Battlefields of Negotiation

Control, Agency, and Ownership in World of Warcraft

AMSTERDAM UNIVERSITY PRESS

RENÉ GLAS

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The publication of this book has been supported by NWO (The Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research), The Hague, the Netherlands.

This book is published in print and online through the online OAPEN library (www.oapen.org)

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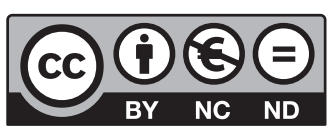
Cover illustration: Sarah Guilbaud and Ivo Mulder, Amsterdam

Cover design: Suzan Beijer, Amersfoort
Lay-out: JAPES, Amsterdam

ISBN 978 90 8964 500 5
e-ISBN 978 90 4851 808 1 (pdf)
e-ISBN 978 90 4851 809 8 (ePub)
NUR 480 / 670



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Acknowledgements

The evolution and realization of this book could not have been possible without the contribution of many friends, colleagues and institutions who I am greatly indebted to. Overseeing the research itself, José van Dijck and Jan Simons have been indispensable from the start. José's emphasis on structure and argumentation and her inspiring enthusiasm helped tremendously in shaping my work. Together with Jan's sharp observations on complex topics, their guidance proved invaluable throughout the research process. The book you have in front of you would not have been possible without support from the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO), which funded the "Tranformations in Perception and Participaion: Digital Games" project from which the research originates. By helping me focus my thoughts and framing my arguments in a series of meetings and conferences, the members of the Digital Games project contributed considerably, especially in the early phases of the research. Led by Renée van de Vall, the group also included Maaike Lauwaert, Martijn Hendriks, Jack Post and Joseph Wachelder. My gratitude also goes out to Karin Wenz and Sally Wyatt for providing valuable feedback as external experts on the project. I also thank the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis (ASCA) at the University of Amsterdam for their continued support and advice in various stages of the research.

Writing a book like this can be a solitary experience, but my colleagues at the Department of Media Studies at the University of Amsterdam and, later, the Department of Media and Culture Studies at Utrecht University made for excellent company. For sharing offices, discussions, ideas, conferences and drinks I would like to thank Joyce Goggin, David Nieborg, Dan Hassler-Forest, Maryn Wilkinson, Jennifer Steetskamp, Andrea Meuzelaar, Imar de Vries, Ann-Sophie Lehmann, Mirko Tobias Schäfer, Michiel de Lange, Marianne van den Boomen, and many others. I would like to especially thank Joost Raessens and Sybille Lammes who, next to being wonderful colleagues and fellow adventurers in the study of digital games and play, were so kind to provide feedback during the final phase of the writing process. Another proofreader I must thank for his thoroughness on short notice is Michael Katzberg. I would also like to show my appreciation to the students I have had the pleasure of teaching in courses in game studies and beyond for interesting discussions and inspiring insights.

A very different group of individuals I would like to thank are The Truants, a guild of "rogue scholars" I met in and around *World of Warcraft* and played with for years. Under the lively leadership of Torill Mortensen, the members of The Truants did not just play – in an often endearingly chaotic way – but they also convened during international conferences to share their work on *World of Warcraft* and games in general. Being part of this group proved to be an inspiring and enjoyable part of my research. Among the many Truants I would like to thank for their companionship are Luca, Kristine, Espen, Valter, Hilde, T.L., Jessica, Ragnhild, Charlotte, Peter and Emma. Special mention goes to Ivo Mulder, a friend who also joined The Truants and with whom I shared many online adventures. Ivo is responsible for this book's wonderful cover design, for which I cannot thank him enough.

Finally, I would like to thank all my family and friends for their warmth and support, and for putting up with my endless banter about *World of Warcraft.* Last but not least, I wish to express my dedication to Nynke and our daughters Madelief, Hente and Dagmar for offering love, guidance, and distraction (in a good way) during all the ups and downs of the writing process. I dedicate this book to them.

Introduction

World of Warcraft is considered the pinnacle of massively multiplayer online role-playing games or MMORPGs, a genre of computer games that offer fictional universes where thousands of individuals play with or against each other or simply hang out to socialize. *World of Warcraft*, developed by Blizzard Entertainment based in Irvine, California, facilitates a wide range of play styles and preferences, ranging from casual role-playing to pursuing hardcore cooperative challenges. The game is considered easy to learn but hard to master, and is surrounded by a huge, player-driven culture offering everything from information wikis to fan fiction, from user-interface modifications to guides explaining how best to level up and even how to learn a profession or how to earn virtual gold through the in-game auction house.

Since its release in November 2004, *World of Warcraft* (WoW) has attracted a massive crowd of players, peaking at twelve million in 2010.[1] The expansion pack entitled *Cataclysm* released that year sold more than 3.3 million copies in the first 24 hours after release, making it the fastest-selling PC game of all time. Even though the game has since shed some of it vast user base, with around ten million players in early 2012 the game remains one of the most popular MMORPGs in the world. With its ongoing success, the game has become a poster child of the progressively collaborative relationship between consumers and producers observed in the larger media landscape. As media theorist Henry Jenkins notes, 'game designers acknowledge that their craft has less to do with prestructured stories than with creating the preconditions for spontaneous community activities' (2006: 159). According to EDGE magazine, one of several game industry sources that crowned *World of Warcraft* the 'game of the decade', the game is exemplary of a larger change in how we consume media 'not as individual packages picked from the shelf, but as services, always evolving to meet the needs of their growing audience' (2010: 68). To obtain this service, however, players need to pay a monthly subscription fee in addition to buying the game itself. These subscription fees provide Blizzard with the financial means to constantly update the game. A game like *World of Warcraft* is not a stable object but an object in flux; it is continuously transformed through patches and expansion packs that express what Blizzard thinks the player community wants next. Players themselves have created a vast network of websites, information databases, blogs, for-

ums and other communication channels through which they not only express their needs, wishes and other game-related expressions in words but also trough fan art, videos, user-interface modifications and other creative productions.

The increasingly collaborative relationship between consumers and producers suggested above, however, is not free of conflict. As Jenkins points out, companies see participation as something they can 'start and stop, channel and reroute, commodify and market', while consumers on the other hand assert 'the right to participate in the culture, on their own terms, when and where they wish' (2006: 169). As a result, conflict can arise between producers and consumers but also between consumers themselves, when they are confronted with diverging interests in the very media object in which they participate. In these moments of conflict, the game itself – what it is (or should become) and how it should be played – is at stake.

Conflicts about *World of Warcraft* between players and Blizzard even started before the game was officially launched in late 2004. The following announcement surfaced and spread across the hacker community in January 2004, many months before the official launch:

> Open-source proponents, crackers, and anarchists alike rejoice as an alpha version of *World of Warcraft* has allegedly been secured and is now supposedly making its way around warez circles. This news comes from Skull's Hack Site who says WarForge (infamous for their work in battle.net emulation for the War3 and TFT betas) is already working on server software for the *WoW* leak.[2]

This incident occurred when the game was still at a closed alpha testing phase, a period in which sparse publicity material, such as carefully chosen screenshots and videos, was available to prospective players. In order to control potential damage, a Blizzard employee was quick to react with a post on Blizzard's official forums:

> In order to accelerate the testing process, we recently allowed a small group of external testers to play the game. During this process, a collection of files was leaked to the Internet. While these files contain alpha content from the game, they are not fully playable and therefore do not convey the experience that *World of Warcraft* will provide when it is released.
>
> We are currently investigating this matter and will take serious action against those involved.
>
> As always, we appreciate the interest and enthusiasm that players around the world have for *World of Warcraft*, and we look forward to delivering a massively multiplayer game unlike any you have ever experienced. Until then, we ask that

you refrain from sharing any content that doesn't come directly from Blizzard Entertainment (posted by "Katricia" on the battle.net forums, 7 January 2004).

Probably to the chagrin of Blizzard, the leaked *World of Warcraft* code nevertheless spread via peer-to-peer file-sharing networks. While it remained largely unplayable – the code was far from finished, and no servers were up supporting the code – *World of Warcraft* was suddenly pulled out of Blizzard's control sphere and thrust into the players' domain. The result was a proliferation of devious coding groups with mysterious names like WarForge, Team Phyton and *WoW*Daemon trying to emulate the game by, for instance, reverse engineering client software in order to set up private rather than Blizzard-controlled servers.

The hacking incident and its aftermath signal a larger phenomenon this book seeks to investigate: both players and Blizzard are stakeholders in *World of Warcraft* who engage in constant negotiations concerning control, agency and ownership over the game. During such negotiations, stakeholders employ different tactics on various levels of negotiation – technical, fictional, social, managerial and so forth – in order to gain and/or keep control, agency and ownership. In this book I organize these levels of negotiation in four main perspectives: game play, game design, game contract and game culture. The more of these perspectives are involved in negotiation processes, the more complex these processes become, and the higher the potential is for tension. In this book, these overlapping levels of negotiation are called *battlefields of negotiation*. From this layered approach follow the main questions this book poses: how and on what level do negotiations between stakeholders (including both players and the game's developer) take form; in what ways do these negotiations define, challenge and alter the process of play; and how do they effect and influence the game as a sociocultural object? Key to understanding the processes of negotiation taking place in and around *World of Warcraft* is the fact that there is no such thing as a definitive, fixed version of *World of Warcraft*; the game is constantly changing through use by its players and through maintenance and upgrading by its owners, and is therefore always evolving into something different.[3]

As explained, *World of Warcraft* is designed to be flexible and manipulatable, not just by Blizzard but also by players, to cater to all kinds of play styles and preferences. Why, then, would players choose to illicitly appropriate *World of Warcraft* – which happened with the *World of Warcraft* leak incident? The answer is that, in practice, *World of Warcraft* is tightly controlled by Blizzard, with both technical and contractual barriers limiting the amount of freedom that players have over the game. For the 'open-source proponents, crackers and anarchists' mentioned in the announcement about the file leak, *World of Warcraft* is the antithesis of what they are looking for in a game. For this group of stakeholders, getting access to the game's code, making it run and spreading it among peers was not (just) an act of piracy but also a way of claiming control, agency and ownership over the

game. For most players, the stakes as well as the tactics used to pursue them are not as excessive as those of the emulation community. But, as I will show throughout this book, players are nevertheless heavily invested in what they consider to be "their" game, even if their particular vision of *World of Warcraft* does not entirely comply with or even opposes the vision of other stakeholders.

The approach this book takes to investigate the complexity of *World of Warcraft* and its accompanying player community could be called a hybrid methodology. As a games researcher with a media studies background, I follow a humanities perspective to analyze *World of Warcraft* as a cultural media object with embedded rules and other design structures which bring with them certain affordances and limitations for use and play. Studying games from such a perspective, however, requires a researcher to play.[4] As game scholar Espen Aarseth points out: 'If we have not experienced the game personally, we are liable to commit severe misunderstandings, even if we study the mechanics and try our best to guess at their workings' (2003: 3). In the same way that games need play to come into being, game researchers need to play in order to understand them. Taking this argument one step further is games researcher and sociologist T. L. Taylor, who argues that:

> While looking at a game as it is presented as a boxed product may tell us something about the given structure of the artifact or its imagined player, understanding it as a live object – as a playful artifact – comes via an attention to the assemblage that constructs our actual games and play (Taylor 2009: 332).

This assemblage is not limited to technology (hardware, software), game design or game history but also includes the emergent practices of communities, the social dimensions of play, the institutional structures shaping the game and play, legal structures, our own material world and so on (ibid. 332).

To understand the game not just as a cultural artifact but as a live object or playful artifact, to study the ongoing negotiations between players – and between Blizzard and the players – and, more importantly, to understand what is at stake for these parties, I needed more than "just" play. To not just participate in but understand the community and their practices, wishes and needs, I went "native", to borrow a term from anthropology; I actively participated in *World of Warcraft*'s community within and well beyond the borders of the game.[5] I started playing *World of Warcraft* in April 2005, a few weeks after the European release of the game, played actively for many years and even though I have moved on to other games, I still find myself renewing my subscription from time to time. During this period, I have accumulated many hundreds, even thousands, of hours of play, spread between different characters. Even before the game was launched I read, monitored and participated in a range of different websites, information

databases and forums dedicated to the game, and I still keep an eye on them. In 2008, I visited a large player convention in Paris organized by Blizzard. Was this time spent in and around *World of Warcraft* dedicated research? No, but it did indirectly contribute to my overall experience and understanding of *World of Warcraft* in all its complexity.

Discovering and navigating the boundaries between play and research has been an important part of the gestation of this book. The risk of going native is always to lose critical distance, especially when considering that a researcher who considers him/herself a gamer – and I do – is already at least partly native. This does not need to be problematic. In the introduction to his seminal book *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture*, Jenkins states that when he writes about fan culture, he writes 'both as an academic (who has access to certain theories of popular culture, certain bodies of critical and ethnographic literature) and as a fan (who has access to the particular knowledge and traditions of that community)' (Jenkins 1992: 5). In many ways, the same applies to me and my work, with the notion of "fan" overlapping or replaced with that of "gamer". The distinctive use of the term "gamer" over "player", for example, is deliberate. As media scholar Bernard Perron pointed out, the label gamer is often used in the game industry to typify gaming fans: it delineates a certain activity and attitude towards the medium of games (Perron 2003: 242). It is a label I would not hesitate to apply to myself, having been an avid games enthusiast since my childhood. I am not an outsider to the world of games but actually an insider, a participant, a status that is as much a part of my writing as academic reflexive, critical distance. My dual position of being close to as well as distanced from the object of study can be considered highly beneficial to studying games like *World of Warcraft*.

Playing on a European *World of Warcraft* server and moving primarily among the English-speaking European and North American community of players on the websites around the game mean that my analysis of the game and its culture unavoidably represents only part of the *World of Warcraft* phenomenon as a whole. The game has a very strong presence in Asia – around half of all *World of Warcraft* players are found in China alone. Unfortunately, this part of the *World of Warcraft* phenomenon is beyond the scope of this book.[6] This work does not claim to have investigated all of *World of Warcraft* but is the result of situated play and research. This makes any holistic statement about *World of Warcraft* by definition complicated, echoing media scholar Sybille Lammes' argument that we should acknowledge the situatedness of games as culture because 'the researched material is always rooted in the local or embodied space of a player/researcher and has no universal meaning as such' (Lammes 2007: 28). The result is a certain inevitability of partiality and subjectivity. My aim is to use the many examples of situated play throughout this book as meaningful samples of the kind of negotiations that take place in and around the game.

To understand both *World of Warcraft* as well as the negotiation processes giving it shape, this book takes a step-by-step approach. In Part I of the book, which I call 'Framing the Game', I provide a framework that forms the theoretical underpinning of the research. This framework consists of the four aforementioned levels – game design, game play, game culture and game contract – each offering a different view on playing a game like *World of Warcraft*. In the game design section, I will focus on whether or not *World of Warcraft* in fact can be called a game at all. Here, I will also provide a historical overview of the MMORPG genre, resulting in a descriptive frame for *World of Warcraft*'s design choices. In the section on game play, I will approach play both ontologically (conceptualizing play as movement) and socially (constructing *World of Warcraft* among other things as an environment that facilitates devious, anti-social forms of play which I call individualized group play). The game culture section discusses *World of Warcraft* in terms of participatory culture, in which the notion of player control, agency and ownership in and over the game is approached critically. Strongly linked to these issues of control, agency and ownership is the final section on game contract, in which legal contracts as well as social etiquette and protocol are investigated. On and between these four levels, I argue, battlefields of negotiations transpire.

Part II of the book, titled 'Controlling the Game', provides an in-depth analysis of *World of Warcraft* as a designed object. Here, I explore how Blizzard exerts control over the player's behaviour through a series of affordances and limitations in the game's design, as well as how this control infuses the game – which as a MMORPG is inherently open-ended in terms of play options – with a sense of how the game should be played. Three levels of game design are investigated: the technological and configurational support structures that enable play; the rules of the game in terms of goals and dominant tactics to accomplish them; and the fictional world in which the player's characters exist during play. Design choices on all three levels present players with dominant play strategies, which in turn convey an intended use of the game. Deviation from this intended use, I argue, is a core element of the various negotiations between players, and between players and Blizzard.

Tactics of deviance are the main subject of Part III of the book, called 'Gaming the Game'. Here, three extended examples are presented in which players purposely go against or beyond the rules and boundaries of play. The questions asked here are whether and how deviant play strategies contribute to a transformative game experience, and whether deviance leads to increased agency and/or alternative, player-created forms of control. The three cases are based on individual play, individualized group play and dedicated group play practices, each showcasing deviance from another angle. All three case studies, however, show players engaging in practices in which they exercise external means originating from *World of Warcraft*'s surrounding participatory culture – including the use of strategy guides

and user-interface modifications – to stray from or transgress the intended use of the game.

Part IV, the final part of the book, named 'Claiming the Game', showcases three extended examples in which stakeholders accidentally and/or wilfully engage in negotiations in which the transgression of the boundaries of play is brought to a point where conflict erupts. The question here is, do Blizzard and players provide and construct forms of management (or self-management) to deal with these conflicts? The examples presented in this chapter are very different in form and content. One of them involves my own experiences as a victim of virtual crime and the subsequent negotiations taking place between Blizzard and myself, and discusses who is primarily involved in enforcing virtual law. The second one investigates the participatory practice of machinima filmmaking (animated films created through game engines). Here, *World of Warcraft*'s game engine is used to create films, some of which present controversial content, which are then distributed among the player community. The final example details a particular event during *World of Warcraft*'s evolution, the release of a content patch that caused severe community fragmentation and harassment between players. In all three cases, the contractual perspective plays a key role, as tensions between players and Blizzard are resolved through potential and actual exclusion from the game.

Each of these chapters adds a new layer of inquiry, which ultimately shows what it means to design and to play but also to study a game in which millions of users invest a large share of their leisure time, an investment that ultimately leads to the ongoing evolution of the game itself. In her article on the assemblage of play, Taylor refers to the work of new media scholar Seth Giddings who shows that 'we are no longer looking at just a "technology" and its "users" but the event of their relationships, of their reciprocal configuration' (Giddings 2006: 160; Taylor 2009). Battlefields of negotiation, I argue, are a key part of these processes of reciprocal configuration, which began well before *World of Warcraft* was released and which still continue now. As such, *World of Warcraft* was, is and will remain a phenomenon that results from perpetual negotiations between its various stakeholders.

Ultimately, by focusing on its various battlefields of negotiation, this book presents a way to expose the forces underlying control, agency and ownership in a game subject to perpetual metamorphosis. In doing so, it shows that these types of games, often thought of as among the most inviting of all participatory media, are certainly not free of power struggles but are rather defined by it.

Part I
Framing the Game

Even though *World of Warcraft* is reaching its tenth anniversary – which makes it ancient in game industry terms – the game and its expansion packs (as well as strategy guides, action figures and other merchandise) can still be found prominently displayed in the game sections of most multimedia stores. *World of Warcraft* clearly *sells* like a game, but whether it actually *is* one depends on the way you look at it.

MMORPGs like *World of Warcraft* typically defy easy definition. Media scholars Eric Hayot and Edward Wesp edited an issue of the *Game Studies* journal which addressed the tenth anniversariy of the MMORPG *Everquest* (Verant Interactive 1999). In the introduction, they ask themselves the following questions:

> What *are* massively multiplayer online role-playing games? Games? Virtual or synthetic worlds? Interactive novels? Simulations? Economic systems? Civic spaces, like cities? Classrooms or laboratories? Social spaces? Pieces of theatre? Wastes of time? Ideological state apparatuses? Forms of industry or modern-day nodes of productive? Networks? (Hayot & Wesp 2009, emphasis in original)

As Hayot and Wesp point out, no single answer can capture the complexity of these games. My aim in this part of the book is therefore not to look for such an all-encompassing answer but instead to provide a theoretical framework to approach MMORPGs as complex socio-cultural phenomena, where the rules of play are under constant negotiation among numerous stakeholders on social, technological and managerial levels. The way I formulate this approach conveys some of the key issues addressed in this book: *World of Warcraft* is a game in and of which the rules are under constant negotiation; *World of Warcraft* both exists and is experienced on a social and cultural level; *World of Warcraft* is a game in which player and other parties (including Blizzard) have certain stakes that are considered to be worth defending. In the following chapters I investigate the various discourses surrounding these issues through four perspectives: game design, game play, game contract and game culture. As I will show, one needs all four

perspectives to fully grasp *World of Warcraft* as a battlefield of negotiation, to understand the stakes invested in this game by those involved, and to identify the different levels at which stakeholders operate when they engage with a MMORPG like *World of Warcraft*.

1: The Definition Game

As should be clear now, MMORPGs such as *World of Warcraft* are hard to define. I have been calling *World of Warcraft* a game for practical reasons but, as pointed out before, MMORPGs are in fact not games in the traditional sense of the word. Tracing a modern MMORPG like *World of Warcraft* back to the genre's roots, for instance, conveys a history that is grounded both in games and in virtual worlds, the result of which makes it infinitely more than "just" a game. Suggesting that there are differences between games and, say, virtual worlds first demands a deeper understanding of what constitutes a game in the first place.

Harking back to classic definitions by the likes of Johan Huizinga (1955) and Roger Caillois (1961), game designers Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman offer a broad definition of the term game, stating that a game is 'a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome' (2004: 80). Working from an even wider array of scholarly and design-oriented definitions, game scholar Jesper Juul distills a more refined formal definition that he calls the classic game model:

> A rule-based system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels emotionally attached to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are negotiatable (2005: 36).

Such definitions of a game work well for most games but present difficulties when applied to the genre of the role-playing game, of which the MMORPG is a subgenre. What is missing from these types of games, ranging from tabletop games like *Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax & Arneson 1974) to MMORPGs, are definite quantifiable outcomes. As Salen and Zimmerman point out, role-playing games are 'structured like serial narratives that grow and evolve from session to session. Sometimes they end; sometimes they do not' (2004: 81).

Games without end?

Juul specifically recognizes MMORPGs as exceptions to the rule of what constitutes a game. Due to the open-ended nature of MMORPGs, 'the player never

reaches a final outcome but only a temporal one when logging out of the game' (2003 43). For this reason, Juul does not provide a place for a MMORPG within the classic definition of a game, suggesting it is a type of game that tries to break with the standard model of games (ibid.).

Salen and Zimmerman are more lenient towards MMORPGs. They argue that quantifiable outcomes are still present in MMORPGs because of the quests that can be accomplished, levels that can be reached and goals attained that players set for themselves. In this way, a MMORPG is 'a larger system that facilitates game play within it, giving rise to a series of outcomes that build on each other over time' (2004: 82). For players, levelling up, finishing quests and reaching other game objectives provide, as game designer and scholar Gonzalo Frasca points out, 'a way to discretely and objectively quantify its players' performances in a way that they can get standard social recognition similar to the one that they would get in a winning/losing situation' (Frasca 2007: 69). Players assign value to their performance, which can then be compared socially. For Frasca, to argue that *World of Warcraft* is not a game is needless: '[it] is a game not because it can be won or not but because there are measurable, conventional ways to assign social status to players' (193). *World of Warcraft*'s status as game, then, is at least partly self-defined by players who may (or may not) choose to set their own desired outcomes, assign value to them and, by doing so, create the possibility to compare player performances.

