# My Life as a Night Elf Priest
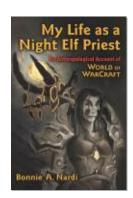
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# Notes

*Chapter One*

1. *WoW* had 70 levels of play during the period of research reported here. To avoid confusion for those who do not play and might talk to others who do, I mention that there are 80 levels of play, the state of the game at the time of writing.

2. See Damer 2009 for an account of the coinage of the term *virtual world.*

3. Copy for an online ad for the first-person shooter *Combat Arms* read, "Head shots are tough, but nut shots are harder." The ad included an animated visual.

4. If you look closely, you may find a few small, cartoony blood drips but very few. The comparison here is to games in which such elements are an important part of the gut-level visual stimulation of the game. *WoW* has plenty of weapons, including guns; I don't find them scary, although it could be argued that some of the larger ones are quite noticeable. Often weapons are "enchanted," lending them sparkles or glows, diminishing realism, and rendering them visually benign. Imagine a machine gun in a first-person shooter with colorful sparkles!

*Chapter Four*

1. I discuss raiding quite a lot because I was in a raiding guild and I found it fascinating. But player forums were replete with discussions of how to handle performative challenges in all *WoW* contexts, including soloing. For example, the following is a portion of a lengthy post on thottbot.com explaining how to solo the quest Stranglethorn Fever. It indicates the precision with which players analyzed (and wrote about) performance:

After several failed attempts, I managed to complete this quest solo as a level 48 hunter. It was not easy, but I'll share some tips that I have learned (the hard way . . .). I went with my wolf pet. His dps is a bit less than an offense-centric pet, but he seems

to hold focus better, as bite only fires once every 10 seconds. This seems to give him more focus available for the all-vital growl. He has a few more HP and AC than my cat, so I thought that he might hold up a bit better on this quest.

First, and perhaps key to the quest, is that you HAVE to keep the witch doctor alive and chanting through TWO waves of gorillas. It is on the third wave that Mokk spawns. There is a named gorilla in the second wave, but the heart is dropped on the third phase. You do NOT need an alive-and-well witchdoctor after Mokk spawns. All you need to do is loot the heart for the completion of the quest.

The first wave wasn't too bad. They spawn outside the cave and come rushing in. I put my pet on them as soon as they appeared, trying to make sure he pulled as much aggro as possible. I kept assisting him until he needed to be healed. That, of course, produced some aggro on to me which was handled via feign death. I managed to clear the first wave with a healthy pet, but almost no mana remaining . . .

This page, with detailed screenshots and player commentary, repays study. It can be found at http://thottbot.com/?qu=348.

2. An analysis of arena play would be very interesting. Arena was pure performance. In short matches players fought in teams of two, three, or five. Most players did not do arenas (which required collecting yet another set of gear and were extremely challenging), but those that did enjoyed high-voltage competition. I played arenas for a while (pretty casually) until my arena partner left the game.

3. There were metrics galore in *WoW*. In battlegrounds where players engaged in games such as capture the flag, a table that players could access any time during a match showed how much damage and healing each player contributed, as well as who accomplished key game actions such as capturing a base or flag. Similar metrics were available after arena matches.

4. *World of Warcraft* included timed contests. In one, a mob named Patchwerk had to be defeated in less than three minutes. In my post–Scarlet Raven guild, we were sure we had brought Patches down in under three minutes but did not get the award. We petitioned a game master who said we were .001 second away. In some contexts, it conceivably would not matter that we had missed by a hair's breadth, but the rule was reliably followed by the software and we did not get the award. I wondered if the GM actually had this data; no matter what, the system had followed its own clock and rules.

5. There were other mechanisms for feedback, such as the public test realms, and data collected by game masters in response to player questions, comments, and problems. I expect Blizzard also data mined key websites, used focus groups, and so on. The point is that Blizzard developed mechanisms for soliciting player opinion.

6. Of course not all players were happy with all changes. The game grew slowly easier in many ways, to the dismay of some who had been playing a long time and preferred more challenge. For example, the Stranglethorn Fever quest was "nerfed"; it no longer

required the efforts described by the hunter. One player commented on the thottbot webpage with the hunter's post, "As stated, this quest is a joke now. Bliz has made it so easy for the people leveling up nowadays compared to us old schoolers."

7. An enterprise resource planning system is a organizationwide software system that coordinates all the organization's information and resources.

