mail . . .

Dear good sir

I am Princess Wanamoni, the only daughter of the late King Itake Yomoni of Ashenvale. My father was poisoned to death by a rival Horde prince while on a business outing in Orgrimmar. My father thought Me so special took good care, but now I have no one and no money. Please Help me good sir send 50 Gold to my associate, Kurhah. she will invest the money in a special account in stormwind and you will receive 1063%.

Such silliness is delightful, original, and productive of what Dewey called "remaking the material of experience."

Let me end with the lunacy of playing *WoW*, its comfortable, goofy, intimate, jokey, unserious, informal surface. An early morning exchange, as I logged my priest for a moment before work, made me smile. I was greeted by Gilarye, a young player who had me on his friends list:

Gilarye whispers: help! i'm dieing

To Gilarye: hey gil

Gilarye whispers: come save me!

To Gilarye: i'm just on for a sec camping a vendor

Gilarye whispers: \*gasp\*

Gilarye whispers: \*slap\* yr mean!

To Gilarye: laters gil, have a good day :D