More so than with other games, the range of options that players have in selecting their own goals and outcomes, and the different ways in which players subsequently exercise this freedom, are among the MMORPG genre's defining features. Together with the persistent nature of the play space, this freedom is what makes games like *World of Warcraft* very similar to virtual worlds. As virtual worlds anthropologist Thomas M. Malaby points out, these characteristics result from a comparable practice of production, shaped as a combination of game design, game development and software development generally (Malaby 2009: 14). In its basic definition, however, virtual worlds are not necessary game-like. Take, for instance, the definition by Richard A. Bartle, one of the pioneers of virtual worlds development:

> Essentially, a virtual world is an automated, shared, persistent environment with and through which people can interact in real time by means of a virtual self (Bartle 2010b: 24).

What sets a MMORPG like *World of Warcraft* apart from virtual worlds like *Second Life* (Linden Lab 2003) is that the game's design team has implemented not only game elements with which players can interact but also a variety of mechanisms that control and guide players through the game, ensuring that most players will ultimately enjoy a similar (rather than a potentially wildly different) game experi-

ence. Bartle goes a step further by simply stating that '*Second Life* is not a game, because it has no embedded gameplay' (Bartle 2010b: 35). To understand the difference between MMORPGs like *World of Warcraft* and less game-oriented virtual worlds, we can turn to the historical roots of MMORPG or, more generally, virtual worlds development.

Tracing the MMORPG genre's roots

While the MMORPG genre has definite ties to the history of the tabletop role-playing game (which will be discussed in Part II of this book), the shared history of MMORPGs and virtual worlds is usually traced back to early developments in networked, multiplayer computer game environments in the late '70s. In 1978, computer science undergrads Roy Trubshaw and Richard Bartle created the network-based *MUD*, or *MUD1* as it is more commonly referred to, which fused multi-player role-playing game elements with text-based computer-mediated adventure gaming, first introduced by games like *Colossal Cave Adventure* (also known as ADVENT, designed by Crowther & Woods, 1976) and *Zork* (Anderson, Blank, Daniels, & Lebling 1977). *MUD1*, standing for Multi-User Dungeon, was a persistent text-based virtual world with a fantasy setting, in which a multitude of participants could play and interact with each other and their surroundings.[7] In *MUD1* and later similar adventure-based games, we see the small, tight player groups of the tabletop role-playing game replaced by a player group whose size is only limited by technological constraints of early computer and network technology, and whose activities were no longer directly governed by fixed game goals and structures. *MUD1*, explains Bartle, was also notably different from earlier, single-player text games: 'The puzzle-based, narratively constrained format of adventure games couldn't work in the setting of a multi-player game: the *world* had to assume dominance, not the problem-solving' (Bartle 2010b: 25, emphasis in original). *MUD1* became the model of a genre of text-based virtual worlds, with the genre also taking on the MUD name.[8]

Early MUDs remained strongly linked to fantasy-based adventure gaming, similar to their tabletop forerunner. MUDs eventually broadened their scope, spawning a much more varied genre of multi-user virtual worlds. As sociologist Elizabeth Reid points out, many MUDs continued their fantasy heritage, creating the subgenre of MUDs its users began calling the 'adventure' MUD, but a new category – the 'social' MUD – started to appear (1999: 109).[9] Trying to build a text-based virtual world without a set theme, therefore breaking with the MUD's fantasy tradition, James Aspnes released *TinyMUD* (1989). It quickly became the preferred virtual world for those fed up with hacking and slashing monsters. It offered world building and socializing, not fantasy-themed action. *TinyMUD* and its peers (like *TinyMUCK*, *TinyMUSH*, both 1990) formed precursors to the MOO. This new form of virtual world – MOO stands for "MUD object oriented" – gave

its user the ultimate freedom to extend and adjust almost everything about the world, the most famous of which was *LambdaMOO* (White & Curtis 1990).

Virtual worlds have continued along the paths of game-oriented and social-oriented interaction. In the mid '90s, graphical virtual worlds successfully entered the virtual world scene, with MMORPGs like *Ultima Online* (ORIGIN Systems, 1997), *Everquest* (Verant Interactive 1999) and *World of Warcraft* representing the graphical upgrades from adventure MUDs. The legacy of social MUDs and MOOs is still visible in the form of social worlds, of which *Second Life* (Linden Lab 2003) has become one of the most prominent (Bartle 2010b: 30-35).

While they share a common history and several defining characteristics, the difference between game-based MMORPGs and the more social interaction-oriented virtual worlds should be clear. Game researcher Lisbeth Klastrup sees them as the two main genres of virtual worlds (or, to use her terminology, online worlds) – namely 'gameworlds' and 'social worlds' (Klastrup 2010: 310). While this book is certainly informed by research into social worlds, with *World of Warcraft* as its main object of study, it deals mainly with gameworlds.

The reason for elucidating the evolutionary junctions between gameworlds and social worlds is because I want to emphasize that, in terms of game design, gameworlds like *World of Warcraft* are not necessarily built to provide mainly social interaction. Even though gameworlds are prime examples of games featuring synchronous multiplay (Bogost 2004), playing and enjoying them does not *require* other players. Players can actually focus on personal goals and objectives, and quantifiable progress (like leveling up) is usually not limited to those who play in groups. While we should not downplay the importance of social interaction in and around MUDs and MMORPGs, we could argue that it is not vital in order to play but rather optional. More so, gameworlds do not just offer options for social interaction but are also designed to offer – or to not necessarily prevent – a broad range of play practices that can be deemed individualistic and anti-social in nature. *World of Warcraft* is therefore a highly elusive game when it comes to play.

2: The Many Faces of Play

We can agree that *World of Warcraft*, which offers a wide range of play practices enabled through the game's design, becomes a varied and unpredictable space for play. Play, however, is always varied and unpredictable, even within the most tightly designed games. As Salen and Zimmermann point out, the act of play, whether within a game, with a toy or with the imagination, is 'free movement between a more rigid structure' (2004: 304). To ensure some measure of grip on the wide variety of play practices found in *World of Warcraft*, I turn to philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer. He defines play ontologically as a movement that has no goal that, when reached, brings it to an end. Play, instead, has a structure of oscillation, a constant to-and-fro movement, which keeps play active by constantly renewing itself (1985: 93). For Gadamer, this is the essence of play and it is through this movement that games can be defined. The rules and structures through which the to-and-fro movement are controlled describe the particular nature of a game (1985: 96). Here we can see that play on a very basic level needs at least some structuring to become a game. Literary theorist Wolfgang Iser has further elaborated on Gadamer's ideas of play as a to-and-fro movement. Iser calls play in games that have a particular goal 'instrumental play'. Here, play ends when the pre-set goals are achieved (1993: 237). On the other side of the spectrum lies 'free play', the form of play that is without endings and keeps play in motion (ibid. 237). Iser looks at *ilinx*, Roger Caillois' category of games which is all about inducing vertigo (Caillois 1961: 24), for 'free play at its most expansive' (Iser 1993: 262). Ilinx-based games like bungee-jumping, downhill racing or swinging (if you would call these games at all), are all about inducing vertigo by destroying the stability of perception (Caillois 1961: 23).

The paradox that Iser recognizes in this opposition is that both instrumental and free play cannot exist in a pure form. Literary theorist Paul B. Armstrong describes this paradox as follows:

> On the one hand, no game can be purely instrumental without ceasing to be playful and becoming merely a means to an end. On the other hand, there is an instrumental quality to free play itself to the extent that each move back-and-forth is an attempt to establish meaning and decide the outcome (2000: 216).

This way, actual play situations are located somewhere along the continuum between instrumental and free play, never quite reaching either end.

The movement of play

Even though *World of Warcraft* is built as a system with a formal structure of rules and goals, it is the movement of play between free and instrumental that makes it difficult if not impossible to see it – or any other game for that matter – as a stable object. This quality of play as movement is not present in prevailing definitions of what constitutes a game, as destabilizing game structures through play makes it even harder to define them. For Malaby, who refers to the destabilizing nature of play as 'process', it is reason to argue that 'any attempt to formalize games by defining them essentially in terms of their rules or through a taxonomy of types [...] falls short because it fails to capture how games are moving targets, capable of generating new, emergent effects that then inform the following instances of the game' (Malaby 2007: 103). For a game like *World of Warcraft*, which offers a highly instrumental goal-driven structure of levels, quests and other objectives but, as a virtual world, also presents a space where players can play freely in unpredictable, innovative or subversive manners, the distinction between instrumental and free play is not conceptual but very real. Play in *World of Warcraft*, then, is not stable but rather the result of constant oscillations between free and instrumental play practices.

If free and instrumental play form two opposing points on a scale between which players move, individual and group play is another. Some games are designed for solo play, others require player groups of various sizes in order to function. *World of Warcraft* offers options for both, with players constantly shifting between individual and group play situations. A shared environment by definition, playing entirely solo is difficult if not impossible to achieve, as other players' characters are always near, but it is nevertheless still possible to enjoy most of the game's content without ever having to communicate or work together with other players.

Put these oppositional pairs – individual and group play as well as free and instrumental play – on imaginary axes and you get a basic framework, with play moving between them. Such a framework is not meant to create a taxonomy that confines players into certain practices of play, like Bartle's well-known player types (Bartle 1996, 2004) but rather to provide a basic overview of the possible forms of play in *World of Warcraft*.[10] Instrumental play, both in its individual form and group form, should not need much explanation. Playing solo by doing quests or pursuing other game objectives are forms of instrumental individual play, while cooperative and competitive practices, like doing quests together or engaging in group-based player-versus-player (or PvP) battles, are forms of instrumental group play. As both individual and group-based forms of free play are not

bound by any particular predefined goal structures or rules, the amount of possible play practices is almost endless. Examples of free individual play would be exploring the vast and detailed fictional world without any other goal than just wanting to see "what's out there", or collecting items of clothing to dress a character to personal aesthetic taste (rather than gathering such items for instrumental reasons like combat). A good example of free group play would be role-playing. In *World of Warcraft*, we can see players inventing a large variety of role-playing practices, often having nothing to do with the goals and challenges that *World of Warcraft* as a game offers. Many of these role-playing activities force role-players to work around the limitations of the game's design, which is not always set up for their role-playing needs (Copier 2007; MacCallum-Stewart & Parsler 2008).

Ludic vs. representational role-playing

There is a reason I mention role-playing as an example of free play above: it is part of the MMORPG or, more generally, the role-playing game genre's name. In genre terms, the term role-playing is far more instrumental in nature, having less to do with acting and more to do with playing/managing a character which, as game scholar Mark J. P. Wolf points out, is 'represented by various statistics, which may even include a developed persona' (Wolf 2001: 130). In some RPGs such as the popular *Final Fantasy* series, players even control several characters at once, managing their strengths and weaknesses in such a way that a goal (like defeating an enemy) is achieved. This type of instrumental play is what can be called *ludic* role-playing, while the acting variety can be referred to as *representational* role-playing. Cooperative forms of instrumental group play are good examples of ludic role-playing, as each player in such a group controls a character with a certain function – they each have an instrumental role to play within their team in order to defeat the adversaries opposing them. Most of *World of Warcraft*'s most challenging content is geared towards these forms of tightly organized ludic role-playing.

The difference between ludic and representational role-playing is not always recognized. In his study of *World of Warcraft*, sociologist William Sims Bainbridge notes that 'because *World of Warcraft* is a role-playing game, it seemed appropriate to use role-playing in the research' (Bainbridge 2010: 16), hereby referring to role-playing practices I would call representational in nature. In a study of the MMORPG *Everquest II*, Williams et al. point out that representational role-players form a small community 'playing their own game, largely independent from the other players and the larger world they populate' (Williams, Kennedy & Moore 2011). In *World of Warcraft*, this larger world seems primarily interested in ludic role-playing, making a representational approach not necessarily as appropriate as Bainbridge suggests. Even on the dedicated (representational) role-playing ser-

vers I was active on, representational role-playing was relatively rare. An in-depth analysis of the possibilities and limitations for both ludic and representational role-playing afforded through *World of Warcraft*'s game design will be provided in Part II of the book.

Another reason to point out the difference between ludic and representational role-playing has to do with the levels of engrossment they induce. In his study on tabletop role-playing games, Fine uses Erving Goffman's method of frame analysis (Goffman 1974) to distinguish three frame levels of engrossment in the games that he studied: the real world in which all activities are grounded, the game context in which players deal with the rules and structures of the game, and the fictional world within the game in which they are present as characters. Each of these frames create other levels of awareness, meaning and immersion for the user, resulting in different forms of interaction with both the game and other players (Fine 1983: 183-186). The concept of frames also reminds us that play is always grounded in the real world and never wholly separate (cf. Lehdonvirta 2010; Jørgensen, Mortensen, Rossi & Glas 2011).

In the light of these frame levels, one could say that ludic role-players tend to approach the game from the game context whereas representational role-players go to a fictional level by approaching the game "in-character", resulting in a noticeably different game experience. Bartle describes similar levels of immersion that are analogous to Fine's frames. These levels – player, avatar, character, persona – are seen as 'conceptual or emotional barriers' between which players must pass to become more deeply immersed in the game (Bartle 2004: 154, 155). Not all players, however, want to fully immerse or engross themselves in a game's fictional world, instead choosing to enjoy themselves on the game level. I would also be hesitant to claim that players who remain on a game level are less emotionally involved or immersed in the game. Many of the extended examples throughout this book show the contrary. Similar to my approach to different play forms, however, players should not be seen as "stuck" on one level of engrossment or immersion but rather as constantly moving between levels depending on the play situation they encounter. In other words, representational role-players can easily switch to ludic role-playing and vice-versa. Different frames or levels of immersion do, however, lead to situations where players have a very different understanding of what the game is or how it should be played.

Following this overview of play forms, we can say that *World of Warcraft*'s design allows and even encourages players to constantly move between free/instrumental and individual/group modes of play, and on different levels of immersion/engrossment, all within a shared, persistent game world. This relative freedom of play both liberates players and brings with it negotiations between players about whether some play forms are "better" or more socially accepted than others. I would therefore like to add another form of play which I will call individualized group play. This form of play, where players play alongside each other rather than

with or against other players within the same game, can only exist in games where players are free to move between individual and group play at will without bringing play to a halt. The notion of individualized group play again brings forward that, even though *World of Warcraft* is a thoroughly social experience, "social" does not always indicate meaningful or positive interaction and communication between players.

Problematizing Social Play

Contrary to what outsiders might potentially expect from a multiplayer game like *World of Warcraft*, individual and individualized group play (rather than group play) amount to a large part of the overall game play experience. Results from large-scale data-mining carried out by games research collective Nicolas Ducheneaut, Nick Yee, Eric Nickell and Robert Moore, for example, show that grouping is seen as an inefficient way to get through the game. Many players choose only to begin grouping when they reach the higher levels with their characters, ignoring grouping possibilities until this moment (2006: 4).[11] Such an example of individual play is part of what Ducheneaut et al. call playing 'alone together': being '*surrounded by* others instead of *playing with* them' (2006: 4, emphasis in original). They do not necessarily consider players who prefer to play individually as anti-social players:

> While many of WoW's subscribers play alone, we believe that they prefer playing a MMORPG to playing a comparable single-player game because of a different kind of "social factor." Indeed, the other players have important roles beyond providing direct support and camaraderie in the context of quest groups: they also provide an *audience*, a sense of *social presence*, and a *spectacle* (2006: 7, emphasis in original).

In other words, gazing at other players, showing off your newly created gear or just reading the endless banter on the game's many chat channels provide much pleasure for non-socializers. The "direct support and camaraderie" of group play situations should, however, not be overestimated as social play. Even when players decide to group up, not all play is socially oriented. The classes available for play in *World of Warcraft* are not equally equipped for solo play. This means individual players need to form groups for particular goals with the sole intention of using each other's character abilities. Group play then becomes a result of game design, forcing players to do so, not the result of players actually wanting to play with others. Game scholars Jaakko Stenros, Janne Paavilainen and Frans Mäyrä, who provide an overview of different forms of sociability and social play in games, refer to this situation as 'a *neutral* tendency towards co-players' (Stenros, Paavilainen & Mäyrä 2009: 87). It is not uncommon, when grouping up with strangers, for communication to be limited to an austere minimum. While players

who group up temporarily to accomplish a particular quest might technically be playing with each other, they do so in an "every man for himself" manner. In this way, they too are playing alone together.

Individualized group play also exists in the form of anti-social behaviour. Ganking, for instance – the practice of randomly killing another player's character and then waiting for him to re-appear or "respawn" with the intention of killing him again – is condemned by most of the player community, but players can do it if they want to. These are forms of what games researcher Torill Mortensen calls 'destructive deviance' – 'that which ruins the progress of others' (2008: 208) – and can seriously reduce the enjoyment of those involved as victims. As the option for ganking is, however, part of the game's design – nothing in the game's rules prevents them from doing it – gankers usually do not see their actions as transgressions of the rules. There is, however, a difference between what the game allows and what the player community deems appropriate (a topic that will be discussed below).

The inclusion of individualized group play – both in free play form (like ganking, which serves no other goal than personal enjoyment for the ganker) and in instrumental form (playing 'alone together') – help to clarify two things about game play in *World of Warcraft*. First, individual play is always embedded in a social environment, making true individual play as seen in single-player games impossible. Second, we should not think of, or at least should not overestimate, *World of Warcraft* as a purely social environment in terms of game play. This is a gameworld, not a social world. As Ducheneaut et al. observe, 'the prevalence and extent of social activities in MMOGs might have been previously over-estimated,' adding that 'gaming communities face important challenges affecting their cohesion and eventual longevity' (2006: 1). Klastrup agrees with Ducheneaut et al., arguing that:

> There is no doubt about the importance of sociality when it comes to describing the attraction of online worlds, but if the approach to online gameworlds is mostly focused on the social- and community-oriented aspects, we might not be able to explain why [...] some players enjoy playing and engaging with a gameworld mostly as a solitary endeavour (Klastrup 2010: 312).

Over time, solitary play has even become an issue within the game community in the form of the derogatory term "casual player".[12] During the period in which I was an active player, the game's evolution in terms of game design progressively catered to individual, "casual" play practices through patches and expansion packs. One such design change was making the so-called epic items, which were initially rewarded only to those engaging in the most dedicated forms of instrumental group play (like raiding), reachable for solo play-oriented players. These easy-to-get epics quickly became known as "welfare epics", a derogatory term

used primarily by hardcore players who argued that these casual players did not put in the required group effort to get such rewards.[13] As communication scholar Christopher A. Paul points out in his work on the rhetoric of rewards, 'the underlying assumption that one should be sociable in MMOGs was present throughout the discourse [in response to the introduction of welfare epics, red.], which is underscored by the fact that, in out of game worlds, ''welfare'' is often distributed to help more fully socialize people into capitalist systems' (Paul 2010: 171). Judging from my own observations of raiding forums, a considerable contingent of the hardcore players remains bitter about the introduction of these items. Casual, solo play-oriented players, however, use what have become known as welfare epics en masse in the game and do not seem to care much that the way they received them differs from how it was previously. According to some commentators, hardcore-versus-casual debacles like these are a key part of the more recent exodus of players from the game (Thomson 2011).

As should be clear from the welfare epics example, "casual" players form a substantial force within *World of Warcraft*. They might not be as vocal as hardcore players, but they do represent an important share of *World of Warcraft*'s paying customers, as this is reflected in the game's design over time. While social group play in *World of Warcraft* remains a crucial part of this book, some of the extended examples deliberately focus on individual and individualized group play practices, most notably in chapter three. This should provide some insight into solitary play in gameworlds.

3: The Contracts of Play

Up until this point, I have mostly referred to game design as a way of affording and limiting certain play practices. These built-in affordances and limitations, one could argue, try to shape play in a sense that they convey what the game designers think the player might want to (or simply should) play. In this chapter, I will discuss forms of control that make sure this shape is retained – they are the rules, codes and contracts that players and Blizzard put in place, both implicitly and explicitly, to make sure players do not stray too far from intended and accepted play practices. It deals with the social and legal agreements that exist amongst players themselves and between players and Blizzard. These agreements, for which I use the umbrella term game contract, show which play practices and other forms of participation and communication are considered acceptible in and around the game. In contrast to the coded, non-negotiable rules of game design, game contracts present players with meta-rules – rules that are not impossible but rather impermissible to break.

Social codes, norms, and boundaries

As should be clear, my use of the term contract should be understood loosely; as I use it, it includes both the legal documents that players agree to when signing up for the game (discussed below) and the whole gamut of player-created social protocols, etiquette and other social rules and guidelines. This second category, which I call contractual, forms what game scholar Esther MacCallum-Stewart aptly calls the social codes of practice: the 'tenets laid down by individuals within the game who have no design power or automatically conferred authority' (MacCallum-Stewart 2011: 45). These codes of practice, she points out, are strongly linked to what players perceive to be foul play, in the 'spirit of the game' or behaving 'with honour' (ibid. 45). As a form of social contracts, in other words, they depict the affordances and limitations of play as judged by the players rather than the contrived, coded affordances and limitations of play as a result of the game's design.

In most games, cheating or other forms of unsportsmanlike behaviour "breaks" the game experience for others, resulting in play being momentarily or indefinitely suspended by the players and/or referee. As stopping play usually

diminishes the enjoyment of those involved, the presence of certain socially negotiated boundaries ensures that in most cases players tend to obey or at least agree on the rules of play. MMORPGs, however, are persistent, resulting in play being continous even if players misbehave in the eyes of others. Divergent play practices are then no longer potential game-stoppers. The presence of social codes of practice, both implicit and explicit, nevertheless ensures that even if players decide to ignore all other players and strictly follow their own rules and pursue their own goals, they still do so within a community of players with established norms and values. Like the MMORPG itself, this community is persistent in its presence; there is no offline, individual version of *World of Warcraft* for the socially averse. Individualized group play practices like ganking might not necessarily stop play in a MMORPG, and players who wish to commit these anti-social acts could continue as they please because the game itself does not stop them from doing so, but they are breaking social contracts created by the collective over years of communal play and negotiation, risking further social exclusion.

The social codes of practice defining what kind of play practices and other behaviour is deemed acceptable do not, however, necessarily apply to *World of Warcraft*'s community as a whole. Many of the codes of practice are part of cultural norms and values that players bring to the game (play remaining grounded in the real world), others are more specifically generated and negotiated in terms of the game's rules or the game's fiction. While most players, for instance, agree on what is considered harassment, what players interested in hardcore instrumental group play might consider acceptable in terms of game play could easily differ from the desirable play styles that representational role-players uphold. In a discussion of players and the way they deal with the virtual economy of a MMORPG, cultural historian Timothy Burke, for instance, paints the difference between individualistic players aiming to maximize their progression and players oriented towards a distribution of wealth based on social and cultural rules or ethics (Burke 2002: 10-11). The first group of players 'understand the argument of moral economy players, but find their vision confining, regulatory, and elitist, one that replaces a concrete economic hierarchy built on measurable achievement with a slippery hierarchy built on rhetorical and cultural skills that originate from outside the frame of the game' (2002: 28-29). Players of different types and/or with different preferences and interests organize themselves both loosely and tenaciously in groups. In his work on tabletop role-playing, Fine refers to groups of players as 'idiocultures', or:

> Systems of knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, and customs peculiar to an interacting group to which members refer and employ as the basis of further interaction. Members recognize that they share experiences and that these experiences can be referred to with the expectation that they will be under-

> stood by other members, and can be employed to construct a shared universe of discourse (1983: 136).