8. I have direct experience of mangles. My mother had one—the mechanical kind—with which she ironed our sheets and pillowcases. The linens were utterly flat after the stress of the rollers passing over the fibers. In metaphorical usage, this flatness disturbs me; it smooths away important prominences to which we should attend.

9. Fron et al. (2007b) and Jordan (2007) made the same argument about the flexibilities of board games. I personally remember deciding only how to deal with Free Parking in Monopoly and then slavishly playing for hours exactly as the game was designed. Although I didn't like board games, I played a lot of them with my friends and siblings. I do not recall changing the rules of checkers, Chinese checkers, the Game of Life, Candyland (yes I played it!), Risk, or card games such as poker, euchre, hearts, war, Tripoli, gin rummy, or other games we played. (I liked card games.)

10. Scarlet Raven did not use a point system (alternating between dice rolls and Suicide Kings), but the guild I joined afterward used DKP, and my experiences of DKP were from that guild.

11. I do not mean cheating the system through clever maneuvers (see Consalvo 2007) but cheating fellow players. *WoW* made no effort to prevent such cheating with respect to the loot scenarios I describe.

12. *WoW* contained several loot distribution mechanisms; I have given a few examples for purposes of my argument.

13. In research I conducted at IBM on virtual worlds in the workplace, this theme was echoed by the managers I spoke to. For example, one manager said the team chose another virtual worlds platform because "You never know what's around the corner in *Second Life.* That's very scary for some people." His work centered on the development of a "safe, business-oriented, friendly" platform.

14. In healing the main tank I was standing in a spot in which the south wall created a lot of lag on my computer, so my timing had to be split second to keep the tank healed and run at the right moment. That kind of challenge was fun and would have been dampened with a mod.

15. For those familiar with the game, at the time of this writing Innikka was healing as discipline. Since this spec did not show the effects of shields and other mitigation in the most commonly used mods, she enjoyed a happy freedom from meters. She kept Recount tuned to the dps to see how they were doing since it measured their contributions more accurately and helped her prioritize where to throw shields when the tanks appeared safe. Even the priest forums, which normally counseled that priests adjust to the realities of meters (see Wine 2008), vigorously argued that the contributions of discipline priests were not recorded by meters and that proper education of raid leaders was essential.

16. Videogamesblogger headlined a post "*World of Warcraft* hits 11 million users world-wide! Making it the 75th biggest country in the world." The population of *WoW* was considerably larger than that of Denmark or Dubai, as well as a great many other countries. See http://www.videogamesblogger.com/2008/10/28/world-of-warcraft-hits-11-million-users-worldwide-making-it-the-75th-biggest-country-in-the-world.htm. Last accessed March 2009. (See also Bainbridge 2007.)

17. For those familiar with the game, during 3.0, when my post–Scarlet Raven guild had done everything but Sarth +3, we went to Sunwell and wiped repeatedly with a full 25-man raid because we had not studied the strategies.

18. Those familiar with the game will recall that nostalgia runs began well before the Achievements system made it instrumental to go back to old dungeons.

19. Ducheneaut et al. (2006) described *WoW* as a spectacle, but they referred to players watching other players. I refer to the game itself.

20. *Hawt* is a playful spelling of "hot," a term connoting approval of the visual design of the gear in this context.

21. Brecht and others of course attempted to unify audience and performers; perhaps *WoW* is a populist realization of that impulse made possible through the affordability of digital technology.

22. Even professional architects gave *World of Warcraft* high marks for the visual design of its buildings. One architect wrote: "The stunning diversity of buildings of Azeroth secures it the top spot [in a competition for best architectural design in video games]. Towering Gothic structures recall the 'dreaming spires' of Oxford given a subversive geometrical revamp. The architecture of the Blood Elves, on the other hand, has softer, more organic influences. Similar to Gaudi's Parc Guell or Sagrada Familia, nature is expressed in stylised form—the very essence of Art Nouveau." See http://www.fastcompany.com/blog/cliff-kuang/design-innovation/architecture-video-games-top-10.

23. Fan culture is vibrant, but in assessing the impact of television, it is undeniable that most people just sit in front of the TV. Television is appealing in part because it is passive, demanding little of us—a comfort when we are tired, depressed, or in need of downtime. Although we may worry about those who seem to need too much such time, it is puritanical to insist that television be active and social when what it is good at is helping us let go.