A larger community thus consists of a large set of small groups with potentially unique codes of practice, but they nevertheless exist within the context of the larger player culture. 'As a result', explains Fine, 'every small group can be said to be an interpreter of this larger culture' (1983: 238). Sometimes these interpretations are on a par with those of other groups, but differences in opinion can cause disagreements between players about their particular play or (other) behaviour.

While Fine limits his observations of idiocultures to small groups interacting face to face in real-world locations, like the Little League baseball teams and tabletop role-playing groups that he originally studied (1979, 1983), when dealing with virtual communities one could stretch the notion of idioculture to include larger, less formal groups. As *World of Warcraft*'s community is not location-based but exists in the virtual, and does not (necessarily) involve face-to-face interaction, the groups that form around specific play practices and preferences can become rather large. Player groupings might start out informal and temporary but can develop into more sustained and organized forms like player guilds. Guilds might consist of small, easily defined groups of players, but some of the raiding and role-playing communities encountered during my research consisted of hundreds, even thousands of participants, especially when including outside observers and/or fans of these groups who follow their cultural lead. Even with this immense size, they often still showed distinct social codes of practice. Just as players can be part of different groups with different characters, they can be part of different idiocultures sequentially and simultaneously (the latter implying a range of identity play options which are part of several of the extended examples throughout this book).

In terms of game contract, we can say that the various overlapping and sometimes contended social codes of practice in and around the game define what players need to do and especially what they should not do to be an accepted part of the community, or to those parts of the community in which they wish to be included. At the same time, social codes of practice enable players interested in anti-social individualized group play practices to act in a manner least appreciated by other players, like ganking. Furthermore, the interactions between the different groups, each with its unique interpretations of how the game should be approached, shape both the community and the game itself, as the constant negotiations about the proper codes of practice can also be said to be negotiations about the boundaries and meaning of play.

Players are, however, not the only ones involved in the creation and enforcement of contracts when it comes to play. In fact, the legal boundaries set by the game developer, stating what players may and may not do with the product they

have purchased, are among the first rules that players encounter after buying the game. It is this side of *World of Warcraft* I will turn to next.

Playing on a licence

Discussing *World of Warcraft* as a social space, a community of players with its own culture, does not imply that we should ignore the fact that *World of Warcraft* represents a very successful business for its proprietor. When investigating *World of Warcraft* in terms of contractual affordances and limitations, one encounters political-economic negotiations in which power and control (or the lack thereof) plays an important role. Like many games, Blizzard as a developer and publisher has put a range of legal documents between players and their game. Two of these documents are especially significant as game contracts when playing *World of Warcraft*: the End-User Licence Agreement or EULA, and the Terms of Use or ToU. Like many software license agreements, signing these document means clicking on the "I Accept" button when prompted during the installation of the game software. Choosing not to accept is always an option, but this choice will simply block access to the software – to play the game, signing these documents is compulsory.

The End-User License Agreement is a key document because it ensures that players understand that they have not in fact *bought* the game software but that Blizzard *licenses* its use. This is worth repeating, as it influences how to think of *World of Warcraft* as a cultural artifact: it is not a product that is published but a service that is provided. As Internet researcher Sal Humphreys, who has written extensively about EULA-related issues concerning the MMORPG *Everquest*, points out:

> Structurally [publication and service] are built on different mechanisms. Publication is an industry built around the notion of property. Powerful discourses circulate that construct publications as property subject to ownership and theft. Service industries on the other hand, are structured around process and relationship. They are not about the exchange of property. There is an exchange of money for service (2005: 92).

How Blizzard deals with its role as a service-provider will feature more prominently in chapter four. For now, it is important to note that legally, players never actually own the game; they pay for the rights to play it through a monthly subscription.

The Terms of Use document describes additional licence limitations, meant to ensure that players do not modify, hack or in any other way exploit the game, but the ToU also features a code of conduct related to inappropriate character and guild names, chat communication and gameplay practices. This code of conduct

overlaps with many of the social contracts among the player community. Whereas breaking social codes of practice only leads to being branded as a cheat or egotist, breaking Blizzard's code of conduct can result in play being halted, at least for the perpetrator. The reason for this is that by signing the EULA and ToU, players give Blizzard the right to ban them from the game temporarily or, in some cases, permanently.

One could criticize EULAs and ToUs for being excessively harsh. In her work on *Everquest*, Humphreys has summarized several of the problems she encountered. All EULAs tend to be alike, regardless of the unique features of the individual programmes or services they cover. Agreeing to the EULA gives the owner the right to terminate the service at will, without user consent or consultation. They allow for the collection of privacy information and covert social surveillance (active control) and take freedom of speech lightly, giving the platform owners the right to silence voices or practices they do not condone (Humphreys 2008: 23-26). More to the point, the contracts allow owners to rewrite or rephrase sections of the contract at will ad infinitum. If players do not like the terms of the contract, they can always play another game. If they violate them, they can be denied access or removed from the service without any difficulties.

Even fair use, the right to use limited amounts of copyrighted material for your own creative productions or, as Lessig describes it: 'the right to hire a lawyer to defend your right to create' (2004: 187) is limited by these contracts. During a conference on law and machinima (animated films created through game engines), an attorney working for a law firm which, among other clients, has represented Blizzard in several cases – argued that, in terms of legal contracts, fair use *can* be signed away entirely.[14] If critics want to dispute any unfair or unclear elements of EULAs in court, all a judge has to do is to rule that the relevant contract terms are valid, creating, as media journalist and gold farming expert Julian Dibbell puts it, 'a sort of wet blanket thrown upon the sparks of intellectual controversy flying from the case' (2006a: 139).

Together with socially negotiated protocols, the EULA and ToU form the constantly shifting boundaries of what is considered acceptable play and behaviour in and around the game by Blizzard. Being non-negotiable, Blizzard's contracts are nonetheless far removed from socially negotiated codes of practice. As law professor Jack Balkin reminds us, together with the coded rules, these contracts create a basic architecture and set of behavioural rules for the game. *World of Warcraft*'s code and contract (pre)condition play and to a degree dictate the limitations of social codes of practice: 'the players' freedom to play is a freedom to play within the rules the platform owners have created' (Balkin 2006: 87).

While issues concerning the EULA and ToU certainly exist and, as I will show in chapter four, can cause strife between Blizzard and players, they are not inherently malevolent contracts. While the degree of freedom to negotiate the terms and conditions may differ greatly, both social and legal contracts are aligned by

their constitution and goals: to create an enjoyable game experience with a healthy, friendly player community. For most players, the EULA and ToU are not at all problematic. They potentially keep disruptive behaviour of other players at bay. Players and designers nonetheless do not always agree on what constitutes fun play, or fun social interaction. As this book shows, players often do go beyond the limits they have agreed to in the licence agreements, limits they themselves do not recognize or in fact take for granted.

Like play itself, game contractual issues, both in terms of the social codes of practice that players create as well as the legal documents that Blizzard provides, point at the fact that *World of Warcraft* is not a stable cultural artifact. Many of these issues, however, are not specifically limited to what happens within the game world. In the following section I will discuss this chapter's final perspective on *World of Warcraft*, game culture, which shows that the negotiations taking place about what the game is, and/or how it should be played, and which forms of appropriation are acceptable, extend far beyond the boundaries of the game.

4: Play and/as Participation

This book is not only limited to what happens within the game world, it also looks at what is happening at the game's periphery. A MMORPG like *World of Warcraft* is embedded in a network of a thousand satellite websites, web forums and other web applications. Game researchers Kurt Squire and Constance Steinkuehler have noticed that while there is a growing body of research on virtual worlds, there appears to be 'a paucity of research on [MMORPGs] as bona fide cultures [...] – sites constituted through language and practice both within the game (e.g., virtual social interaction and joint activity) and beyond (e.g., discussion of game-related issues on player-driven web sites)' (2006: 178-179). Research – most notably from the social science, STS and Human-Computer Interaction studies perspectives – has since produced several enriching works on MMORPG and/or virtual worlds in general (see Taylor 2006c; Malaby 2009; Pearce & Artemesia 2009; Bainbridge 2010; Nardi 2010; Chen 2011). In terms of culture, this book approaches *World of Warcraft* primarily from a participatory culture perspective, which has media and fan culture studies at its roots. From this perspective, the view is that consumers do not simply consume but participate as (co-)producers too. In participatory cultures, fans of cultural objects (like *Harry Potter* or *Star Trek*) not only engage in creative productions, they do so in an environment where creating and sharing these creative productions is seen as defining social connections (Jenkins 1992, 2006; Gray, Sandvoss & Harrington 2007). *World of Warcraft* is not just a game, it constitutes a culture in which meaning is developed and negotiated between players as well as between players and the developers.

Every player plays its part

As one would expect, creative productions by consumers are not always in line with the main narrative or ideology of the core text. While fans of a film or book might not be able to change the core text, by producing their own material they can give a voice to their own interpretation of the work (alternative endings, short stories, drawings, videos, etc.) or create an expanded universe of interaction for the object (fan sites, forums, wikis, etc.). When dealing with a game like *World of Warcraft*, consumers – or players – can quite literally play with the core text. The most basic level at which negotiations about acceptable forms of participation

(and through it, appropriation) takes place is therefore play itself. As games require active participation from the player in the form of play – without play, games remain inert – the notion of participatory culture in relation to games clearly needs some additional consideration. As Humphreys points out: 'Fan cultures represent the small percentage of audience members who actively seek to create communities around their interest in a particular text or series. MMOGs require *every* player to be engaged in community' (2005: 71, emphasis by author). Many others have pointed out that playing a game adds user functions like exploration, modification and construction to the more interpretative user function of "passive" media like film, books and television. These additional user functions enable players not just to interpret the content of a game but to explore, reconfigure and, depending on the amount of freedom given, add to it also (Raessens 2005). Play does not simply require participation, we could argue that it *is* participation.

World of Warcraft is designed with exploration, reconfiguration and, to a degree, modification in mind, resulting in profoundly different play practices and outcomes, some of which Blizzard and/or other players may view as unwelcome. In the same way that players' play preferences and/or levels of engrossment might differ, players do not all share similar levels of participatory activity or even necessarily a social orientation towards participation. Different forms of play and therefore participation do not always serve common goals. Divergent, transformative and even anti-social play forms constantly challenge the core game experience as intended by the designers as well as the boundaries of what is considered acceptable participation by other players.

On the many communication platforms outside of the game itself, participation is more on a par with fan cultures of traditional media. Where the practice of play makes everything within the game participatory, on the websites surrounding the game, few are responsible for most of the creative cultural production. To describe this situation in online social networks and communities, web usability researcher Nielsen has put forward a "90-9-1 rule" of user participation, where 90% of all users are lurkers, 9% contribute from time to time and only 1% accounts for most creative contributions (Nielsen 2006). Large-scale quantitative research has shown that *World of Warcraft* players, however, tend to be more active on web forums, with only 30% of players indicating that they never post on forums and well over 30% of players saying they do so once or several times a day, usually on guild-related forums (Yee 2006). The differences between levels of participation, then, are less drastic than the 90-10-1 rule would suggest. A relatively small portion of all players is nevertheless accountable for the vast majority of contributions from participation. Due to play's participatory characteristics, players will nonetheless never reach a point where they do not participate at all.[15] The differences between active and relatively passive participation in *World of War-*

craft's subculture might be substantial, but each player still contributes his or her part through play. As Humphreys explains:

> While we can identify the hardcore, who go and make the websites that surround the game and produce much of the material that is useful to playing, we can also identify that every single member of the MMOG 'audience' is productive of material that can be used by other players and the publisher (2005: 71).

The addition of the publisher in the final sentence of the quote signals that the participatory activity of *World of Warcraft* is not just beneficial to participants themselves. It ultimately serves its creator, who can harness participation in order to use it as a force of co-production. Even if participation is limited to individual play practices, the actions within the game can be data-mined to see what players like the most or where they get stuck and stop playing as a result. In this way, all forms of player participation become a co-productive force for future versions of the game.[16]

The result of *World of Warcraft*'s participatory culture is a disintegration of the traditional distinction between consumer and producer. Players become 'prosumers' (Toffler 1981) – active participants in the process of *World of Warcraft*'s creation and evolution. In Henry Jenkins' seminal book *Convergence Culture*, new media users are positioned as being active, emancipated, creative and community-oriented while new media companies (among which game companies) are 'collaborationists' in the process, 'experimenting with new approaches that see fans as important collaborators in the production of content and as grassroots intermediaries helping to promote the franchise' (2006: 134). These collaborationists sharply contrast with old media companies (film, tv, music) who deny users the ability to tinker with their products. These he calls 'prohibitionists' – and even they are slowly turning to collaboration (ibid. 134). Without question, participatory contributions from active players are key to the success of the overall community and subculture and therefore the success of the game. Frank Pearce, Blizzard's senior vice-president, recognizes this fact:

> It's not just a bullet point for the back of the box: I really view the Blizzard community for each specific game to be a huge feature that adds value to the product. So it's important for us to nurture that community and ensure it has a long lifespan (EDGE 2004: 80).

Active players literally add value to the "product" in the form of content and/or function as structural roles within the subculture's networks of communication, dispersing information to less active players – and they do it all for free. One could even say that players have moved beyond prosumerism to what new media scholar Axel Bruns calls 'produsage', the collaborative and continuous building

and extending of existing content in pursuit of further improvement that we see for instance on newly emerging sites, Wikipedia and blogs (2005, 2008).

Participation as exploitation?

The situation of mutual benefit between consumer and producer should, however, be approached with caution; *World of Warcraft* is not at all the kind of "Web 2.0" open source system in which Bruns's 'produser' thrives. As new media scholar Mirko Tobias Schäfer points out, popular discourse on participation often neglects the fact that social progress is not inherent to user participation; that participation is not always explicit, community-based and primarily intrinsically motivated; that participating in cultural production does not automatically mean participating in power structures or benefitting from generated revenues; and that many participatory practices are often implemented into software design (Schäfer 2011: 45).

And indeed, creative cultural productions resulting from active player participation are actively appropriated by game developers. As Consalvo reminds us: 'clearly, commercial entities have vested interests in commodifying as many elements of gaming culture as possible, to then sell those bits back to players as the most desirable forms of capital' (2007: 184). Media scholars Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Whiteford and Greig de Peuter point out that games in general are increasingly becoming the product of 'communities that extend beyond the workplace', with paid corporate employees forming 'only the core of a much wider circle or creativity [...] that includes a diffuse swirl of unpaid creators, test subjects, expert informants, and voluntary labour' (2003: 201). The concept of convergence culture is in danger of overstating the eagerness of producers to allow full collaboration of users in creative processes. While the roots of participatory culture in online social networks like virtual worlds can be traced back to grassroots and "DIY" counterculture, participation is now embedded in and entangled with corporately owned control spheres (Galloway 2004; Turner 2006; Lessig 2006; Schäfer 2011). Jenkins, too, recognizes protectionist tendencies of companies, stating that: 'allowing consumers to interact with media under controlled circumstances is one thing; allowing them to participate in the production and distribution of cultural goods – on their own terms – is something else altogether' (2006: 133).[17]

While exposing the legal, economic and/or governmental implications of these shifts or transformations from consumer to co-producer is not the main aim of this book, the practices of (and power struggles about) participation do affect the game itself, or at least the way it is played and perceived.[18] What this book does show is how a gameworld like *World of Warcraft* differs from social worlds like *Second Life*, the design of which is very much the result of a close cooperation between users and the world's developer Linden Lab. I agree with cultural anthropologist Bonni A. Nardi who regards *World of Warcraft* more like a work of art in

that it is 'inherently singular, anomalous, moving on the edges of culture', adding that 'it has no interest in balancing competing claims through fairness or compromise, although it is, of course, not immune to influence outside itself' (Nardi 2010: 80). In other words, even though every player participates in the game in some way or form, Blizzard is still very much in charge of the game and does not share this power easily. At the same time, even when we bestow Blizzard with a large amount of power over the game, when it comes to the possibilities and limitations of participation, play is a process that is not easily constrained by design. This leads to my final argument in this chapter, in which I argue that we should be looking at the various negotiations between players and Blizzard on the levels discussed above (game design, game play, game contract and game culture) if we want to understand the complexity of *World of Warcraft*.

5: Battlefields of Negotiation

The previous chapters conveyed how one should not limit observations of a MMORPG such as *World of Warcraft* to one perspective. It does not do justice to its complexity, potentially limiting one's understanding of the game. I have therefore tried to frame *World of Warcraft* through four main perspectives. First, I discussed *World of Warcraft* from a game design perspective, framing the MMORPG genre as a problematic type of game, as it defies classic game definitions. While part of the virtual worlds family, I argued that it is a gameworld first and foremost, with individualistic and instrumental play being important characteristics. I then discussed the game play perspective, giving more attention to these characteristics. Play was furthermore framed as movement: players constantly change play styles between and even during play sessions. This movement extends from play styles to levels of immersion or engrossment, making game play in *World of Warcraft* highly diverse in nature and experience. In the following game contract perspective, I have shown how this diverse nature of play is still regulated to some extent by a range of social codes of practice and legal documents describing the accepted boundaries of play. Lastly, I discussed the game culture perspective, in which I framed *World of Warcraft* in terms of participatory culture, showing how the boundaries between player and designer are contested.

The multi-layered perspective allows me to explain in greater detail how and why claims about what *World of Warcraft* is (or should be) are different, and how these differences influence the game's evolution. This lack of agreement is limited not only to differences between players and Blizzard but is also evident within the player community itself in the form of different practices of play, in some cases supported by unique cultural norms and values, representing different approaches to the rules and boundaries of play.

Players (in all their varieties) and Blizzard are all stakeholders when it comes to *World of Warcraft* – all strive to achieve what they think is in the game's or their own best interest. Even if they pursue different values, the fact that these values in many cases need to be expressed and defended in order to arrive at their preferred version of the game unites all of the stakeholders. The resulting negotiations, dealing with differences of opinion and other asymmetries of power or agency over the game, take place on what I figuratively call a *battlefield of negotiation*. The use of the term "battlefield" sounds serious. And indeed, play can be very serious,

and the stakes, both affective and financial, quite large. Negotiation practices are, however, all very different in form, context and severity; some of them can look benign, almost insignificant, to the stakeholders involved. Exploring the fictional world (game play) while ignoring the instrumental rules or goals (game design) to create a video showing the landscape of a particular in-game region (game culture) is, for instance, hardly seen as problematic by players and/or Blizzard. Sometimes negotiations between stakeholders are more explicit, for instance when players unwittingly or actively break either social codes of practice or one of the licence agreements, attracting scorn from other players or repercussions from Blizzard. The release of controversial new content through patches can also provoke vocal opposition from player groups, as seen in the welfare epics example. A case included in Part IV of the book, to give another example, discusses the players' ability to exchange virtual currency for real money and vice versa. This practice is shown to be highly controversial among players and is explicitly forbidden by Blizzard. Another extended example in that chapter shows that Blizzard does not shy away from pursuing (or threatening) legal action when it encounters activities it does not condone on websites outside of its direct control sphere. Here, a video hosting site is asked to remove a player-made video which shows how to exploit game flaws.

For Blizzard, arguably the most powerful stakeholder entity, the process of ensuring that all stakeholders (including itself) are satisfied with the game is a difficult creative and managerial task. Players, Henry Jenkins has pointed out, must feel a sense of ownership over a virtual world if they are going to put in the time and effort needed to make it work, for themselves and for other players. 'You can't possibly mandate a fictionally involving universe with thousands of other people. The best you can hope for is a world that is vibrant enough that people act in manners consistent with the fictional tenets' (2006: 160).[19] As hope alone is not sufficient to keep players in check all the time, *World of Warcraft* remains tightly controlled by Blizzard's control mechanisms, including the coded rules and the contractual agreements each player has signed. Through design, maintenance and customer support, Blizzard has the most options to deem certain practices of play as desired while outlawing others. More so, through interventions, adaptations, expansions and limitations brought forth by content patches and community management, it regularly adjusts *World of Warcraft* as it sees fit. Such changes, both on the instrumental (game rules, interface options, etc.) and fictional levels (additional narratives, expanding the virtual world's geography) have nonetheless been appreciated by players, judging by its vast player community.

While Blizzard undoubtedly is the most powerful stakeholder within *World of Warcraft*, players usually do not feel underpowered or exploited. Through play itself, players can diverge from game design structures they feel conflict with or diverge from their wishes or needs. As long as divergent play practices or modifications are considered 'creative use of game mechanics' (as Blizzard tends to

refer to activities going beyond the intended design), players are free to do as they please. Blizzard also allows players to adjust the user interface of the game to some extent with modifications created by players themselves, giving the game a more personalized look and feel during play. Again, user interface modification is allowed as long as Blizzard does not deem it inappropriate, in which case the company will block the modification's functionality. Both divergent play and modification can be considered a kind of negotiation between players (through play) and Blizzard (through the game's design).

While apt for a game which, as its title suggests, is all about war, the term "battlefield" in battlefield of negotiation should be read as the space within or between the different levels of negotiation where stakeholders meet. The battlefields of negotiation throughout this book show *World of Warcraft* as a host environment for playful interaction, a social environment, as a source for creative productions, a product worth protecting from misuse and so on, showing that *World of Warcraft* is a complex socio-cultural phenomenon, but always one embedded in a commercially controlled context. The variety of battlefields of negotiation, both within and around the game, remind us that *World of Warcraft* is not an easily defined cultural object to play, use, manage or study. Different as they may be, they all provide insight into the way the shifting boundaries of game and play define the *World of Warcraft* phenomenon, and how the line between developer, manager, owner and player becomes increasingly diffuse.

Part II
Controlling the Game

A game like *World of Warcraft* is always developed with an 'attempt to embed within it particular forms of use and, by extension, particular users', as game researcher T. L. Taylor puts it (2006a). In this part of the book, I will analyze *World of Warcraft*'s underlying technology, its coded rules and its fictional world as designed by Blizzard. By doing so, I will demonstrate how the game is indeed constructed with particular uses and users in mind. Individual and individualized group players with a strong emphasis on the instrumental parts of the game, for instance, might be very passionate about their play style but, as Burke argues, 'at least some of that passion is less an expression of their own choice and more an adaptation to [...] foundational choices made by the developers' (Burke 2002: 29). Even with an ever-evolving game like *World of Warcraft*, an analysis of some of the key choices in its design will shed light on the affordances and limitations that form the basis of play. The following three chapters will therefore serve as both an in-depth introduction to the game as well as a reference point for the rest of the book, where player behaviour deliberately or accidentally diverges from Blizzard's intended use.