*Chapter Five*

1. "Lol" is an acronym for "laugh out loud" and is a common chat term. It does not actually mean "laugh out loud" but rather connotes a smile, or friendliness, or irony, depending on the context. If someone is actually laughing out loud they would more likely type "rofl," which stands for "roll on the floor laughing." I am not sure what they would type if they were actually rolling on the floor laughing.

2. Huizinga (1950) has been critiqued for his claim that play "has no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it" (see Stevens 1978). Some theorists throw out the

baby (Huizinga's good work) with the bathwater (this particular claim). His good work should be recognized, but Huizinga was clearly wrong on this issue; it has been shown that even animals deprived of play suffer (see Stevens 1978).

3. Turner (1982) observed that the word *entertainment* shares a notion of separateness, being derived from the Old French *entretenir*, "to hold apart."

4. Notions such as the Protestant work ethic rankle a bit; in our global economy, work ethics are as likely to have arisen in a village in Mexico or an urban center in Asia as anywhere else. Suggesting that player activity arises from such constructs seems problematic even when used metonymically.

5. Golub (2007) recounted the incensed reactions of players to a reduction in the size of shoulder armor worn by the Draenei race. Three hundred forty-one messages of protest were posted to an official Blizzard player forum. One player wrote, "[Y]ou can no longer pretend you are surprised when we are unhappy . . . This matter is . . . purely cosmetic, but it makes us regret our choices at character creation. We work very hard for the items that you are ruining and we do not appreciate it."

6. Not all players farmed; it was an activity for serious players. I am responding to the dialogue introduced by Yee, Poole, and Rettberg, which identified farming (and related video game activities) as in need of explanation.

7. Players complained about the need for too many raid consumables—it was massively time consuming to prepare them—and, in the cycle of feedback/change discussed in chapter 4, Blizzard eventually reduced the quantities needed. I thought it was a good decision, preserving social capital and the investment in professions such as alchemy many players had made but reducing the time needed for farming.

8. Ducheneaut et al. (2006) used the phrase "alone together" to describe *World of Warcraft* sociality. Though the phrase appears to play off Huizinga, it is about something else altogether, denoting a statistic Ducheneaut et al. generated showing that players are in formal groupings 30 to 40 percent of the time (being "alone" the rest of the time). "Alone together" does not, as I understand it, engage arguments about the magic circle.

9. Instances are part of the design of other games as well.

10. Not all raiding dungeons were belowground. But a lot of them were, including such *WoW* archetypes as Deadmines, Scholomance (how I loved Scholo; I remember the descent well because I had to shackle the ghost at the bottom of the stairs), Molten Core, and the Coilfang instances. Many instances were designed around vaults, sanctums, and lairs.

11. I.e., a space away from home and work. Third spaces in RL include bars, beauty salons, and bingo nights.

## Chapter Six

1. Although I do not know for sure, I interpret this player's comment on *Second Life* as a reference to its reputation for being dominated by adult-themed activity (see Bardzell and Odom 2008).

*Chapter Seven*

1. There are various ways to define game mechanics (see Sicart 2008), but for purposes of this chapter I am interested in the ways in which game rules produce outcomes.

2. Over 4,000 mods were available at curse.com and wowinterface.com (mod distribution sites) according to a count we did on December 8, 2008 (see Kow and Nardi 2009).

3. Karl Isenberg's real name is used with permission.

4. Mods comprised scripted programming files written in XML and Lua. Lua was used to specify functions. XML specified user interface elements. Mod users downloaded the files into a folder in the game directory where they were read when the game began. See Takhteyev (2009) on Lua.

5. Decursing was burdensome when many players were afflicted. Instead of seeing players' health restored after issuing a healing spell (the payoff for healers), the healer saw only the removal of the debuff—less satisfying. Members of damage classes that could decurse, such as mages, were forced to stop doing what they loved—damage—in order to remove debuffs.

6. Although outside the study period, in April 2009, Blizzard established firmer guidelines for mod authors, partly in response to the appearance of advertising in some mods. The commercial aspects of modding remind us that "community participation" is complex; participants have variable motives (see http://forums.worldofwarcraft.com/thread.html?topicId=15864747207&sid=1).

*Chapter Eight*

1. I searched for sociolinguistic analyses of gendered talk in video games and found little. Wright et al. (2002) constructed a typology of talk in *Counter-Strike* that included "Explicit gendered, racialized or homophobic talk," but they gave no examples and did not discuss or analyze the talk.