While games in general might not necessarily be tied to certain media or platforms – you can play chess on almost anything – in digital games the practices of play are, as media theorist Alexander Galloway notes, 'embedded inside algorithmic game machines' (2006: 21). The technology that carries digital games, both in terms of hardware and software, shapes the possibilities for play as well as the game world in which this play takes place, in advance of the players' arrival. Game technology and design allow for certain play practices, while making others impossible or at least improbable or impractical. The game setting – the fantasy world of Azeroth – is furthermore carefully constructed to provide players with certain experiences while limiting the possibilities for other ways to engage with the fiction. On the contractual level, the End User Licence Agreements and Terms of Service play a part too, as they help to retain the intended uses of the game after players actually start to interact with the game.

To understand the battlefields of negotiation in and around *World of Warcraft*, we need to therefore understand the game itself as a cultural artifact created from

a particular artistic but also commercial vision. As Nardi points out, the social negotiations that give shape to the game experience are materially constituted through the rules of play as created by the game design team: 'the design of a game dictates where opportunities for human intervention shall be offered; a hand of God is embroidered in the software' (2010: 75). The following three chapters will therefore investigate *World of Warcraft* on respectively the levels of technology, game rules and structures, and the fictional world it represents. Even though the practice of play leads to wildly different deviations from the way the design team envisions the average player will act inside the game, which in turn can lead to formal adjustments to the game, 'users find themselves engaging with a world that has been created with a particular vision of community, identity, and social life' (Taylor 2003: 28). These chapters will attempt to convey this vision. Ultimately, my aim is to show that, as a result of Blizzard's design decisions, players do not just play *World of Warcraft* but are played by it too.

6. The Setup of Play

Not unlike other computer games, *World of Warcraft* has certain technological and contractual thresholds and barriers, often working in conjunction, which must be traversed in order to actually arrive at the playable part. In this chapter, I will discuss three such thresholds – the network, the platform technology (both hardware and software) and the game configuration – each playing its own role in affording and imitating certain forms of play. These technological and configurational thresholds convey the amount of control Blizzard has given itself over *World of Warcraft*, both enabling and restricting play before it has even started as well as influencing what you can and cannot do with(in) *World of Warcraft* during play.

Network play

World of Warcraft offers networked play, where players are connected to each other over the Internet through a system of servers managed by Blizzard Entertainment. Without an Internet connection, you cannot play *World of Warcraft*; you might be able to open the game software, but engaging in play remains impossible. What you install on your computer is, as Blizzard calls it in the EULA, the 'game client'. This client might be able to load, render and animate the virtual environment, but it only does so through requests from a server located elsewhere. Therefore, a permanent Internet connection is one of the primary technological preconditions players must meet in order to play, in addition to the actual computer the game client runs on (which will be discussed below).

Making the game client connect to Blizzard's servers requires a contractual hurdle. The road to accessing the *World of Warcraft* network begins with buying the game client or, to be more precise, the serial number included with every copy of *World of Warcraft* as commercially sold. It does not matter where you actually get the installation software, as long as you buy a unique serial number. Each player needs an individual serial number to set up an account which gives access to the actual game by logging into the network. Buying the game client's serial number is, however, not enough to enter the network. Activating the account also requires players to choose one of the many monthly payment options. *World of Warcraft* is a subscription-based service, so no pay equals no play. In addition, installing the game client (and every subsequent software update or patch)

requires players to accept *World of Warcraft*'s EULA and Terms of Service. Refusing to do so means you will not be able to access the software.

When access to the game has been arranged, players are connected to a server, called a 'realm' by Blizzard. Communication and interaction with other players always passes through these central hubs, not peer-to-peer directly. If one of the data centres hosting the realms is inoperable, it will take down all of its subordinate realms, showing that, on a physical level, *World of Warcraft*'s network is highly centralized.[20] As soon as you log on to *World of Warcraft*, the distributed network of the Internet – where 'no single zenith exercises control over all others' (Galloway 2004: 31) – is therefore replaced with a classic decentralized network, with multiple central hosts each with their own sets of satellite clients. As all zeniths in *World of Warcraft*'s network are controlled by Blizzard, one single control point still exists. Additionally, players always login through the login-server, a single server point through which all connections between clients and the decentralized realms are made possible (the one for the European realms is located in Paris), which implies the presence of an actual, physical centralized network. For these reasons, within the *World of Warcraft* network, Blizzard is in full control.

Centralized and especially decentralized networks are, however, not unique in the world of online gaming. In fact, most online multiplayer games are played with one host acting as a server and all others acting as clients. Not all online multiplayer games have fixed, company-controlled servers, however. With many PC-based first-person shooters, players themselves are able to act as servers and are then in charge of the central network hub by doing so. This gives the party running the server considerable power over the others, because they can stop play whenever they wish. *World of Warcraft*, like most other MMORPGs, does not allow self-hosted games. As players share the same game space in MMORPGs like *World of Warcraft*, keeping security tight is vital; one devious player could hack his or her client and, through the network, destroy the game experience for many thousands of players. As game designer Richard Bartle emphasizes in a similar discussion on MUD security: 'absolutely *no* decisions with regard to what happens in a virtual world can be relegated to a client. *No* decisions. That's *no* decisions' (2004: 109, emphasis in original). Therefore, when designing *World of Warcraft*, Blizzard kept control over the game's network centralized and limited the amount of freedom that players were allowed over the game client.

The result of the regulatory security measures might keep evil-doers at bay, but it also turns *World of Warcraft* into what media theorist Eugene Thacker calls 'a new kind of gated community', with its borders being controlled through surveillance (Thacker 2004: xvii). Evoking the concept of the panopticon, Blizzard even installs a software programme called Warden alongside the game client, monitoring computer activity that goes on while the game is played looking for third-party applications that violate the EULA. Warden is part of Blizzard's ongoing struggle against cheaters and/or hackers using non-approved third-party software

to alter the game.[21] It also provides players security against keylogging and other malware. When Blizzard finds an application it deems to be in violation of the EULA, players will not be able to access the game. In contrast to the panopticon, where people discipline themselves because they know someone might be watching, most *WoW* players are not aware of Warden's presence on their systems, even though Blizzard has never made a secret of its existence and it has been part of other Blizzard games too. It was for long unclear what this programme actually does behind the scenes. Security software engineer Greg Hoglund decided to investigate the Warden programme in October 2005. He found that, apparently, the watchdog software did not just scan for third-party software in violation of the EULA but looked at any program running on the computer, including those which might include private information (Hoglund 2005). While Blizzard promptly denied that Warden reviews or retrieves any information identifiable as personal information, a wave of discussions on spyware and privacy issues ensued, mostly from the security software and user interface modding scenes (Fulton III 2005; Ward 2005; Hoglund & McGraw 2007).[22]

Blizzard Entertainment thus controls the game and its usage by controlling the network on which it exists. The first thresholds that need to be overcome in order to play are signing *World of Warcraft*'s EULA, which you *must* do in order to be able to play, and entering Blizzard's decentralized network of servers. These thresholds ensure a reliable multiplayer experience in terms of client/server stability and safety by limiting what players may do with the game software. Privacy concerns remain; the game communicates all in-game practices back to Blizzard, while the Warden programme quietly monitors other computer uses. Players might disagree with this situation, but there is no alternative other than not to play.

Playing machines

Digital games exist through hardware platforms – PCs, consoles, handheld game-playing devices, etc. – as well as software running on this hardware. The game client discussed earlier represents *World of Warcraft*'s software, which is bound to either the PC (with the Microsoft Windows operating system) or to a Mac platform. While not as demanding as other high-end PC and Mac games, playing *World of Warcraft* also means certain minimum system requirements must be met in order for the software to function correctly (or even at all). The computer, however, is not just a host for the software, it becomes an actor through the software – you do not simply play on a computer but also with and against it.

Structurally, the rules of a game are similar to the inner workings of a computer. Game scholar Jesper Juul looks at computer science to describe the workings of the rules of a game (digital or not) as a 'state machine':

> A machine that has an *initial state*, accepts a specific amount of *input events*, changes state in response to inputs using a *state transition function* (ie. rules), and produces specific outputs using an *output function* (2005: 60, emphasis in original).

When calling non-digital games state machines, one is in danger of forgetting the fact that game rules are not always fixed but rather dynamic (Malaby 2007). The hardware and software, though, support a videogame in two distinct ways that separate them from non-digital games. Firstly, the computational power that forms the basis of the technology is able to uphold the rules; it decides what happens in response to player input. Secondly, it keeps track of the current game state through its memory (Juul 2005: 48-49).

In many ways, computer technology has taken over tasks players needed to perform themselves in non-computer games, especially in role-playing games. As sociologist Gary Alan Fine has shown, in a tabletop role-playing game like *Dungeons & Dragons*, the dungeon master acts both as storyteller and referee and 'sculpts' the way a particular scenario evolves on the fly (1983: 88). Emphasizing what is most appealing to the players is more important within this process than strictly following the rules; if something turns out not to be fun, the rules are adjusted or tweaked. With computer-based games, including *World of Warcraft*, many rules are coded into the software and are therefore largely fixed. The computer becomes an automated referee; it does not think about what's appealing but instead follows algorithms written by the design team. In tabletop RPGs, cheating chance by controlling or changing dice rolls is also a well-known practice; as Fine showed, 'the dice are used in conjunction with the logical structure of the game', adding that most referees nevertheless give the aesthetic logic priority (1983: 105). In computer-based games, the computer-as-referee does not follow aesthetic-based logic founded on particular play situations. It follows the logic of coded rules.

With the computer as referee, the programmed rules and structures of a computer game are beyond discussion – player-created rules might exist on top of and in addition to the coded rules, but the coded rules themselves are definite and unambiguous. As Juul points out:

> What can qualify as an algorithm – and therefore what can be made a rule in a game – hinges on *decontextualization*: an algorithm can work *because* it requires no understanding of the domain and because it only reacts to very selected aspects of the world – the state of the system; the well-defined inputs; but generally *not* the weather, the color of the computer case, the personality of the computer operators, or the current political climate (2005: 63, emphasis in original).

The only way to negotiate coded, algorithmic rules is to find loopholes or other design flaws or faults in order to exploit the rules, to hack the game software, to complain about the rules on the official forums in the hope that the design team acts on the complaints or, in an act of ultimate defiance, to simply refrain from playing. It should, of course, be noted that while the coded rules of a computer game are definite and unambiguous at the moment of play, over time Blizzard nevertheless adjusts them according to player (or its own) taste and wishes. Except for hacking practices, players therefore only have indirect influence over changes in the formal, coded rules of play.

In a state machine governed by computational power and memory, the computer (or computers when one considers the networked interplay between client and server) is in charge of enforcing the algorithmic rules of the software but also controls all the mobs and non-player characters (or NPCs) the player meets in the virtual world.[23] The computer therefore is not just a referee but also another "player" controlling virtual characters – some friendly, others hostile. The computer, for instance, decides whether or not a mob or a NPC will attack a player's character (and how), whether it will present the character with a quest or not, or whether it allows you to buy something from his inventory. It does not judge your character to make these decisions but simply refers to algorithmic rules related to the player's character data (his level, his faction, his class, etc.). The computer thus functions as an important actor in the process of play alongside the players: it enables and referees play, and controls every virtual life form in the game world not controlled by other, real players. Acting solely on rules designed by Blizzard, the computer *represents* Blizzard within the game.

Galloway reminds us that distinguishing between what he calls machine actions, performed by software and hardware, and operator actions, performed by the player, creates an entirely artificial division. 'In fact', he states, 'in much of gameplay, the two actions exist as a *unified, single phenomenon*, even if they are distinguishable for the purposes of analysis' (2006: 5, emphasis in original). Being a virtual world filled with NPCs and mobs to interact with, machine actions form an important part of *World of Warcraft*'s appeal, especially for those players not solely interested in playing with other "real" players.

Machine actors can even function as a companion to players. My main character was a hunter, a class that is allowed to train a wild animal to become a fighting pet. These pets act according to player commands but can also be instructed to act on their own (which is to say: to follow algorithmic rules prescribed by the game). For instance, a pet that is ordered to be vigilant in dangerous situations will attack any potential threat without requiring a direct order from the player. I trained a rare sabre-tooth cat called Humar the Pridelord which I kept with me for years, even after acquiring other, newer pets that might have made more sense in terms of damage output. Rationally, I was very much aware that Humar was a machine actor largely following set algorithms just like any other pet in the

game. I was nevertheless attached to the beast – an emotional link between human and machine.

Even though *World of Warcraft*'s appeal lies in the interplay between machine and operator, some players prefer to automate their own actions. Using bots, third-party software created to emulate human input, players can replace their own operator acts with machine acts. The use of bots creates a situation in which machines are playing each other (in this case, Blizzard's server against the client operated by bot software). Players use bots for a variety of reasons, mostly related to either saving time or gathering virtual money. The advantage of using a bot is substantial: collecting items or gold via an automated process means a player's character 'reaps experience points and gold without the player investing any time in the game, as the bot can reap those rewards very efficiently 24 hours a day, without fatigue or boredom' (Mitterhofer et al. 2009: 18).

From the perspective of game contract, the use of third-party software like bots is both controversial (in terms of social codes of practice) and expressly forbidden by Blizzard (in terms of license agreements and terms of use). As game researcher Mia Consalvo points out, players see the automated collecting of virtual goods as an unfair advantage over "normal" play, making it a cheating practice (2009: 412). Blizzard fears that the amount of extra virtual income these bots generate might disrupt the in-game economy. While players using bots tend to keep their activities quiet so as not to attract scorn from other players, commercial bot software sellers have faced legal action from Blizzard. In one notable lawsuit, MDY Industries, creator of the Glider bot software, agreed to pay six million dollars in damages to Blizzard (Duranske 2008b). This case shows how large the stakes can be in virtual currency-related games of stake. Players who use bots and are caught (either by Warden or by other players reporting them) are in danger of having their accounts temporarily banned or, worse, terminated. Trying to abolish bots from a MMORPG like *World of Warcraft* looks like an uphill battle due to the ever-present demand for virtual money coupled with constant improvements of bot software in terms of detection avoidance. Through the enforcement of their licence agreements, Blizzard nevertheless tries to keep these malevolent machine acts at bay, ensuring that it alone controls what machine actors may do with the game.

To conclude, we can say that through the machine, Blizzard as a stakeholder is not absent during play but present by proxy. By interacting with the players vicariously through machine acts, the company remains at a distance when players want to negotiate the viability or desirability of certain rules or the fairness of their outcomes, positioning many of the rules of play and the way they are enforced as non-negotiable. This situation above is not unique to *World of Warcraft*; all digital games feature machine acts in conjunction with operator acts. It is, however, not the presence of a machine actor but the coded rules guiding the machine's acts that informs the amount of control the game designers have over

play. As I will show in the following chapters, *World of Warcraft* is tightly controlled, leading to certain preferred and therefore dominant play practices while limiting the options for alternative play strategies. In the last section of this chapter, however, I want to discuss the configurational threshold that precedes play.

Configuring play

Before being able to interact with the game world, both new and experienced players of *World of Warcraft* will need to traverse the setup screens where the player's character is configured. From the perspective of game design, the setup screens present moments not only where players configure the game they are about to play but also where designers configure the players into certain gameplay patterns.

Let us take a new player as an example. After having logged into the network by entering the account name and password, a new player is presented with a multitude of choices for their first character. There's the choice of realm as well as the race, class, gender, name, look and faction allegiance of the to-be-created character. This process, which can be bewildering for the uninitiated, features many choices that cannot be reversed at a later stage of play without cost (financially and/or in terms of time investment). Such choices tremendously influence play, both setting up the range of gameplay options a player will have as well as defining part of the identity and role of their character within *World of Warcraft*'s fictional world.

In the case of *World of Warcraft* and other virtual worlds, the tools and affordances with which players are able to build their characters are embedded within a certain 'world vision', ranging from 'aesthetic choices to deep value systems', of individual designers or the organization as a whole (Taylor 2003: 28). Part of the world vision that Blizzard (or its individual designers) tried to inscribe into *World of Warcraft* can be discerned when analyzing the way the setup phase positions the players into certain fixed identities with limited options for deviation during play. The setup phase also regulates the amount of freedom that players have for virtual identity creation in terms of the appearance and naming of characters. Setting up a new character through the afforded configuration options means setting up a player to participate in Blizzard's world vision.

The option that precedes all and presents itself the moment after a new player logs in for the first time is the realm choice for your character. At this point, a character's place within the network of *World of Warcraft* is decided. As I mentioned earlier, hundreds of different realms exist. These realms are not all the same. To begin with, each realm carries a unique name which is derived from elements of Warcraft's fictional world (Moonglade, Burning Legion, Hakkar and so forth). This name is mostly cosmetic: what matters is the realm *type*. On the rules level, there is a distinction between a PvE (Player vs. Environment) and a PvP

(Player vs. Player) realm type. This distinction is based not on social agreements about fair play in combat situations but rather on non-negotiable code: in PvE realms the game simply prevents you from attacking someone when this person has not given his explicit consent. Choosing a PvP realm means you can play more aggressively against other players, but it also means subjecting yourself to the potential of unexpected (and sometimes unwelcome) combat situations. On the level of fiction, players can furthermore choose between a "normal" realm and a realm dedicated to (representational) role-playing, the latter falling under additional role-playing policies (some of which will be discussed below).[24]

In many cases, the initial realm selection is a choice for (virtual) life. Players are allowed to change realms whenever they please, but switching costs are high. You cannot easily transfer established characters; you must create new ones, each requiring the same time investment.[25] This means that players' particular experience with and/or view of *World of Warcraft* as a whole is actually based on a fragment, which can differ greatly from other fragments. For instance, one battlefield of negotiation, discussed in chapter fourteen, deals with an instance of community breakdown due to differences between player groups concerning a new content patch released by Blizzard. This breakdown, however, took place in the realm in which I was playing and observing; in other realms, players might have embraced the new content without any problems. A game design choice further emphasizing the fragmented nature of *World of Warcraft* is the lack of in-game play and communication options between players in different realms (except from some PvP situations), making sustained in-game social interaction between realms nearly impossible.

A result of *World of Warcraft*'s fragmentation into strictly separated realms is the creation of realm-unique communities. Some realms attract relatively more instrumental play-oriented players due to the presence of renowned raiding guilds. Other realms might have become famous for their role-playing activities. Players sometimes loosely organize themselves in order to create their "own" realm. Before Blizzard added a dedicated Spanish-language realm, Spanish players had already colonized an English-language realm called Agamaggan. According to a wiki entry on the background and history of this realm, at one point its population was well over 50% Spanish-speaking, creating large rifts regarding the realm's official language.[26]

Blizzard's decision to break up *World of Warcraft* into many parallel realms, a decision that was for a large part more practical than ideological, has resulted in a host of world *visions* rather than a singular, unified world vision. The fragmented nature of *World of Warcraft* thus can result in realm-related negotiation processes, triggered by the concentration (or segregation) of player groups. The different realm types designed by Blizzard and the unique nature of realm communities as organized by players still present considerable freedom of choice for players. Survey data has, however, shown that many players tend to play with

people they know in real life (Yee 2005d). My initial choice of realm was based on real-life reasons, too; a friend had started playing *World of Warcraft* in a particular realm a few weeks earlier and I followed to join him there to learn to play the game together. Whether friends, family or romantic partners are already playing in a certain realm can be as important a factor in choosing your own realm as any play preference-related reason. With realm choice based on such social factors, winding up in a realm that might not fit your preferred play style (or language) is therefore possible.

After having picked a realm to play in, a new player is allowed to create his/her own in-game character. Where realm choice influences your instrumental and representational limitations and affordances on a macro level of play – what you can do within the boundaries of your realm – character creation dictates the way you play on a micro level – that is, what you can do within the boundaries of your character(s). On the one hand, you are asked to make a choice in the type of instrumental role you want to play within the game which defines your options for ludic role-playing. On the other hand, you are asked to create a virtual identity for this character in terms of look, name and faction alliance – setting up your character for representational role-playing. The difference between ludic and representational character options signals the persistent double role of the in-game character. As game scholar Ragnhild Tronstad points out in a study on character identification in *World of Warcraft*: 'on the one hand, [the character] represents the player vis à vis other players in the game. On the other hand, it functions as a tool for the player's agency in the game' (2008: 255).

When it comes to ludic role-playing, there are several classes to choose from for your character – druids, hunters, mages, paladins and so forth – each offering a unique style of play.[27] Choosing a particular class means choosing a particular style of play. This is what ludic role-playing is all about: you take up a role within the game from which you can only deviate within boundaries set by the game's design. For many classes, certain play styles are simply impossible: a warrior or warlock cannot heal other players, mages or priests are too fragile for close combat, etc. Some classes are "hybrids": they allow for different play styles. In many group play situations, however, hybrid classes are required to specialize in one play style to prevent becoming a jack of all trades but master of none. From a game design perspective, the class system means that players are forced to work together in order to overcome challenges they cannot overcome themselves due to class weaknesses. I will discuss the interplay between the classes and the way it affects group play later in this chapter. For the character creation phase is it important to emphasize that players are not limited to playing only one class: they may create and play several characters if they wish to and if they want to make the time investment. They are, however, limited to one play style of ludic role-playing for each of their individual characters – you cannot switch your character's class should you not like it, only to start a new one. Within each class,

there is a lot of flexibility for those looking for it. In terms of ludic role-playing, switching *between* classes is, however, not an option with Blizzard's world vision – if you would rather be a warrior than a priest you have no other option than to start anew with a fresh character.

Influencing both the affordances and limitations of ludic and representational role-playing is the choice of faction. Each character must choose between either the Horde or the Alliance faction. On a fictional level, eternal war rages between these factions. Each faction has its own cities, its own transportation system, its own economy and so on, all of which are out of bounds for members of the other faction. Within the game, players having chosen Alliance for their character are also not permitted to chat to members of the other faction by design. If they want to role-play with members of the opposing faction in-game, they must do so through gestures (nothing prevents them from meeting outside of the game, though). On an instrumental level, players are not allowed to form any formal group if their characters are not part of the same faction. They cannot trade items or visit dungeons together, nor can they take on quests meant for the opposing faction. Like realm choice, the impact of faction choice, as well as Blizzard's reasoning behind the split-up in factions, will be analyzed further later in this chapter.

The choice of faction directly influences other character creation choices players can make in terms of representational role-playing. Based on faction choice, a character is either human, dwarf, gnome, night elf or drainei – races allied within the Alliance – or they become orc, troll, undead, tauren or blood elf – the combined Horde races.[28] As one would expect, the choice of race influences a character's look. From the ordinarily human to the zombie-like undead, from the hulking minotaur-like tauren to the cute diminutive gnome, all races have a distinct look. While this outward appearance is mostly cosmetic, each race does have several unique abilities that provide instrumental advantages. The tauren race, for example, has been given a stamina boost, justified on a fictional level by their size and muscular build. On an instrumental level, extra stamina means the tauren race is well suited for classes who specialize in surviving copious amounts of damage like the warrior. Here, fantasy culture tropes concerning a certain type of fictional race are translated into instrumental advantages, showing that ludic and representational role-playing are not opposites but, by design, can indeed go hand in hand. In contradistinction, by the same design some ludic/representational combinations are not allowed. Night elves loathe the use of magic on a fictional level, making it impossible to pick classes using magic (like mages or warlocks) on an instrumental level. By promoting and preventing certain combinations of race and class, Blizzard regulates both ludic and representational role-playing, exposing in the process the forms of play that fit into the world vision of *World of Warcraft*.

While the choice of race impacts instrumental play, the final representational character creation options – gender, appearance and personal naming – are mostly cosmetic. The choice of either a male or female character comes down to individual preference. Experimenting with a character's skin and hair colour and other facial characteristics (each chosen from a limited set of options) makes it possible to construct the illusion of age in a character's face (like choosing a wrinkled face underneath a bald head or gray hair to signify being old). The character's body, however, cannot be changed. Characters all have the same hypersexualized features, especially with those races most closely resembling humans, limiting the options for identity play.[29] For many players, the gender and appearance of their characters are pragmatic choices. *World of Warcraft* is a game played from a third-person perspective, with the character in constant view of the player's gaze. Many players choose a character they enjoy looking at, while many players opt for gender-bending (ie. choosing the gender that is not their own). Survey data from 2005 showed that the gender distribution among characters was 65% male and 35% female while in reality, only 16% of all *World of Warcraft* players were female (Yee 2005e).[30]

With relatively limited means to create a unique character in terms of race, gender and looks due to design-imposed constraints, the choice of name makes a character truly individual. Character names are therefore among the most powerful ways of expressing identity because the rest of the characters' appearance is bound to Blizzard's design (Hagström 2008; Tronstad 2008). In theory, players of games like *World of Warcraft* can enter any name they want for their character, allowing them to use their name as a depiction of their context, preferences or playing styles (cf. Schaap 2002). However, the naming option is not completely devoid of control. The game's design, for instance, will not allow names surpassing fifteen letters, nor can it have punctuation marks or consist of more than one word. Naming practices are not only controlled on the level of game design but also on the level of game contract. Blizzard's naming policy in the Terms of Use states that characters names should not include vulgarity, racial slurs, advertising and other forms of abuse defined by Blizzard (2006b). For dedicated role-playing realms, Blizzard has even created a separate "role-playing realms policy", supporting players who appreciate that their fellow players do not use names that break the "magic circle" of the fictional world.[31] If players are caught violating the naming policy, they may face penalties.

In contrast to the other setup options, where the rules are enforced automatically through coded game design limitations, the naming policy is enforced after the setup phase. Blizzard might catch players themselves through surveillance software (which, for example, picks up gibberish names like 'fggtfwjq' often generated by bot software) but usually, inappropriate names are reported by other players. I have witnessed players reporting inappropriate names (or at least claiming they would do so) many times in the role-playing realms in which I was active.

In one case my own character's name, Grmbl, was even at stake. The name was reported for being gibberish, even though it is a well-known exclamation of grumpy characters in comics, Apparently, though, "grmbl" was not well known enough. After logging in one day, I found my character's name changed into a randomly generated temporary name. I found out my name was deemed inappropriate through an email from Blizzard's customer support and was asked to change it before I could re-enter the game. I eventually contacted a Game Master (one of Blizzard's in-game service employees) who, after referring to google to look up "Grmbl", removed the temporary name and reinstated my original one. The exact same thing happened again a year later, with the same character and name (after which they changed it to "Grumbl"). In another case, a friend was harassed in-game in a role-playing realm several times because his character's name was "Motorbreath". Even though he claimed this name had its roots in his character being an engineer, a standard *World of Warcraft* profession, his harassers pointed out that in the real world it is the name of a well-known song by rock band Metallica. In the end, my friend's character never received an official name ban from Blizzard. This leads to an interesting situation where Blizzard's world vision concerning names, as stated in the game's legal documents, is recalled and enforced by players themselves. Whether this is for better or worse depends on the stakes of the players involved; while for some, having a devious name is a way to claim agency over the restrictions of the game, for others it represents a form of destructive deviance lessening the immersion of the fictional world.

For players, both those who make all the choices mentioned above for the first time and those experienced in and knowledgeable of the process, the configurational affordances and limitations are not necessarily intrusive or in other ways negatively impacting the enjoyment of the game or its fictional world. The same goes for the *World of Warcraft*'s centralized and therefore tightly controlled network as well as the nature of the computer as machine actor. When not too intrusive, they keep the game stable and they add to the worldliness of Azeroth, limiting the ways players are able to abuse the character creation for divergent or devious purposes (Klastrup 2010). For some players, however, the lack of customization options for their character, the limitations of machine actors, or a feeling of there being too much surveillance on behalf of Blizzard might hinder them from building a meaningful virtual identity or pursuing the play style to which they aspire. These players are not powerless – through negotiation processes they find ways to work around the affordances and limitations of *World of Warcraft*'s setup. By discussing the technological and configurational structure underpinning and preceding play, this chapter has nevertheless shown that *World of Warcraft* steers players to certain intended uses. In the next chapter, the rules of play that are encountered during play itself take this process a step further.

7: The Rules of Play

In this chapter I will not deal yet with *World of Warcraft* as a fictional world but will instead focus on *World of Warcraft* as a *game*, or as Galloway puts it: the 'gamic elements that all are inside the total gamic apparatus yet outside the portion of the apparatus that constitutes a pretend world of character and story' (2006: 7-8). Sure enough, much of the gamic apparatus is articulated to the player through the fictional world. While one could describe *World of Warcraft*'s rules and structures using only abstract descriptions (referring to characters as player-controlled objects for instance), rules and fiction are inextricably intertwined. In this section, I will not refrain from referring to fictional elements if it helps to convey the underlying instrumental rule system.

Overall, this chapter investigates how dominant play strategies – and thus the preferred or intended use of *World of Warcraft* as designed by Blizzard – are implemented to guide players through the game. I will look at the way players are introduced to the game, looking in particular at the way progress is designed as a player's primary goal. I will also discuss dedicated group play as a form of play being all about very particular group compositions and behaviour that are not necessarily or inherently social. Lastly, I will look at player versus player combat (an important part of the Warcraft in the game's title) as an instrumental goal in and of itself, designed to perpetuate eternal war between player groups.

The numbers game

In the previous chapter, I introduced the configurational phase in which players set up their characters; I will now continue with what happens as soon as a player actually engages in play after logging into the game. This allows me to convey how *World of Warcraft*'s design structures function on an instrumental level. Depending on the chosen race, a new character will magically appear within the game world in the so-called starter zone of that particular race.[32] For a troll hunter, for instance, (the combination of race and class which formed my main character), this means appearing in an area called the 'Valley of Trials', a nicely rendered rocky valley with appropriate flora and fauna within the land of Durator. Other characters are present here too: "non-player characters" or NPCs and, potentially, other players' characters (those who have just started a new character

too, or chose to visit with an established character). On an instrumental level, little of the diegetic geographical and scenic information matters. What does matter instrumentally, however, is the non-diegetic user interface sitting between the player and the fictional world. The user interface or UI includes a large selection of options in bars at the lower bottom of the screen, a mini-map (showing your character's position in the world) in the right-hand corner and some statistical information about the character in the left-hand corner including the amount of health and a simple number 1 depicting that the character is, in fact, still on level one.

As the UI exists on the fringes of the screen, what arguably draws our most immediate attention after appearing in the game world is a character standing just a few metres in front of one's character. It is framed in the centre of the screen, an obvious design trick to focus the player's attention on him and, more importantly, the bright yellow exclamation mark floating above its head. It is an invitation, a non-diegetic signifier for possible interaction. Right-clicking on the character reveals a UI pop-up window filled with text under the header 'Your place in the world'. The text explains that your character must go talk to another NPC standing in the near vicinity, and offers to either accept or decline this simple mission. It is the character's first mission in the game which comes in the form of a so-called quest. After accepting the quest, the other NPC suddenly has a large, bright yellow question mark above its head. Interacting with this target NPC reveals the message that you have 'completed' the 'Your place in the world' quest. This leads to another quest, this time offering a pair of boots or gloves as a reward. You are also informed that by completing the quest, you have earned forty experience points, visualized by one of the previously transparent bars in the bottom of the screen appearing now partly filled up. Doing the follow-up quests, involving the killing of ten "mottled boars" in an adjacent valley, leads to more experience points, both for each boar killed and for 'completing' the quest by conversing with the quest giver again. After a certain experience point threshold is met, a "ding!" sound is heard and the character is suddenly engulfed in bright yellow light. Congratulations: you have just levelled up to level two. When you complete the quest you also receive the boots or gloves, each granting the character extra strength when worn. Other NPCs in the area now also exhibit exclamation marks above their heads: more quests to do, experience points to gain and rewards to be earned.

The short series of actions described above reveal the basic instrumental structure of *World of Warcraft* for individual play: accumulating experience points and rewards by completing quests and slaying mobs. The higher the level, the stronger the character becomes and the broader your options become for additional quests and killing. The term 'stronger' does not necessarily – or only partly – refer to skill. In *World of Warcraft*, strength is measured through a large set of different abstract values, or attributes, describing a character's level, its health, its agility

during combat, the amount of damage its weapons inflict and so forth.[33] It is here that the MMORPG's historical roots in the war-gaming genre, as discussed in chapter one, manifest themselves. Increasing these attributes, which are communicated to the player through the UI in the form of data, means increasing a character's overall defensive and offensive capabilities. Combined, the different values form a character's "stats"; the better your stats, the stronger you are in the game. A player still needs skill to get the best out of a character's capabilities, but the general idea is that having better statistics or "stats" than your adversary means that you will probably win a battle.[34]

When the highest level is reached for one's character, most of the world is discovered and the amount of quests to do individually start to thin out, players enter what is known as the "endgame". Here, 'challenges emerge to replace levelling that are characteristically long-term endeavours', with a strong focus on instrumental group play and an even bigger emphasis on stats (Brown 2011: 77). I will discuss endgame play further below; what matters here is that the emphasis on increasing numerical values throughout the game in many ways controls the way players think of instrumental progress and success in the game. By measuring success through stats, *World of Warcraft* concretizes the accomplishments of a character as well as the players behind the character. Striving for the best possible stats for your character is a driving force of both individual and, eventually, group-based instrumental play. The accumulation of better stats forms the instrumental backbone of *World of Warcraft*, providing a constant incentive for improvement. There are always better items than the ones your characters has; even if you have earned, produced or bought the best items the game has on offer, Blizzard will add more to keep you busy through expansion packs and updates. The heavy reliance on stats therefore does not just concretize a player's strength but also keeps players coming back for more (Paul 2010; Brown 2011). *World of Warcraft* is far from unique in the way it uses stats to create player incentive – many digital games have similar setups – and for many instrumentally oriented players it presents the main appeal of the game. In terms of control and agency, we should nevertheless remain attentive to the fact that *World of Warcraft* is a subscription-based game where continued play is beneficial to the game's key stakeholder in terms of income. The focus on the incremental increase of stats through various challenges is a key part of what makes *World of Warcraft*'s endgame such a strong 'rentention tool', as game scholar Douglas Brown befittingly calls it (2011).

Character and item stats are not the only forms of data conveyed through the UI. Many actions related to combat, like damaging mobs or healing other players' characters, are articulated through data visible within (or retrievable through) the UI. Players can see which of their powers are most effective not through diegetic means (character and mob models, for instance, do not show inflicted wounds) but through non-diegetic information. In chapter eleven, I will introduce a case study in which players analyze and use the UI information flows to such a degree

that their play exists primarily on interface level only, allowing them to theorize about the algorithms driving *World of Warcraft* (a practice known as "theorycrafting"). As many of the algorithms responsible for the calculation and processing of the different data sets are hidden within the game's code, players need to pay attention to UI data in order to optimize their performance. As Galloway points out: 'To play [a] game means to play the code of the game. To win means to know the system. And thus to *interpret* a game means to interpret its algorithm' (2006: 90-91, emphasis in original). The emphasis on data interpretation and manipulation is therefore critical when trying to answer the question of how Blizzard controls play from the perspective of game design: it presents a system where players are trained and conditioned for certain dominant play practices.

The quest of progression

As shown in the Valley of Trials introduction above, one key form of data needed to advance through the game are experience points, and the best way to acquire them is through quests. While many actions (including defeating mobs) yield experience points, quests represent by far the most efficient way to gain experience points to get to the highest level and, with that, to the endgame. The additional gear and monetary rewards from quests are also generally better than those pillaged from dead mobs. Quests are designed to guide progress through the game – both instrumentally and, as will be discussed in the last section of this chapter, fictionally. Even though the emphasis lies on performing continuous sequences of quests, it is possible to skip, circumvent or even ignore them entirely. The result is that, through quests, advancement is structured as an inverted tree model in which players decide which quest branches they want to follow, and in what order.

Like the classic quest in literature, computer game quests do not just tell a story but are meant to give a character – and therefore, in computer games, also the player – a clear goal by performing a task. The variety of quests found in games like *World of Warcraft* is extensive. As game scholar Espen Aarseth explains, quest-tasks can be place, time and/or objective-oriented, and quests themselves can be 'weaved, mixed, parallelized and sequentialized' (2005: 3). The mottled boar quest mentioned above, for instance, asks the player to venture further into a particular part of the Valley of Trials (place) to kill a specific number of boars (objective). You *must* complete this quest in order to qualify for new quests (sequence). These new quests can be pursued in any order, but pursuing several quests at the same time (parallel) is often the smartest thing to do if their objectives are located in the same area of the game world. To prevent players from getting lost in an endless supply of quests, characters are limited to a certain amount of quests at the same time through a quest log. They either need to finish the quests they are currently on or drop them if they want to pursue others.

Even though a major part of *World of Warcraft*'s fiction is told through quests (including a character's own place within the greater Warcraft narrative), they function as a means to an end – attaining experience points and gear in order to progress through the game. As literary scholar Rettberg notes, most players do not even pay attention to the narratives in *World of Warcraft*'s quests. They tend to gravitate towards external information databases like thottbot.com or wowhead.com for instrumental information on where to go or what to do in order to achieve the quest's goals rather than deciphering this information from the quest's story (Rettberg 2008).

Due to the quests' instrumental function of providing players with a task to perform, Aarseth proposes the term 'quest games' as a replacement for 'narrative games' or similar terms describing games with narrative aspirations (2004, 2005). In an effort to define the term 'quest game' itself, Aarseth distills the following:

> A game with a concrete and attainable goal, which supersedes performance or the accumulation of points. Such goals can be nested (hierarchic), concurrent, or serial, or a combination of the above (2005: 2).[35]

In the case of *World of Warcraft* and similar games, it is hard to divorce the instrumental goals Aarseth mentions (performance; accumulation of points) from the quest goals. *World of Warcraft*'s quests are not designed to supersede performance or the accumulation of points, but they do form a substantial part of instrumental play. The point is, however, that quests are not necessarily or purely about storytelling.[36] In *World of Warcraft*, quests also serve to guide and control a player's movement and activities through the game. The more quests you perform (and mobs you kill), the higher your character's level becomes. This process slowly opens up the range of possibilities for your character, both in terms of objectives (each quest leads to new quests) as well as in terms of spatial layout (the higher your level, the easier it becomes to travel to places that were previously too dangerous). This structure, which can be found in many MMORPGs, allows the game to feel emergent in nature while still containing sequences of events that players need to follow in order to acquire the best rewards. As explained in chapter one, the quest system also gives players a sense of short-term closure by pursuing quest goals and granting quantifiable outcomes that the game as a whole lacks (Salen & Zimmerman 2004: 81-82). You might not be able to finish *World of Warcraft* as a whole, but you can finish the parts of it you find important by doing quests.

As Aarseth points out, quests control players' agendas, 'forcing them to perform certain actions that might otherwise not have been chosen, thus reducing the possibility space offered by the game rules and the landscape' (2005: 9). Media scholar Jill Walker Rettberg argues that *World of Warcraft*'s quests lean heavily

on deferral (the constant promise of bigger, better rewards) and repetition (all quests can be followed by all players). Both deferral and repetition urge the player to advance through the game; players know that when they see a higher-level character walking around with a big, shiny axe, they know they too can obtain it if they invest the appropriate amount of time. While this situation might not always make sense on a fictional level (as I will show below), in terms of instrumental game design it makes sense. As Rettberg explains:

> [The] rhetorical figures of deferral and repetition are solutions to the problem of how to construct a game played by many people at once that needs to accommodate group play, solo play, and players who are at every possible point in the game (from newbie to highly experienced, from level 1 to level 70) – in the same game system and game world (2008: 182).

Quests keep players occupied at every point of the game. Even when they have run out of quests to perform individually, there are group quests and raid quests to accomplish, especially in the endgame. Quests are *World of Warcraft*'s carrots on a stick; 'in a sense *World of Warcraft* is evidence that we humans have finally succeeded in creating something that we can desire endlessly, have entirely, and never consume (Rettberg 2008: 176). In terms of game design, the 'we humans' actually refers to Blizzard. The game is designed to create endless desire through deferral and repetition which, again, translates to players continuing to play instead of cancelling their subscriptions.

To further emphasize how *World of Warcraft* is structured to perpetuate endless play (and thus endless subscription pay), it is useful to look at the way the game foregoes the traditional "game over" scenario of digital games. In *World of Warcraft*, the player's character simply cannot perish, at least not forever. Media scholar Lisbeth Klastrup has studied death in games, including *World of Warcraft*. She writes about the challenge of game design to provide a 'form of death penalty severe enough that it results in a certain excitement, which forces players to take death seriously and play strategically to avoid it', however, 'they must not make it so harsh that players are scared away from the game at an early point in their gaming experience' (2008: 146). In the specific case of *World of Warcraft*, death is designed to be as lenient as possible without being meaningless. When a character's health points run out due to receiving too much damage from an opponent, it dies. The character's death, however, is temporary. After being killed, a character enters a greyish ghost world; there are several resurrection options that allow the character to be brought back to the world of the living.[37] Alive again, the only penalty is a certain amount of damage to the worn gear (which can be fixed for a price) and, in some cases, a temporary health and power reduction ('resurrection sickness'). Death is designed as a nuisance but never a game breaker.[38]

Through death penalty design, Blizzard has made mortality within *World of Warcraft* part of play, not an endpoint. Death becomes a learning experience, forcing players to rethink their strategy in order to prevent dying again – it presents us with a very literal example of "what doesn't kill you makes you stronger". It is also a way to ensure that players never give up the game because of their character's demise. With no "game over" scenario to worry about and an endless supply of quests to do and rewards to collect, we could say that players themselves are "being played" by the game's design and coaxed to continue playing – and therefore paying subscription fees – indefinitely.

Designing cooperation

Even though hundreds of quests exist and more are added with every patch and expansion pack, the appeal of the quest system as the basic underlying structure of instrumental play is finite. As said, after reaching the highest level (in the original *World of Warcraft* level 60, each expansion pack adding more levels) no more experience points can be earned. From this point on, the endgame starts, and in order to improve a character gear (and therefore stats), players often head to *World of Warcraft*'s many endgame dungeons (designed for small groups) and raid dungeons (designed for large groups). Within these dungeons are "bosses", the strongest types of mobs in the game which, when defeated, yield the best rewards. Bosses form challenges unlike most of the solo content, as they require a group of players who, through an often lengthy process of trial and error, need to learn their attack and defence patterns in order to defeat them. If players want to continue advancing and improving their instrumental power, they simply *must* turn to others for instrumental group play. Two design mechanisms drive and control this form of instrumental group play, both imposing a certain vision of cooperative play on players: the first addresses the economics of availability of the game's "best" rewards, the second shows how intended group configurations control collective action.

For many players with a preference for instrumental play, the leveling process, though fun, is seen as something that stands in the way of the core game experience: collecting the best gear possible in the group-based endgame phase. Even legendary weapons that should be rare or even unique according to Warcraft's fiction can be obtained by each player who puts enough time and effort into it. Over time, *World of Warcraft* also made epic items more available to players less inclined or able to join raid groups, ensuring that such players, deemed "casual" by hardcore players, never reach a point of saturation for their character. Some exceptions to the rule aside, unlimited and equal availability of items defines *World of Warcraft*'s internal economy. For Fine, who recognized similar economics in tabletop role-playing games, the equal availability of goods on an instrumental level makes sense, even if it is often unexplainable on a fictional level. 'Because

the rationale for the existence of the treasure is frequently left undefined', explains Fine, 'an unlimited supply of "good" is possible, and this maintains players' interest in the game' (1983: 77). In an effort to explain the appeal of the economics of MMORPGs, economist Edward Castranova lists several responses, the first of which is quite simple: consumption and acquisition is enjoyable in and of itself (2005: 177). Other reasons Castranova gives are directly related to instrumental play. The economics are directly tied to defining elements of games: player effort, quantifiable outcomes and systems to valorize and attach meaning to such outcomes. They include getting fair returns for work and skill, creating one's own personal rags-to-riches story, injecting meaning and purpose into gathering gear and other virtual goods, creating competition under equal opportunity, generating risk situations, and providing the means to own property (2005: 177-179).

The way the in-game economy is set up can make a game more interesting and/or challenging, but we should not forget that it represents a certain world view including, as Fine reminds us, an 'implicit philosophy or ideals by which the world operates' which players will adopt in order to succeed and/or survive (1983: 76). According to Fine, one of the world views that has been part of the role-playing game genre since its tabletop days is the principle of unlimited goods in American culture: 'the structure of dungeons and fantasy worlds reflects the American image of a potentially unlimited supply of treasure' (1983: 76).[39] The unlimited availability of items implies that all players will, in the end, be wanting, wearing and wielding the same gear. This might lessen the enjoyment of being different and/or "stronger" than other players. Many items are therefore rationed through a chance-based system, leading to scarcity for the most coveted items. The chance a boss will "drop" a certain rare sword might be designed to be only 5%. Low drop rates mean that groups of players will have to return to the same dungeon over and over again to collect all the items they want. Even if you finally obtain the rare sword you wanted, another player in the group might still be looking for his rare staff. Playing on to help friends get the item they want might be a social act but it is nonetheless driven by the way item availability is allocated.

While it might take time and effort, players almost always have access to more and better items, and are teased with these items through deferral and repetition, potentially leading to addictive levels of consumption (and, one could argue, play). Taking this one step further, new media scholar Scott Rettberg sees a MMORPG like *World of Warcraft* as a 'convincing and detailed simulacrum of the process of becoming successful in capitalist society', with playing serving as a 'form of corporate training' (2008: 20). We could argue whether this situation is corruptive or educational in nature. Either way, the capitalist ideology embedded in *World of Warcraft*'s design can cause socio-economic woes when scarce items suddenly become readily available through design changes, or through an influx of virtual money bought with real money. As I will show in chapter four, where I

discuss the large-scale and mostly illegal market for the exchange of virtual money for real money, these situations lead to sometimes heated discussions about the relationship between work and play.