2. I want to reiterate that I knew the gender of guildmates through voice chat.

3. Williams et al. (2006) used the metaphor of the tree house to describe social life in *World of Warcraft*. I build on their notion but am focused here on gendered aspects of sociality which are perhaps not so benign as those of generic tree houses.

4. Wine (2008) discussed male rhetorical practice on a *WoW* forum, observing the aggressive-submissive postures of male posters.

5. My son agreed that being made the exception rendered this exchange one of fundamental inequality, but he observed that I could have scored some points by replying with something like, "Yeah, send me a picture of your balls, and then I'll have your email address." This rejoinder did not occur to me at the time.

6. I am indebted to Celia Pearce for her insight on the exaggeration present in masculinist discourse in games such as *WoW*.

7. Thelwall (2008) studied MySpace users and found that in the United States males used stronger language than females. This is consistent with my findings. But in the

United Kingdom, younger males and females exhibited similar patterns of language use, possibly due to the development of a female "ladette" culture involving heavy drinking.

8. My data concern activities in heterosexual guilds and my general observations of gendered activity in *WoW,* which were of heterosexual activity.

9. The "sex change operation" happened in my post–Scarlet Raven guild, but I report the incident as it was so apropos.

10. I am referring to dynamics in guilds and pickup groups; it is possible that some newbie male players pretended to be real life females. I don't have any data on that.

11. I use the term "safe" in an emotional sense; see Taylor (2003a) for a discussion of females' sense of freedom and safety in roaming anywhere in a video game without fear of physical harm, something they could not do in real life. Such roaming puts males and females at the same risk of in-game dangers, again a departure from real life.

12. Games such as *Lineage* and *Ragnarock* have lighter color palettes than *World of Warcraft,* although *WoW* is bright compared to the games described by Fullerton et al. (2007).

13. As a Blizzard product, *WoW*'s gendered elements are particular to *WoW.* Blizzard also produces masculinist games such as *Starcraft.* I have not played *Starcraft* but watched the video trailer several times during my two days at BlizzCon. It was both funny and sad. Funny because the two main characters managed to package up every imaginable hypermasculine stereotype dredged from the bowels of popular culture, and sad because so many men must identify at some level with the characters. Of course that's funny, too.

14. The feminine robes of the male mage provoked humor and even inspired a satirical player video, *Big Blue Dress.* The vocal of an original song laments the sorry state of affairs faced by male mages, asking why "A man of my stature should have to wear a dress" (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vqO7zEWu0W0).

*Chapter Nine*

1. The Internet cafe speaks to the continuing importance of the large-screen format. Despite the affordability, and hence ubiquity, of cell phones, it is enjoyable to watch movies, play video games, and interact with multiple applications on a bigger screen— exactly the activities we observed in Internet cafes in China.

2. At an art gallery in Beijing, we met a Chinese artist, Caixiaoxiao, who used "PK" as a theme in his art. One of his works was a large picture in which a headshot of Mu'ammar al-Gadhafi was juxtaposed with one of the artist, both images of the same size. It was titled, in English, *PK PK, Caixiaoxiao's Political PK.* We asked the artist how to interpret the picture. He told us that interpretation was up to the viewer, but that he saw himself in a kind of competition with al-Gadhafi. In the picture, both men are wearing hats with the Communist star, al-Gadhafi the traditional ethnic hat he is often photographed in, and the artist a Mao cap. The young Chinese research assistants who had taken me to the gallery did not recognize al-Gadhafi, so the work had a greater impact on me. The artist appeared to be in his late thirties.

3. This sentiment on the need to collaborate was common to both Chinese and North American players. Dreadlock, a young player I interviewed, connected the fun of *WoW* to opportunities for meeting people. (The :D icon means grin.)

> To Dreadlock: what do you like about the game?
> Dreadlock whispers: its fun :D
> To Dreadlock: right! but why?
> Dreadlock whispers: cant feal lonly while playing it!
> Dreadlock whispers: to meet people, etcw
> Dreadlock whispers: i love instances
> To Dreadlock: why do you love them?
> Dreadlock whispers: because they make it so you MUST group
> Dreadlock whispers: its not an option
> To Dreadlock: how do you find people to group with?
> Dreadlock whispers: advertising in the chat channels, guild and asking my friends
> Dreadlock whispers: also instances are an oppertuniy to meet people

## *Coda*

1. Corneliussen played on a European server; things may be much different there. More research is needed.