The second design mechanism driving and controlling instrumental group play disciplines players to play in certain styles and group compositions. As said earlier, dungeons are the places to go in order to get to the best gear improvements. To prevent hundreds of players visiting the same dungeon at the same time, they are "instanced – automatically duplicated for every group that enters them. Several groups of players can therefore fight a boss at the same time while never meeting each other. While the existence of multiple "instances" of the same dungeon at the same time makes no sense on a fictional level, the prevalence of the term instance as an alternative for dungeon among players suggests that most do not mind this privatization of space in an otherwise shared persistent environment. In terms of instrumental game design, the instanced nature of dungeons allowed Blizzard to create a way to focus the dungeon's challenges on a limited group of players, stimulating highly strategic instrumental group play.

Even though "doing" dungeons with a group is one of the most popular forms of instrumental group play, it limits the possibilities of group play as much as it enables. Taylor, for example, argues that 'instancing the game world into smaller, privatized spaces limits large scale collective action on behalf of the player to explore other ways to approach challenging goals', adding that 'game designers are always making choices about what kinds of activities and player identities are to be supported to the exclusion of others' (2006a). One of the major design choices made in relation to dedicated group content like dungeons concerns the way in which groups are intended to be composed within dungeons and other dedicated group situations. As I show below, some compositions are preferred, even required, to win against *World of Warcraft*'s computer-controlled adversaries. It results in group action predestined by design, not choice.

In the previous chapter I introduced the fact that players must choose a class for their character; let me now briefly explain how these classes are designed to function together in group situations. There are three basic types of classes: tanks, healers and dps'ers (which stands for damage-per-second). A tank (for example a warrior) is built to draw a mob's attention and prevent it from focusing on other players. Tanks have heavy armour, often carry shields to protect them and specialize in absorbing and sustaining considerable amounts of damage. The healer type (for example a priest) keeps other classes alive with their healing powers. Their main attention is the tank, who is taking most of the hits. The dps'ers (for example a mage) are specialized in inflicting as much damage as possible to the target. This role is important, too: they must kill a mob before it kills the tank(s) and healer(s) protecting them from harm. This system only works because *World of Warcraft*'s mobs are designed to be deliberately dumb. Mobs only attack the character that generates the highest "threat" (the tank's

task), whether this makes sense or not. Even supposedly intelligent adversaries go straight for these characters even though they should have "known" that killing another, weaker character (like the healer, or a dps'er) would seriously diminish the survival chances of the entire group.[40]

Such a basic combination of strengths and weaknesses is what game designer Harvey Smith calls 'orthogonal unit differentiation' (2003), a common design structure in games whether they are digital or not. Like individual class attributes, this form of unit differentiation is a leftover from the MMORPG's historical roots in tabletop wargaming, where army units (cavalry, infantry, artillery and so on) each have their own advantages and weaknesses when used in combat. The basic combination of competences in the form of tank/healer/dps has become a "holy trinity" for many role-playing games, and *World of Warcraft* has designed much of its group content around it. A standard normal dungeon is designed for a group of five characters consisting of one tank, one healer and three dps'ers. Larger so-called raid dungeons are designed for groups of ten, twenty-five and forty characters, requiring a more elaborate setup of tanks, healers and dps'ers. Deviation from this requirement will more often than not lead to failure but at the same time results in interesting, strategic play situations.

To achieve better results, group composition and skills management become so important that players tend to form groups based on the characters' class and skill setups rather than the actual players behind them, especially when groups are formed spontaneously. This, however, is not true for all forms of instrumental group play. Within hardcore raid guilds, where a greater degree of dependence on each other is needed than in more casually organized forms of group play, the emphasis is on trust and proven skill on the battlefield (Taylor 2006c). Even in the raid guilds I have participated in, however, some classes and skill setups are still preferred above others, independent of the players behind the characters. Here, ludic role-playing is no longer a question of choice but a matter of duty. Especially for tanks and healers, who usually form the minority of the three types, this duty can lead to peer pressure within the group. They play such key roles in the holy trinity of types that, if they do not show up for an evening of raiding, the rest of the players cannot raid either.[41]

The way instrumental group play is enabled and disciplined through design affordances and limitations proves to be a strong mechanism with which to steer groups in *World of Warcraft* into certain types of play behaviour – the larger the group-based challenge players face in the game, the less options players have for deviating from the dominant group strategies designed into the game. For dedicated raiding groups, the emphasis on highly coordinated cooperative ludic role-playing offers substantial appeal – for them, it is what the game is all about. Blizzard seems to think so too, as most of the best-known villains of the Warcraft universe as well as the rare and powerful items they drop are found in the most challenging dungeons. For players who wish to organize group action in order to

tackle instrumental goals in more diverse ways, the options and rewards tend to be limited.

More emergent forms of instrumental (group) play based on the class system's orthogonal unit differentiation exist in the form of player versus player or PvP combat. Since *World of Warcraft*'s initial release, PvP combat has evolved from a diversion (earning players no reward other than the fun of fighting each other) into a full-blown dedicated part of the instrumental game play experience with its own goals and reward structure. PvP combat requires different offensive and defensive strategies, which furthermore rely on other gear setups and (cooperative) skills. In other words, PvP combat is a very different beast altogether.

While faction choice does not have much meaning when trying to conquer a dungeon, it plays a significant role in PvP combat, as it automatically defines who your enemy is. The game is not called *World of Warcraft* for nothing: the division of factions is designed to infuse the game with inter-player combat. Whereas one could consider war a dedicated goal of the game, initially PvP combat was a form of free rather than instrumental play. In the first few months after the game's release, attacking players from the other faction did not pursue or serve any particular instrumental goal, nor did it grant any rewards. PvP combat was motivated on a fictional level (the factions are at war after all) or by a personal interest in fighting other players.

In terms of instrumental goals and rewards, the introduction of the Honor System in patch 1.4 (May 2005) changed PvP combat considerably. This and a subsequent reward system gave players the option to gain PvP-oriented rewards.[42] PvP was now redesigned as an instrumental goal in and of itself rather than a diversion from performing quests. Initially, no areas were set aside purely for PvP combat, players themselves sought each other out, creating notorious hotspots for spontaneous PvP action.[43] Further patches and expansion packs introduced dedicated PvP areas in the form of "battlegrounds"(for large, loosely organized groups) and "arenas" (for small, tightly organized teams). Both battlegrounds and arenas are grounded in Warcraft's fiction but, like dungeons, they are instanced and thus stand separate from the rest of the game world (MacCallum-Stewart 2008). More similarities with dungeons exist. The often chaotic battlegrounds and the highly skill-based arenas form mini-challenges with true quantitative outcomes (you either win or lose a battle) and allow players to build up and showcase their instrumental prowess. The arenas spawned a highly dedicated tournament culture, with the best players fighting each other in professional so-called e-Sports teams for real money (cf. Taylor 2012).

Whereas battlegrounds and arenas offer dedicated areas for PvP combat, existing outside of the main game world through instancing, the role of PvP in the rest of the game world is organized through other rules. Whether you can actually attack a member of the opposing faction outside of a battleground or arena depends on the choice of realm, as explained earlier.[44] Even on dedicated PvP

realms, there are socially negotiated codes of practice dictating which kinds of PvP action are allowed. In most cases, attacking characters of a considerably lower level (and as such rather defenseless) is seen as improper conduct. The same goes for killing an opponent, waiting for him or her to be resurrected and, killing him or her again and again, exploiting the victim's weak state after resurrection (a practice called "corpse camping"). Needless to say, whether or not these examples of individualized group play usually referred to as "ganking" or "griefing" depends on a particular view of sportsmanlike behaviour between individuals, larger groups, factions or entire realms. Ganking and griefing are, however, as game scholar Jonas Heide Smith calls them, forms of extra-mechanic conflict: the 'consequence of multiplayer games being social spaces' as opposed to intra-mechanic conflict which form the direct consequences of the way the game rules are designed . (Smith 2004; Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith & Tosca 2008: 155).

Having created the preconditions for extra-mechanic conflict to exist, Blizzard is not taking a stance against PvP griefing. In fact, the company's PvP realm policy states that 'actions that would typically be considered "dishonorable actions" are considered PvP mechanics and are not considered harassment' (Blizzard Entertainment 2005). While PvP combat is encouraged by Blizzard on the level of game design, it is at least partly regulated through social codes of practice by players themselves. This situation can lead to serious battlefields of negotiation, which will be investigated in chapter ten.

For some, the built-in possibilities for extra-mechanical conflict through PvP mechanics and the faction division go against the established norms and values of the MMORPG genre. Virtual worlds designer R. V. Kelly 2, for instance, calls PvP 'a violent, creepy, ornery, impatient, petulant subculture' (Kelly 2 2004: 40). A presence or even emphasis on PvP combat does not have to lead to anti-social behaviour. Empirical research has shown that *World of Warcraft*'s PvP realms see more players in group formations than in normal realms (2005). One way of explaining this is that there is simply no better way of protecting oneself against attacks from the opposing faction than by bringing a friend. The possibility of PvP-based extra-mechnical conflict therefore also leads to organized group play, not merely to individualized, anti-social group behaviour.

Through the way PvP combat has been set up as an instrumental pursuit with its own reward systems, we can nevertheless show how players are set up for a game world where attacking other players' characters is not punished but in many cases rewarded. Again, the game isn't called *World of Warcraft* for nothing. My point, however, is not to argue against PvP combat but to convey the dominant play strategies that, like performing quests and picking the correct group composition for dungeons, define the game's "intended" use and world vision and, by doing so, conditioning players into certain forms of behaviour. On an individual level, players get hooked on the game by an endless supply of quests

and the promises of unlimited goods availability. In group play situations, we see players peer-pressured into specific types of collective action or, when dealing with PvP, are left to define their own boundaries of acceptable behaviour. This highlights the way the game's design controls and guides instrumental play, which allows for a better understanding of the players' stakes when they deviate from the intended uses of the game. As I show in the following chapters, players do not just follow the intended instrumental structures but resist, manipulate and/or transform them in order to engage with the game in ways they enjoy most, both individually as well as in groups.

The instrumental rules and structures are not the only parts of *World of Warcraft*'s design that define its intended use. On the level of representation, game design also influences the course of play. I will therefore focus next on the way *World of Warcraft*'s fictional world is designed, showing that there is, in fact, a large difference between the way this world is represented and the way it is engaged through play.

8: Playing with Fiction

While discussing the dominant rules and structures that constitute the game in *World of Warcraft*, I did not shy away from mentioning that which creates its fiction. After all, in order to explain the mechanics of *World of Warcraft*, it does not matter that its factions are called Horde and Alliance: a more abstract "A" and "B" would have sufficed. For most players, the fact that *World of Warcraft* is set in a fantasy world cannot be divorced from play – even with the same instrumental rules and structures, another fictional theme would have meant playing another game. *World of Warcraft*'s fiction is not purely cosmetic either: like the instrumental design discussed above, the fictional design controls and guides the player's action toward intended uses and, since we are dealing with representation, its intended interpretations. It does so by situating a player's character in the fiction, by orienting and guiding the player spatially and by limiting the amount of persistent influence players have on the fictional world. Ultimately, the goal of this chapter is to convey that Azeroth, the name of *World of Warcraft*'s fictional world, is a world in which formal player agency is limited at best.

Representing Azeroth

There are many ways to address a game's fiction. While I discussed *World of Warcraft* as a text in chapter four, enunciating the difference between "passive" interpretation and "active" participation, I do not aim to define *World of Warcraft* as a narrative. A MMORPG is more than just a representation of a fictional world (as is a film or book); as Klastrup points out, it presents 'an *actualised* version of an imaginary universe' (2009, emphasis in original) with an added social dimension:

> We as users of it know that the people we meet and interact with in the world are real people and that our real-time interaction and communication with them is not imagined or scripted by someone else, but actually take place here and now (2009).

MMORPGs form shared fictional universes where players have the chance, as game critic and historian J. C. Herz expresses it, 'not just to press your nose against the window of this universe, but to actually be a living, breathing part of

it, and have thousands of people implicitly acknowledge that you are part of it' (2002: 119).

As an actualized *version* of an imaginary universe, *World of Warcraft* is not a complete copy of that universe. Taking his cues from theories on possible worlds (Pavel; Ryan 1991, 1992), Juul addresses the fact that fictional worlds in games can be nothing *but* incomplete, with players having to fill in the missing pieces by combining knowledge from the real world, knowledge of genre conventions (2005: 122-123) and, as I argue below, knowledge of existing source material. Additionally, Juul argues, many games present game worlds that are incoherent, where the world 'contradicts itself or some game events cannot be explained as part of the fictional world', usually due to the fact that they are games first, and fictional worlds second (ibid. 132). Other games, like many adventure games, offer more coherent worlds where 'nothing prevents us from imagining them in detail' (ibid. 132). According to Klastrup, MMORPGs 'logically' belong to Juul's category of coherent world games (2009). I prefer to deviate from Klastrup on this point. On many occasions discussed throughout this chapter, *World of Warcraft*'s Azeroth *does* contain instances of incoherency and contradiction, the reason being that there is a big difference between the fictional world of Azeroth and the fictional world of Azeroth as depicted in *World of Warcraft*. To explain this difference, it is useful to discuss Azeroth first in detail.

Since its conception in the game *Warcraft: Orcs and Humans* (Blizzard Entertainment 1994), Azeroth has grown into a fictional universe with countless dissimilar races on several planets (and, in some cases, other dimensions) and a history spanning thousands of years. Azeroth is not limited to the Warcraft computer games and their various expansion packs. Like the fictional universe of *Star Wars*, Azeroth forms the fictional grounding for, among other things, a host of novels, comics, board games, a trading card game, a tabletop role-playing game and so on. Spanning so many media, Blizzard keeps tight control over the core narratives, events and characters of this world in order to preserve fictional consistency and logical continuity. Chris Metzen, credited as the creative director of *World of Warcraft* and vice president for creative development at Blizzard Entertainment, has been a key figure in Azeroth's overall design since the mid-90s, many years before *World of Warcraft*'s release.[45] He remarks about the creation and maintenance of Azeroth's lore:

> We're taking the process of building a world seriously and it wasn't just churned out. It had a strong sense of continuity. [...] We are kind of painstakingly anal, about making sure all the details add up; that continuity is held to be sacred. So that no matter in what medium you are experiencing Warcraft it all feels like a contiguous experience (Blizzard Entertainment 2004b).

Suggesting that the medium is not an essential element for a contiguous experience, Metzen glosses over an important difference between Azeroth as the fictional world existing on a meta-level and Azeroth the fictional world as presented within individual media like *World of Warcraft*. In his work on tabletop role-playing games, Fine explains that a game has the same relationship to the fictional world it presents 'than a game based upon "reality" has to do with that reality' (1983: 134). *World of Warcraft* does not present the "real" Azeroth. Instead it offers a 'magnification or model of life' on Azeroth . The fact that there is no "real" Azeroth in the first place provides Blizzard's writing staff ample opportunity to control both versions of Azeroth, changing the fiction when they feel it suits the game or the other way around.

In the form of a model, or actualized version as Klastrup put it, of the "real" Azeroth, *World of Warcraft*'s fictional world is designed with play in mind: it is simplified in order to focus on those elements important to becoming a game. As such, one could replace the term model or version with simulation. A MMORPG like *World of Warcraft* is what Juul calls a stylized simulation, 'developed not just for fidelity to their source domain, but for aesthetic purposes' (2005: 172).

The process of simplification and stylization is already visible in the setup phase, discussed in the first part of this chapter, and shows the large degree of agency that Blizzard has over a player's role within the fictional world. Here, players were able to choose between several classes, each presenting a potential career that a person within the "real" Azeroth might have. What players do not get to choose are careers deemed too boring or not heroic enough to play. While one could play one through representational role-playing, in terms of formal ludic role-playing you simply cannot choose to be a city guard, a nurse, a salesman or a lumberjack. Similarly, players can only choose fit, strong, young bodies for their characters during setup, not ugly, fat, old, crippled or in any other way less than "perfect" physiques. Players are to be heroic, with all other less heroic characters being computer-controlled.

Within this simplified simulation of Azeroth, Blizzard has chosen the quest system as the main driver of the player's character story. In the previous section, I introduced the very first quest that a Horde troll encounters upon entering the world. Then, I only discussed this quest as a pointer to the next quest, in order to explain how the quest system works in terms of instrumental progress. Quests, however, also function to give a player's character purpose on a fictional level, providing the freshly created character with a personal story. What follows is the quest text from the first quest, called 'Your place in the world':

> *Finally, you are of age, <name>... of age to battle in the name of the Horde. To conquer for the glory of the Warchief.*
>
> *Yes...*

<Kaltunk looks you over.>

You will do nicely.

No doubt you wish to find a great dragon or demon and strangle it with your bare hands, but perhaps it would be wise to start on something less… dangerous.

<Kaltunk laughs.>

Report to Gornek, he should be able to assign a task better suited to a young <class>. You will find Gornek in the Den, to the west (Blizzard Entertainment 2004a).

Obviously, the parts <name> and <class> are replaced in-game with the name chosen for one's character, as well as his chosen class. Throughout the game, quests are individualized for each player's character engaging with them, ensuring that players undergo a personalized experience. Even though all players do the same quests, this system ensures that the quests represent *their* character's story. This suggests that quests present an immersive, narrative experience, not just a system of instrumental progress. In terms of narrative progress, quests nevertheless adhere to roughly the same principles. In the same way that quests force players to follow a fixed objective, quests also do not allow players to change their stories. As Aarseth argues, the story as told through quests is only 'uncovered and observed' by players, essentially arriving at a situation where we do not have a 'gamer-as-author, but (at best) gamer-as-archaeologist' (2005: 9). In the case of *World of Warcraft*, quests almost always have only one story outcome, and reaching this outcome is a straightforward affair of searching, killing and collecting.[46] By carrying out quests, players piece a series of pre-written texts together into something resembling a personal story for one's character.

Players may not have much agency over the outcome of the stories within quests, but they are allowed to choose which quests to do, and in what order. Due to the way the quest system is set up, quests can be done serially, in parallel, mixed together or skipped. Players can also decide how (choosing an instrumental strategy), when (postponing a quest to return to it after a character has grown stronger) and whether to finish a quest (sometimes, quests turn out to be not worth the effort halfway through). Furthermore, many quests require groups, creating shared and overlapping storylines between different players. This means we should not think of gamers-as-archeologist but of *gamers-as-bricoleurs* as well; players are in a constant process of cobbling together story elements through deliberate, spontaneous and/or random engagements with quests. Rigid as individual quests' stories may be, players can thus still create personalized stories for their characters.

The way the Horde and Alliance factions are designed to be eternally at war leaves players with fewer options for manipulation. On an instrumental level, the strict faction division provides players with an enemy to defeat through PvP combat. On a fictional level, the faction division makes one of the most impactful simplifications of the "real" Azeroth possible. To understand why, it is best to explain how both factions have been represented over the years in various games and other media.

The war between the Alliance and Horde has been a key element in the fictional world of Azeroth since the release of *Warcraft: Orcs and Humans*. The following text comes from the introduction of this game and presents the first introduction to the Warcraft series' fictional world:

> In the Age of Chaos, two factions battled for dominance. The Kingdom of Azeroth was a prosperous one. The humans who dwelled there turned the land into a paradise. The Knights of Stormwind, and the Clerics of Northshire Abbey roamed far and wide, serving the king's people with honour and justice. The well-trained armies of the King maintained a lasting peace for many generations. Then came the Orcish Hordes.
>
> No-one knew where these creatures came from, and none were prepared for the terror that they spawned. Their warriors wielded axe and spear with deadly proficiency, while others rode Darkwolves as black as the moonless night. Unimagined were the destructive powers of their evil magicks, derived from the fires of the underworld. With an ingenious arsenal of weaponry and powerful magick, these two forces collide in a contest of cunning, intellect, and brute strength, with the victor claiming dominance over the whole of Azeroth. Welcome to the World of *Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 1994).

The sharp opposition between the Alliance (described in terms of 'honour' and 'justice'), and the Horde (spreading 'terror' and wielding 'destructive powers') is closely linked to the conceptualization of fictional worlds that Fine identifies in fantasy culture in general. Fantasy worlds form a 'battleground between good and evil with no middle ground', and even if neutral characters and settings would exist, they 'are to be used by the forces of good or evil to achieve their ends' (1983: 76-77). Over the years, the sharp bifurcation between good and evil began to disappear in the *Warcraft* games and related media. Both factions received histories filled with both heroism and villainy, making none of the two more "good" or "evil" than the other. As pointed out by game scholar Esther MacCallum-Stewart, who analyzed the notions of war in *World of Warcraft*, the Alliance is rather portrayed as a warmongering colonizer, while the Horde can be seen as living in harmony with the lands around them (MacCallum-Stewart 2008: 43). In many of the games and books, the Horde and Alliance are given shared foes like the

undead Scourge or the demonic Burning Legion, leading to temporary, uneasy truces and to characters of both factions fighting shoulder to shoulder. According to MacCallum-Stewart, *World of Warcraft* even 'questions the discrepancy between good and evil' and by doing so ties 'directly into the modern unease with warfare and the question of who, if anyone, is on the right side' (MacCallum-Stewart 2008: 58-59).

While the lack of truly "good" and "bad" sides might sound like a far less rigid approach to the sharply defined classical oppositions in fantasy culture, suggesting far more cooperation and other faction-bridging activities, in the reality of *World of Warcraft*'s simulation of Azeroth, the opposite is true. As explained earlier, Blizzard Entertainment has implemented the player factions in such a way that strife between them is almost unavoidable, especially in PvP realms.[47] The way the factions are played out against each other through design, however, extends to communication between players within the different factions. While characters in other Warcraft media forms (like the books or, weirdly enough, *World of Warcraft*'s own promotional videos) do not have many problems understanding each other, in the game itself players playing with characters from different factions cannot communicate with each other in-game than with gestured. While for some races sharing a common language across the faction-divide makes sense historically (like the Alliance's Night Elf and the Horde's Blood Elf races), within *World of Warcraft*'s version of Azeroth communication between factions is limited to gestures only. Even though it makes no sense on a fictional level, Blizzard simplified the faction divide into a very strict "us" and "them" scenario, making cooperation nearly impossible. In the "real" Azeroth, the factions have grown to become increasingly equal – though 'equal in being wrong' in terms of militarism and warmongering (MacCallum-Stewart: 58-59). In *World of Warcraft*'s simulation of Azeroth, members of the opposing faction are positioned as different, dangerous and hostile. This situation does not mean that players do not have ways to interact peacefully with members of the opposing factions (through representational role-playing, or on forums outside of the fictional world). It does emphasize that the game is designed for inter-faction struggle, not socializing. As I will show next, the same can be said about the spatial experience of *World of Warcraft*'s Azeroth.

The space of play

In a discussion on *World of Warcraft* as a spatial practice, Aarseth argues that 'compared to a fictional world, the ultimate example of which is Tolkien's Middle-earth in *The Lord of the Rings*, Azeroth is small and compartmental' (2008: 118). He goes on to literally compare the two in terms of geographical size. According to the map Tolkien included in his work, he explains, there are hundreds of miles traversed by the main characters to get from one city to another, while the calcu-

lated length of an entire continent in *World of Warcraft*'s Azeroth is less than ten miles (2008: 116-118). He misses the point, however, that when comparing Tolkien's Middle-earth with the game's version of Azeroth instead of the "real" Azeroth as it exists on a meta-level across a wide variety of media, he is comparing apples with pears. In the "real" Azeroth, cities are also hundreds of miles apart.[48] His argument is, however, that *World of Warcraft*'s Azeroth is small and compartmental, making it functional as a gameworld, which shows that simplification as a result of transferring a fictional world into a game has an impact on a spatial level (2008: 118-119).

I am not as interested in the differences in size between different versions of various fictional worlds; instead, I aim to show how the simplification of space to create a functional game influences the way the fictional space is traversed. According to Aarseth, *World of Warcraft*'s Azeroth is more akin to a theme park than to a fictional world, a 'conglomerate or parkland quilt of connected playgrounds built around a common theme' (2008: 121). It is a somewhat exaggerated way to say that as a space, *World of Warcraft*'s Azeroth in many ways is designed for play only, not to live a virtual life in.

In contrast to most other digital games, movement through the fictional world is continuous, suggesting that it is a whole rather than a series of dislocated levels. *World of Warcraft*'s Azeroth is nevertheless sectioned into zones, each with its own name, theme and difficulty level. These zones, roughly based on the different fictional lands in the "real" Azeroth, are designed to guide players through the game. The Valley of Trials example, the first area encountered when creating a troll, is part of a dusty, mountainous zone called Durotar on the continent Kalimdor. There is nothing preventing a character from walking through the gates that form the exit from the valley, but, by design, your character cannot climb the mountainous hills that enclose the rest of the valley. They are "natural" barriers limiting spatial movement. Many zones in Azeroth are surrounded with such barriers, with only a few mountain passes, tunnels or gates allowing egress and exit. These barriers keep players within and in some cases outside a zone as desired by the design team, allowing the game to unfold as intended.[49] Additionally, the level system ensures that you are where you are supposed to be according to the game's design. Each zone's hostile mobs (wildlife, monsters, NPCs of the opposing factions, etc.) have specific level ranges; walking a low-level character into higher-level zones is dangerous: mobs are programmed to attack weaker player characters, usually resulting in a quick death. This means that when you begin playing *World of Warcraft*, only a few zones are accessible to your character: you need to level up to visit the other zones.

Unscalable barriers and level differences result in the distribution of players over the game's world into zones where the relation between effort and reward is optimal for their character's level. Following the quest system guides players through the different zones, for instance by directing them to NPCs in other

zones who offer new quests, which slowly expands the players' spatial experience of the game. This process of "unlocking" Azeroth zone-by-zone is visualized within the map system in the UI. Zones and areas within zones that your character has not visited yet remain unrendered on maps. Whether these limitations make sense or not on a fictional level is arguable; in terms of game design they control player movement and discovery in such a way that if you want to visit all of *World of Warcraft*, prolonged play (and thus subscription fees) is required.

Even after reaching the highest level for your character, the fictional world is not freely traversable. As a result of the faction division, you can only use the transportation system and visit the cities that belong to your character's faction. While there are some faction-neutral towns and transportation means, the Horde and Alliance have their own strict network of cities and transportation routes.[50] Navigation and thus the experience of space by both factions is strongly disconnected. If you want to see how members of the other faction experience the game in terms of spatial configuration of the game world, the only option is to initiate a character on the other side of the faction divide. Taking into account the amount of time needed to create a new character, and keeping in mind that most players like to keep playing with the friends they have made within the game, this results in a fictional world which, for most players, is only experienced from the viewpoint of one faction and seldom both.

While the shape of the "real" Azeroth can be as large as the players' imagination allows it to be, the shrunken, simplified and sectioned nature of *World of Warcraft*'s version of Azeroth is very much limited and controlled by design. *World of Warcraft*'s Azeroth does, however, change over time. Through expansion packs and patches, Blizzard regularly adds new land and even whole continents to the game world or changes its existing geography. As I will show next, players themselves have less lasting influence on the world over time. As *World of Warcraft* features a persistent world, this lack of options to have a lasting influence on the world creates, I will argue, situations that seriously affect fictional coherency.

Stuck in time

According to the fictional timeline of the *Warcraft* universe, the events of *World of Warcraft* are situated twenty-five years after the Horde's invasion of Azeroth as understood in the first *Warcraft* game, a moment deemed so important that it has become the year zero of Azerothian time.[51] As such, *World of Warcraft* does not present all of the fictional world of Warcraft but presents a particular moment within it. While playing *World of Warcraft*, players are constantly reminded of the diachronic, of playing in a constantly changing world with a tangible past. Azeroth's history is not just told by NPCs through quests. Blizzard also engages in environmental storytelling by embedding narrative elements in geographical landmarks and other objects scattered throughout the game world.[52] For

instance, the partly destroyed capital city of the blood elves, Silvermoon City, fell victim to a large-scale Scourge attack during the Third War, an event depicted in *Warcraft III: Reign of Chaos* (Blizzard Entertainment 2002). Even to those players who have not played this earlier game, read the novels or are simply not interested in the how and why of Azeroth's past, the fact that this war took place has been made obvious in *World of Warcraft*. While the war is long over, the city ruins still exist in *World of Warcraft* as well as the gigantic "scar" through the countryside surrounding the city caused by a marching army of demons. Many of the quest givers in this area refer to past events and ask the player to help remove the remaining demonic presence.

Even though the richness of Azeroth's past is told, felt and seen throughout *World of Warcraft*, I argue that playing the game is a wholly synchronous experience, with hardly any influence on the past or future of the fictional world. You are very much playing in the 'here and now' of the fictional world, as Klastrup puts it (2009) but at the same time you are stuck there. The issue I want to address here, however, is not how the diachronic is represented in the fictional world but how the synchronic experience of play influences – or rather does not influence – *World of Warcraft*'s fictional evolution.

Before addressing the design choices that impact the diachronic and/or synchronic experience of time, I will introduce some general observations on the experience of time when engaging with fictional worlds in games. When talking about time in a game's fictional world, there is a difference between the time played by the player and the time his or her characters spend inside the fictional world. Film theorist Seymour Chatman's commonly used terms 'discourse time' ('the time it takes to peruse the discourse') and 'story time' ('the duration of the purported events in the narrative') could be used to describe this difference . Juul, however, points out that not all games have a narrative, and some games' fictional worlds are so incoherent that they defy an understandable story time. To address the often non-narrative nature of games, he therefore suggests the alternative terms 'play time' and 'fictional time' (2004, 2005). Another issue worth addressing is that, in games, the player is not an observer but he is more often than not in control of the protagonist. As Juul argues, 'the player's time and actions are projected onto the game world where they take on a fictional meaning' (2005: 143). The idea of projection onto a game world fits well with being in the here and now of a game's fictional world. The amount of fictional meaning a player's time and actions are allowed to make is controlled through design.

There are two main design choices I link to the experience of time and which play key roles in the level of influence that players have over Azeroth. First, there is the amount of impact that players are allowed to have on their surroundings: are they allowed to build objects, extend the geography or implement their own stories into formal quests? Secondly, there is the amount of persistency the game world has: do players' actions have a lasting impact; do the changes they bring

about become part of the game world? As game designers Raph Koster and Rich Vogel point out, all online virtual worlds and communities can be ranked along the two axes of impact and persistency (2001). When a player/user is allowed full access to change their surroundings in a fully persistent environment, we arrive at free-building worlds like *Second Life* (which is almost entirely user-constructed).[53] Most online chat systems sustaining virtual communities, on the other hand, do not create or change a fictional world at all, nor do they include many persistent elements. Between these extremes we find MMORPGs, where, depending on the amount of freedom the design allows, players have some influence on the fictional world, which persists to some degree.

As I mentioned earlier, the levels of impact and persistency influence the experience of time when engaging with the fictional world of *World of Warcraft*. At first glance, time in Azeroth conforms to our own experience of time; an Azeroth day has twenty-four hours and it becomes dark in the virtual world when it becomes dark in the real world. Here, fictional time and play time resemble each other. The difference becomes apparent when you start interacting with the environment. Every time you kill a mob within Azeroth, from the smallest nondescript farm animal to the monstrous bosses in instances with a well known legacy from Azeroth's history, they simply reappear (or "respawn") several minutes later. It is simply not possible to eradicate a mob permanently – the game is set up in such a way that every player has a chance to kill a particular target as well as become *the* hero. The actual impact on the fictional world by killing a mob is thus nihil, as the game is not designed for the death of mobs to persist. Like the players' characters, *World of Warcraft*'s computer-controlled characters are immortal; only Blizzard can kill them eternally when they think the time is right for a fictional character to die. The world's fictional time is caught in a loop: whatever players are allowed to do within it, it will reset again to allow other players to do the same thing.

While leading to a rather incoherent fictional world full of immortal beings, the repetitive killing of mobs is rewarded by the game on an instrumental level. As explained earlier, mobs "drop" loot. The more famous or important a mob is in *World of Warcraft*'s fiction, the higher the chance their loot includes rare and thus highly sought after items. These mobs, including the bosses in dungeons, are "farmed" – killed repeatedly – for their loot. This results in what Juul calls 'dead time': unchallenging, mundane activities for the sake of a higher goal (2004: 138). Players are furthermore not able to build objects that add to the game world like houses or geographical features. From a game design perspective, players are allowed to play *within World of Warcraft*'s fictional world but not *with* it. In terms of impact and persistency, this makes World of Warcraft markedly different from something like *Second Life*, whose complex virtual world is a result of thousands upon thousands of user-architects (cf. Malaby 2009).

While players are not permitted to have a lasting impact on their characters' surroundings, they are able to manipulate the characters themselves. The many thousands of different items like clothing and weaponry that players can earn, buy or make (by taking up a profession like leatherworking or blacksmithing) can be worn visibly by characters. This enables players, for instance, to create a unique look for their character for (representational) role-playing purposes or, when wearing rare items, to showcase their past victories in difficult dungeons. This way, a character's look tells the story of where a character has been, or what he or she has done to obtain the items worn. The persistency of characters is furthermore tracked and represented by their level and stats: the higher they are, the longer the character has been part of the fictional world. Quests also contribute to the feeling of persistency and making an impact on the fictional world. Exceptions aside, as soon as a quest is finished, a character may not do the same quest again. This suggests progress both instrumentally and temporally, providing a player with the feeling of having "been there, done that". Obtaining and wearing items, leveling up and finishing quests allow players to infuse their play with fictional meaning, but these actions do not have a lasting influence on the fictional world itself, only on the players' characters.

Returning to the notion of play time and fictional time, we can observe that in *World of Warcraft*, play time is continuous and chronological while fictional time is forced into a divide between the fictional time of the players' individual characters and the fictional time of the world surrounding these characters. This results in having a persistent character that players develop over time (within the boundaries of the design) which exists in a fictional world stuck in time – a world that only moves on when Blizzard decides it is time to move on. Blizzard does so regularly through patches, creating world events like a war against an insect empire (patch 1.9, called 'The Gates of Ahn'Qiraj', January 2006), or the mysterious appearance of floating necropolises throughout Azeroth (Patch 1.11, called 'Shadow of the Necropolis', June 2006). Most influential, though, have been the massive expansions of and changes in both geography and fiction due to the release of World of Warcraft's various expansion packs. The first two expansions, called *The Burning Crusade* and *Wrath of the Lich King* primarily added new continents to the game world. With 2010's *Cataclysm* expansion pack, however, the core game world – which had been largely unchanged since *World of Warcraft*'s initial release in 2004 – was significantly changed. The expansion pack's central plot was the return of an immense dragon called Deathwing the Destroyer who tore the world asunder, a cataclysmic happening providing the design team ample opportunity to redesign entire lands. Through these moments, Blizzard adds to the diachronic story, developing and implementing an additional back story with which the players can interact. On a synchronic level, the players did not cause the events to happen, nor will they truly influence their resolution.

Game critic Steven Poole once suggested that in games, 'the drama is provided by the pre-scripted story, the virtual exploration is interactive, and never the twain shall meet' (Poole 2000: 114). Whether or not this observation is valid for all games is arguable, but for *World of Warcraft* it is rather fitting. Players do get to interact with Azeroth's fiction to the degree that they can give their personal actions fictional meaning but, in terms of having a persistent impact, formally changing the rest of *World of Warcraft*'s Azeroth remains out of the players' reach, independent of the amount of play time they put into it.

Like the previous chapters in this part of the book, I have shown here how *World of Warcraft* affords but also limits player agency. In this process, certain dominant uses and play styles arise. By looking closely at the game's design on the levels of technology, rules and fiction, I have provided insight into how Blizzard envisions the game should be played – or at least how it should *not* be played. We must, of course, be cautious when thinking about game companies as singular entities. Instead, notes Taylor, we should regard games as 'emerging from a tangled mix of individual personalities, organizational structures, design imperatives, and economic considerations' (2003: 26). My attempt here was to nevertheless lay bare dominant design structures, imperatives and considerations as they are presented to the players through design.

What we find are elaborate mechanisms of control and guidance, disciplining and propelling the player through the game. These mechanisms present themselves both in limitations as well as in affordances, which means we should not immediately reject them as being oppressive. *World of Warcraft* is a multiplayer game in which people invest a considerable amount of their (leisure) time, and as such needs some protection from devious misuse by some in order to keep it fun for others. The tight, top-down control over the game that is exercised by Blizzard is appreciated by most players for this very reason. At the same time, what we see is that in many cases, *World of Warcraft* does not ask the player what they would like it to be but rather tries to define it for them. Again, for most players this is not an issue, at least not one needing constant attention. Play, however, does not always abide by set rules, and players have a habit of knowingly or unknowingly deviating from them.

In the following part of the book, I will show that players play games on their own terms as much as they follow those set by companies like Blizzard. Such diversity of play forms and preferences exist within the tightly designed structure set by Blizzard, leading to potentially endless battlefields of negotiation on technological, instrumental and fictional levels. Here, World of Warcraft's status as an assemblage of play, as an artifact defined both by design as well as play and other forms of participation, becomes clear.

Part III
Gaming the Game

It should be clear by now that even though *World of Warcraft* is very much open for free play, it is nevertheless a game infused with a range of control and guidance mechanisms creating dominant play strategies and also certain limitations for play. The three chapters in this part of the book will, however, show how players address these strategies and limitations imposed on them. They are, one could say, "gaming" the game. The chapters also show what happens when players share the game, but not necessarily the way it can or should be played. Players do not always agree with the ways *World of Warcraft* asks them to play, nor do they always agree with the ways other players engage with "their" game. These moments of tension between game and player, and between players themselves, can turn into battlefields of negotiation about the rules of play. The main questions here are: which tactics do players use to gain agency over the game's design through negotiation processes; how are the tactics of negotiation supported, reinforced and sometimes contested on the level of game culture and community; and in what ways do play practices that counter, circumvent or go beyond dominant strategies and play limitations inform the experience of the game both individually and socially?

The chapters here introduce a host of battlefields of negotiation in which *World of Warcraft*'s intended, dominant uses (as analyzed in the previous part of the book) will be challenged through player practices. With these chapters, I do not claim at all to provide a full overview of all forms of play that deviate from the intended path set out by Blizzard. While dominant, intended play strategies can be studied through an analysis of the game's design, play practices diverging, countering or foregoing these strategies can only be studied through active participation – ie., through play. The chapters here therefore describe *examples* of transformative and transgressive play stemming from my own experiences and encounters as a player/researcher. They nevertheless describe widespread and often very popular – and thus representative – play practices, which has allowed me to tap into and use an extensive body of websites, strategy guides, modifications and other participatory cultural productions dedicated to them.

Each of the upcoming chapters is furthermore dedicated to one of the three forms of social play introduced earlier – individual play, individualized group play and group play – showcasing very different negotiation processes as a result. In the first chapter, I focus on the use of walkthroughs and strategy guides as tools to transform the individual play experience. To do this, I ventured into play practices that some players would consider cheating. The following also involves controversial play: the practice of boosting a character through the game by giving it an "unfair" advantage over other players' characters. The third and final chapter of this part of the book offers a discussion on the group play form of raiding and tackles social surveillance through player-created UI modifications.

Throughout these chapters, I show that players, as stakeholders with their own particular view on the rules of play, are exceedingly creative in their ways to avoid, transform or surpass the intended use of *World of Warcraft* as designed by Blizzard. It is here that it becomes clear what the limitations are when only analyzing a game's design, as the process of play leads to very different strategies and interpretations.

9: It's about time

World of Warcraft asks for a serious time investment from players. Just getting to the highest level to reach the endgame, where most of the bigger instrumental challenges and social activities can be found, requires hundreds of hours of play. A 2006 data-mining project by game researchers Nicholas Ducheneaut, Nick Yee, Eric Nickell and Robert Moore showed that the average player had accumulated fifteen-and-a-half days (or forty-seven full eight-hour work days) to reach level sixty, excluding all the time played after reaching this level (Ducheneaut et al. 2006: 409). Patches and expansion packs have since significantly speeded up the process of gaining experience points. Increased knowledge about the leveling process among the player base, collected in and distributed through the vast knowledge databases and wikis dedicated to the game, also have undoubtedly made progress easier and faster. The average amount of time it takes to get to the highest level has nevertheless been somewhat constant over time due to an increase of content and the highest level jumping from level 60 to 85 (the maximum level introduced with the Cataclysm expansion pack). The time investment to reach the highest level therefore remains daunting.

For a significant amount of players, however, most time in *World of Warcraft* is spent beyond the moment of reaching the highest level. My main character, for instance, became level sixty during Christmas 2005, but when I last logged out three years later, I had accumulated a total of 1483 hours playing with him, or close to 62 full days. *World of Warcraft*'s endgame is a vast and diverse experience that, not surprisingly, receives a relatively large amount of attention (in terms of new content) and polish (in terms of creative and innovative design) from Blizzard. It is, after all, here where all players wind up at some point and where Blizzard needs to convince players to keep on playing and paying their subscription fees (Brown 2011). As a result, an often-heard statement among players is that leveling up a character is just a means to an end, an obstacle preceding the real fun of the endgame.[54]

This chapter investigates how players who cannot or do not want to invest so much time can negotiate the time-consuming leveling process. In the battlefields of negotiation encountered here, time is therefore at stake. With leveling being an obstacle that can take months to overcome if players do not have unlimited time to play in their daily lives, some players look for external means to limit the

demands of leveling with the use of strategy guides available online.[55] Using strategy guides for assistance in getting through the game as efficiently as possible has become an important part of the culture of digital games, and *World of Warcraft*'s culture forms no exception. Strategy guides offer a wide range of different help topics for every imaginable play situation, and are created both by professionals (like commercial strategy guide publishers) and amateurs (players writing their own strategy guides and posting them online). The latter brings strategy guides into the realm of participatory culture. Using strategy guides therefore does not just bring external help to play, it also presents a very direct overlap between game culture and game design. Negotiation processes about strategy guides that result from this overlap concern both its actual use (using a product of the participatory culture around the game to overcome challenges within the game itself) and the perception of this use (using external means to overcome challenges can be considered cheating in terms of game play and associated social codes of practice).

One particular type of strategy guide will be featured here: the walkthrough. Where strategy guides generally offer a general approach to problems, walkthroughs take a player by the hand in a step-by-step fashion, showing them the quickest and/or most efficient way to get through a game. As such, walkthroughs can be linked directly to the issue of time. I focus on a particular use of walkthroughs called power-leveling, which takes speed and efficiency to an extreme. My discussion of walkthroughs will also go beyond the aforementioned discussion of their accepted use by investigating how the use of walkthroughs affects the ways in which the game and its fictional world are experienced. Power-leveling through the use of walkthroughs, I will show, is a form of individual play that transforms the play experience into a negotiation process that aims to ignore the game's intended design as much as possible in order to maximize progression.[56]

Paratexts as cheating tools

Strategy guides have a particular relation to games. Providing tips, tricks and other game play enhancing solutions, strategy guides can greatly impact the experience of play. As game researcher Mia Consalvo argues, strategy guides can be seen as part of a game's paratext, a term coined by literary theorist Gérard Genette to refer to all the information accompanying the main text of a book such as the preface, the table of contents and the index. Paratexts form 'thresholds of interpretation' – pieces of information standing in between text (the inside) and off-text (the outside) (Genette: 1-2). Paratexts do more than just provide additional information for the main text, they control one's reading of it. Including the paratexts in one's reading therefore has the ability to change how the main text is perceived. Consalvo takes the concept of paratext into the realm of digital games by situating strategy guides as paratextual to the games they

describe (2007: 21). As paratexts, strategy guides control not just one's reading but potentially one's playing too. In her work, Consalvo points out that paratexts are 'anything but peripheral, and they grow more integral to the digital game industry and player community with every year' (2007: 182). Consalvo's focus is on the rise and subsequent influence of the 'paratextual industries' as developed by the game industry (2007: 9). I pursue the question of how paratexts created by players themselves function as strong guiding mechanisms and thereby change the reading and playing of the game.

While nobody will object to a reader referring to a book's index, there is no consensus among players about the ethicality of using walkthroughs and strategy guides for playing a game. While for some, using these paratexts is a perfectly acceptable practice, for others it is clearly a form of cheating. The lack of consensus results from the lack of a generally accepted definition of cheating among players. According to Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, there is a hypothetical "standard player" who only plays the game as intended by the designers, forming a 'test case against which all other types of players are contrasted' (Salen & Zimmerman 2004: 269). Such players would be "cheat-free" – that is, they would employ no external help in order to play a game. Whether such players exist or not, for purists, the idea of being cheat-free is something to aspire to. According to Consalvo, who investigated the social practices of cheating, this purist group believes that 'anything other than a solo effort in completing a game is cheating' (2007: 88). This means that all external information, including asking friends for tips or advice or going online to look up some information about a quest or an item, is considered to be breaking the magic circle of play and hence can be labeled cheating. A purist player in *World of Warcraft* would never allow himself or herself to use web forums or information databases, only using what the game's design offers as guidance.

As the purist definition shows, cheating is not simply breaking the rules; it is a term used to define what purists believe create unfair advantages over other players by using external help. Simply bending or reinterpreting the rules can be enough to be labeled a cheater (Consalvo 2007: 87). Like discussions about ganking and griefing, briefly discussed in chapter seven, conflicts about definitions of cheating are the result of multiplayer games being social spaces. The activities of players that Salen and Zimmerman define as being cheats – violating the formal rules of the game in order to win – can be deemed completely acceptable by players who see cheating as something only existing in social settings (Salen & Zimmerman 2004: 269). For these players, Consalvo points out, 'the use of items such as walkthroughs or code devices in a single player game is acceptable because, by [their] definition, one cannot cheat a machine or oneself' (2007: 92). In a game like *World of Warcraft*, these lenient players coexist with purists and everyone in between, making any socially negotiated fixed definition of cheating nearly impossible.

As an alternative term, deviance is closely linked to cheating in the sense that it involves defying norms and/or rules but is arguably less accusatory in nature. Game researcher Torill Mortensen defines deviance as diverging from the plans of the game designers. She posits two types of deviance: 'counterproductive, that which hinders personal progress, and destructive, that which ruins the progress of other players' (2008: 208). As *World of Warcraft* is designed as a game of emergence with some elements of progression, turning it into a game of progression through a step-by-step walkthrough certainly constitutes deviance. In terms of progress, however, using a walkthrough is all *but* counterproductive. I would argue that Mortensen's distinction between counterproductive and destructive deviance could benefit from the addition of what I would call *hyperproductive* deviance: that which deviates from the game's intended design by looking for ways to excel beyond the core challenges. One of the two walkthroughs under discussion in this case study is dedicated to hyperproductive deviance, whose main aim is to get through the game as quickly as possible by whatever means necessary. As I show in this case study, hyperproductive deviance can increase a player's sense of agency over a game.

How hyperproductive deviance affects the experience of the game and its fictional world, and what role player agency plays within this process, will form an important part of this chapter. Using paratextual assistance like a strategy guide can create situations among players where, as game scholar Julian Kücklich observes, 'one player's increase in agency is another player's loss of immersion' (2004: 9). As one would expect, this situation can create tension and thus battlefields of negotiation between players, and between players and Blizzard (who does not want to see players unhappy due to other player's divergent behaviour). The other chapters in this section of the book, which address individualized group play and group play practices, involve exactly such battlefields of negotiation. Here, however, I will primarily focus on the individual play experience, so I will limit myself to investigating negotiation processes between the player and the game's design.

I will investigate two *World of Warcraft* walkthroughs to show how different translations of *World of Warcraft* into a strategy guide format not only lead to two different play practices but additionally influence a player's perception of the game as a whole. The first walkthrough is part of the official strategy guide published by commercial strategy guide publisher Bradygames (Lummis & Vanderlip 2005); the second is a power-leveling guide created by a player calling himself Joana, who also sells his guide commercially through his own website (Joana 2007).[57]

To understand the practice of using walkthroughs, I have made use of both guides extensively during the leveling process of two of my characters. What is considered cheating or deviance is difficult – if not impossible – to define, as it is socially negotiated and highly context dependent, but as a research practice it is

considered controversial. As game scholar Julian Kücklich has pointed out, the term cheating has connotations that usually do not meet the game research community's professional and ethical guidelines (2007: 356). As Aarseth once stated, for instance, researchers who cheat in the games they study 'cannot reach a deep understanding of the games they examine' (2003: 7). In reaction to Aarseth, Lammes however argues that 'a self-confessed cheater/researcher that takes [the position of a cheater] as a reflexive practice could actually engender very interesting material' (2007: 28). In his work on cheating as a methodological tool in digital games research, Kücklich takes up a similar position, in effect summing up some of the advantages of inducing the puzzlement through cheating:

> As a method, cheating allows us to reflect upon the presuppositions that we bring to games, no matter from which perspective we are studying them. It also enables us to identify blind spots in our research perspectives and thus discover new avenues of inquiry with regard to the phenomena we study. Perhaps even more importantly, taking into account unorthodox forms of play can help us recognize flaws in our theoretical models, which are so often built upon the experience of playing by the rules, rather than breaking them. (2007: 357)

Engaging in practices some players would consider cheating allowed me to indeed identify and reflect on play practices that would have been otherwise inaccessible. Some of these practices, like the use of walkthroughs and other external information supporting advantageous play (as seen in the next chapter), are not uncommon but widespread among the player community. For me, this meant that taking this approach enabled me to broaden my overall experience and understanding of the game, its stakeholders and their stakes.

While *what* is considered to be cheating or deviation is socially negotiated, *why* players cheat or deviate is a more personal affair. After countless interviews with players as well as game designers about why people cheat, Consalvo concludes that 'perhaps the only constant is the lack of a constant factor' (2007: 94). People cheat and deviate in order to win a game, out of boredom, because a game is too difficult, to annoy others or simply because they are stuck. Or, as in this case of walkthroughs, to lessen the amount of time it takes to go through a game. Instead of trying to provide a top-down overview of the reasons why people turn to walkthroughs and strategy guides, I will take a bottom-up approach by describing my own reasons for using them, reasons I have seen reoccur many times with other players throughout my time on web forums and during play.

When one starts out playing *World of Warcraft* without prior experience with MMORPGs or RPGs in general, the game is dauntingly complex. The official strategy guide lends a helping hand, offering a broad and general introduction to playing the game. It is therefore particularly attractive for newcomers to the game

and/or the MMORPG genre.[58] Joana's dedicated power-leveling guide, however, requires players to have a solid knowledge of the inner mechanics of the game a priori, and most of its users are therefore experienced players with one or more characters on the highest levels. It is mostly aimed at players who want to level up additional characters as quick as possible. Both guides offer walkthroughs aimed at different types of players and offer a very different take on the walkthrough process. As I will show, the two guides form paratexts that change not only the way the game is interpreted but the way it is played. Both, however, allow players to gain agency over the game's intended use by actively bending, circumventing or flat out ignoring it.

From emergence to progression

Strategy guides generally convey much about a game. Game scholar Jesper Juul offers a simple test to see what the main structure of a game is using only paratextual information:

> Search for a guide to the game on the Internet. If the game guide is a walkthrough (describing step-by-step what to do), it is a game of progression. If the game guide is a strategy guide (describing the rules of thumb for how to play), it is a game of emergence (2005: 71).

In games of progression, often single-player games, players need to perform a predefined sequence of events in order to succeed, while in games of emergence, "the primordial game structure" often seen in multiplayer games, a small number of rules result in a relatively large amount of potential play variations (Juul 2005: 72-74). When reading through Bradygames' official guide for *World of Warcraft* (the first of the two guides I discuss in this section), it is instantly obvious that *World of Warcraft* is primarily a game of emergence. Take, for example, this excerpt from the guide's introduction:

> This guide explains the terms that appear in the community, the methods of creating and building a character, and how to handle yourself in various situations.
>
> For those with greater MORG experience, the guide brings you up to speed with class explanations, tactics, long-term strategies for increasing your power and getting the most out of your Talent specializations. Those switching to *World of Warcraft* from other MORG's should find these chapters of tremendous value while looking at long-term options for play and mastery (Lummis & Vanderlip: 6).

The guide goes on to offer tips and tricks for a large variety of subjects, like keyboard layouts, general etiquette, naming your character, death and rebirth ("spawning") and – playing ahead – information on party dynamics (the "holy trinity"), talents and professions.

Even though there is a strong emphasis on the emergent aspects of the game, there is a chapter dedicated to progression in the form of a walkthrough. Under the heading 'Your first day', a step-by-step description of what to do, which quests to take in what order is provided for each of the six starter zones of the game world, explaining everything a character needs to do to reach level ten. For experienced players who know that reaching level ten only takes approximately a few hours to achieve in a game that offers many hundreds of hours of content (which for a large part is also repeatable), such information looks almost superfluous. The walkthrough sections of the official strategy guide may not be very useful for the long-term players, but for the newcomer they can be a key that unlocks the workings of the game and its fantasy world.

How a walkthrough is presented can dictate how the game should be experienced in play. In the previous chapter I introduced both the instrumental as well as fictional sides of *World of Warcraft* by entering the game as a troll hunter in the Valley of Trials. You might recall the way I described seeing the first NPC with a question mark above its head, while at the same time discovering that executing quests and killing boars led to level increases and more power. Here, I present the way the official strategy guide translates this exact moment into walkthrough form:

> The Valley of Trials is the starting point for all new Orcs and Trolls. It sits nestled within a valley in the southwestern region of Durotar. The beginning trainers and a small few vendors are located here.
>
> The Valley of Trials is a great starting place for Orcs and Trolls. There are minimal amounts of running involved at this point and the quests all revolve around the same contained area.
>
> When you first come into the world, you'll find yourself face-to-face with Eitrigg. He is your introduction into the *New Horde* and directs you to seek out Gornak to begin your journey. Gornak wants to help you to gain strength, albeit a bit reluctantly. He tasks you with killing 10 Mottled Boars (*Cutting Teeth*).
>
> Galgar is nearby and has another quest for you as well. He wants you to collect 10 cactus apples for him so he can make his *Cactus Apple Surprise*. He claims that Cactus Apple Surprise can do wonders and cool you down. Both of these quests are a fairly easy way to start your time as an Orc or Troll.

> Right in the beginning part of the Valley of Trials you'll see plenty of Mottled Boars roaming around. They're not aggressive. Also sprinkled around the area are cactus and cactus apples. You'll know them by the rosy blooms on the cacti. Right-click on them to gather the apples; they respawn relatively quickly.
>
> Once you've killed all the boars and gather the apples, return to the Valley of Trials and complete the quest by speaking to the appropriate NPCs. Gornak will want you to prove your prowess further by killing Scorpids and collecting 8 of their tails. It seems anti-venom is created from an extraction of venom from their stingers. Fortunately, Scorpids are not aggressive here (Lummis & Vanderlip: 65, emphasis in original).

As a walkthrough, this style of translation of gameplay is aimed at a narrative telling of events. While several references are made to the instrumental, highly controlled spine of the fictional world (a 'contained area', NPCs, right-clicking, respawning), pure instrumental matters like experience points, equipment attributes and levels are not mentioned. The quest system is brought forward by the authors as a narrative tool, a system of narrative guidance. Additionally, it might tell you what to do with quest objectives ('right-click on them to gather the apples'), though it does not directly tell you where they are (they are 'sprinkled around the area'). Still, in terms of immersion, this walkthrough addresses you as a character first, and as a player second.

For most new players, unaccustomed to the way *World of Warcraft* works, the narrative of the quest system forms the backbone of the initial play experience. A careful reading of the description that accompanies a quest, written in a style fitting the NPC's race, class or rank, usually offers enough information about how and where to fulfill a task.[59] In these earliest stages of the game, most quest goals are not far away from the quest givers, resulting in a conveniently arranged initial play arena. Playing through these early levels was never meant to be hard, and the walkthrough makes it even easier by guiding players through the first levels with a step-by-step process. Being an official guide, the writers do not stray far from Blizzard's intended design, making a player's perceived agency over the game through this walkthrough limited.

As a character progresses in level, the simplicity of the early quests is replaced by a multiplicity of quest series to follow in different zones of the world, and a mostly linear narrative experience changes into a forking path structure in which the player must make choices. In *World of Warcraft*, this happens at the moment the players leave their starting zone, having finished all the quests there. The point at which the fictional world starts to open up to the player with many choices is also the point where narrative-driven walkthroughs begin to fall short. While quests, especially those linked to each other as a series of follow-ups, still offer linear progression within the game, the large amounts of parallel quest lines

prohibit all-encompassing walkthroughs. It is simply impossible to offer a coherent narrative of progression through a fictional world with many layers and paths without excluding some or most of such paths. This might be the reason why the official *World of Warcraft* strategy guide stops its walkthroughs at the point of leaving the starting zone. From here onwards, players have to follow their own paths, consisting of a mix of quests from various zones not necessarily related to each other, instead of the singular narrative provided by the early quests and the accompanying official walkthrough. It becomes clear that *World of Warcraft* is not a game of linear progression but a game of emergence where a strategy guide, instead of a walkthrough, is the paratext of both choice and necessity.

There are, however, ways of bringing back the linear progression of a walkthrough, even when a game's emergent structure defies such an approach. Instead of trying to provide a broad, incoherent narrative recounting all of *World of Warcraft*'s quests, another option is to create an in-depth walkthrough that focuses on a specific play form or experience – getting to the highest level as quickly as possible, for instance. Singling out what is important for speed becomes more important than, say, an interesting quest storyline or a quest that grants useless rewards. This is what Joana did with his power-leveling walkthrough. As soon as such a specific, dedicated approach is taken, the narrative underpinning the walkthrough provided by the official strategy guide is replaced by instrumental concerns. Not the most narratively pleasing succession of quests is chosen, but the most useful. Following such a walkthrough means players actively circumvent and even ignore *World of Warcraft*'s dominant strategies in terms of fictional and spatial exposition.

A walkthrough aimed at fast leveling is not just organized as a simple collection of tips and tricks for easier progress but offers an ideal singular path through a game. Joana's guide, for instance, is based on the author's claims to be the fastest player ever to reach level sixty when that was still the highest reachable level (he did it in four days and twenty hours, which, at the time, was less than a quarter of the average leveling time). His power-leveling guide functions both as proof that he did so – buyers get access to a video recording of Joana's record-breaking run through the game – and as a step-by-step manual allowing other players to do the same.

The process of advancing through a game as fast as possible and recording it as proof is part of the gaming subculture of "speedrunning". The practice of speedrunning has been around since the early days of online gaming and has evolved. Through experimentation with gameplay recording as well as editing this material into videos, the speedrunning community also spawned machinima filmmaking – making films using game engines as cinematic tools (see also Salen 2002; Lowood 2006, 2007). The practices around machinima filmmaking will be investigated in chapter thirteen. Here I want to keep the focus on speedrunning

and the way it affects the experience of the game for those who follow speedrunners' leads.

While speedrunning traditionally involves single player games, players like Joana have extended the practice to MMORPGs.[60] Speedrunning through a MMORPG looks different from "regular" speedrunning. In terms of sheer time investment, Joana's record of less than five days is far removed from beating *Quake* in eleven and a half minutes or *Zelda: Ocarina of Time* in one hour and sixteen minutes.[61] The way *World of Warcraft* is designed – a game of emergence with a quest system offering elements of progression – also differs from the linear games of progression on which speedrunners usually focus. Nevertheless, Joana's guide shows that tactics similar to regular speedrunning were used to achieve his record run. As game designer and writer Simon Carless explains, route planning, sequence breaking and tricks form the core tactics of any speedrunner (Carless 2004: 258). Route planning forms the basis; advancing through a game as fast as possible means planning ahead. The only way to do so is to know the game extensively – study its spatial design, solve all its puzzles or other challenges, achieve a high level of skill in moving around, shooting and so forth. Sequence breaking or 'tackling the levels of a game in an unintended order or skipping entire sections the designers intended you to play' is needed to further optimize the chosen route through the game (Carless 2004: 262). Lastly, tricks (of which some can be exploitations, or "exploits", of game design flaws) are used to achieve such breaks. This is what hyperproductive deviation is all about: speedrunners internalize the game's instrumental rules, strategies and mechanics to go beyond the intended design.

Whether or not the hyperproductive deviance of speedrunning or power-leveling is actually cheating is arguable. As Consalvo points out, superior players do not consider themselves as potential cheaters anymore: 'such players often see themselves as elite gamers that have already surpassed the challenges offered by a game, and so turn to gaming the game itself' (2005: 6). By gaming the game, speedrunners achieve their own desired form of agency over the intended design of a game.

By analyzing Joana's walkthrough guide and watching the accompanying video recordings, we can see how speedrunning tactics deconstruct *World of Warcraft*'s intended design. It also showcases the difference between this guide and the official, narrative-oriented walkthrough. As explained above, the latter stopped at the moment *World of Warcraft*'s design structure becomes too emergent to put into one coherent step-by-step guide. By using speedrunning's route planning, sequence breaking and tricks, Joana's walkthrough turns the game into a non-emergent, highly linear experience. As the introduction to his guide points out, for Joana, the creation of the guide involved a less linear approach to the game:

> The first time I went through the game, I attempted virtually EVERY quest, by doing this I learned what quests are worth doing, and which quests should be avoided (because some of the quests are not good enough for the time/XP reward, and so quests are just down right to hard to solo at certain levels). [...] I read EVERY quest description and took my time REAL slowly, learning everything I can about the game, I tried every profession, I did every instance like at least 5 times, and (with my dedication) I studied websites on every instance, about the loot from the mobs, all the quests for them, and the correct way to do each one (2007: 1).

Here, Joana claims to have played through and analyzed *all* the game has to offer for route planning purposes. The goals are obvious: to lay the groundwork for the perfect speedrun and to subsequently write (and sell) the best power-leveling walkthrough to expose how he did it. Hyperbole notwithstanding, the result of Joana's efforts offer us an explanation of speedrunning tactics through which other, less "elite" players are given the chance to experience similar agency over the game.

Joana's densely written walkthrough looks very different from the official walkthrough in terms of form and goal. Below is Joana's rendition of the Valley of Trials, the area I took as an example for the official walkthrough:

> 01) I do every single quest in Durotar! Here's the fastest way to do em:
> 02) Start off doing *"Cutting Teeth"*
> 03) Then once you hit level 2, go accept *"Sarkoth"* (at 40.62) and do *"Sarkoth"* (at 40.66). Then turn it in and accept *"Sarkoth"* pt.2
> 04) Go turn in *"Sarkoth"* pt.2 and *"Cutting Teeth"* ... accept and do the following...
> 05) *"Sting of the Scorpid" "Vile Familiars" "Galgar's Cactus Apple Surprise"* and *"Lazy Peons"*
> 06) Turn those quests in, then accept and go do...
> 07) "Burning Blade Medallion" and *"Thazz'ril's Pick"* (these are done in the cave at 44.56)
> 08) Once those two are done use your hearthstone.
> 09) Turn those quests in, then..
> 10) Accept *"Report to Sen'jin Village"*
> 11) Leave starting noob zone... (2007: 2, emphasis in original). [62]

This excerpt describes the entire process of getting from level one until leaving the Valley. For comparison: the excerpt from the official strategy guide shown earlier barely describes half of it (it ends halfway through step five of Joana's guide). Before analyzing the differences between both walkthroughs in terms of its paratextual impact on the experience of play, which forms the topic of the next

section, I will take a closer look at how this walkthrough of the same area takes a player through the game.

Being the product of speedrunning practices, the presence of instrumental tactics in Joana's walkthrough is far more pronounced than in the official walkthrough. The excerpt above immediately announces that there is a "fastest way" to complete the quests in this area, presenting them in a numbered to-do style. Step-by-step, the player is taken through the game world, a process Joana even highlights with the use of maps showing the location of each quest-object and the "correct" routes to travel between them. Should it still be unclear where a player using the walkthrough should go, there is also a video recording of Joana progressing through the same steps. Sequence breaking and the use of tricks – the other two hallmarks of speedrunning – are also present in the excerpt. In step eight, 'using the hearthstone' is mentioned. The hearthstone is a game mechanism that offers the player a fixed location to which he can return his character once every hour, independent of the location of the character. Usually, players link their hearthstone to a major city or travel hub in order to have quick access to banks, auction houses and the transport system. In this case, it is used to eliminate the time walking back from the cave (from step seven) to where the quest givers are located. Here, the hearthstone mechanism is used as a trick to break the normal sequence of walking back and forth between quest givers and quest objects. An additional trick that Joana refers to is the use of geographical coordinates for the location of certain NPCs (in step three) or destinations (the cave in step seven). As such coordinates are not part of the core game's user interface, players need to install user interface modifications to be able to see them on the in-game maps.

The strategies and tricks mentioned above might provide players with the feeling that they are speedrunning through the game in the same way the original author did, although their agency over the game is not necessarily heightened in the same way. Using Joana's walkthrough certainly sped up play considerably for me; this time, it took me a third of the time to get to the highest level with a new character than with my first character. It granted me the feeling of conquering the game in ways far beyond standard play; it made me feel powerful in negotiating Blizzard's design, as I was indeed gaming the game. Whereas Joana internalized the game's core design through extensive play and research, I was busy *skipping* a considerable amount of content. Following someone else's path through a game that is built to offer thousands of different paths limits rather than expands your agency in and over the game. It is as if you are participating in someone else's game rather than your own. Hyperproductive agency acquired by the use of walkthroughs rather than your own experience is therefore at least partly an illusion. This situation of both gaining and losing agency is, of course, connected to a walkthrough's potential in influence the reading/playing of the game.

Hyperproductive demystification

As a paratext, a walkthrough influences the way you experience a game, and the more dedicated a walkthrough is to a particular goal, the bigger this influence can be. The two walkthroughs discussed above have different goals; the official strategy guide means to introduce the game to the player, while the power-leveling guide means to deconstruct it. This difference is felt most strongly in the way the walkthroughs treat the fictional world in which play is situated. After a brief comparison of the way each of the two walkthroughs (re)present the fictional world, I will focus on Joana's guide which, having been created by a speedrunner rather than a professional strategy guide publisher, differs most from the game's indented use as implemented by Blizzard.

When comparing the excerpts from the official strategy guide and from Joana's guide, the de-emphasizing of *World of Warcraft*'s fiction is immediately apparent. As we can see in the excerpt above, Joana ignores the fictional aspects of the quests entirely, focusing only on those that had to be done and in which sequence, in order to traverse through the Valley of Trials as fast as possible. While the official strategy guide's walkthrough exhibits an elaborate writing style in tune with *World of Warcraft*'s fantasy history and setting, Joana's approach reads like a list of declarative orders ("go there!" "do this!"). As both walkthroughs clearly explain what you need to do step-by-step, they also both contribute to what Consalvo considers a demystification of the game's challenges (2007: 45).[63] The power-leveling guide, however, goes on to demystify the fictional embedding of quests within the fictional worlds. To use examples from the Valley of Trials excerpts, the question of why you need to collect cactus apples for a quest is no longer motivated on a fictional level (because a character wants to make you some refreshing cactus apple surprise) but on an instrumental level (because it is the most efficient way to progress). The demystification of quests in Joana's guide lays bare their instrumental purposes in ways the official guide refuses to do.

The demystification of the game's quests has an impact on players' spatial orientation. The step-by-step approaches in the walkthroughs prompted me to only pick up the quests they told me to pick up and, subsequently, to only go where the walkthroughs told me the quests' goals were to be found. To improve speed by avoiding unnecessary travel, Joana's guide especially limited spatial exploration. It bundles groups of quests together when their goals are roughly in the same area. Any coherence between quests on a fictional level – going where the story goes – is replaced with a coherence of quests on the spatial level – that is, going where the other quests go. Linking quests together like this makes reading the quest descriptions – which include most of the fictional reasons for doing the quest – superfluous to progress. Reading the descriptions becomes an obstacle that hinders speedy progress. Reading them for clues to finish a quest (which usually is part of the challenge of doing a quest) is not needed, as a pre-planned

route is followed. What we find here is a case of hyperproductive demystification: instrumental progress going above and beyond the game's own challenges and fiction, both of which are deconstructed in the process.

While *World of Warcraft*'s version of Azeroth already is a miniature version of the "real" Azeroth (as discussed in chapter eight), following a singular path through the game by skipping and ignoring large amounts of quests provides an even more radical condensation of space. Large swaths of the game's geography, including entire zones and all the quests that lie within them, were skipped completely by simply ignoring every quest that lead to them. This meant skipping hours and hours of content of both fictional and instrumental nature, all intended to reduce the time it takes to progress.[64] The only actions that matter are those on the planned route, with exploration being both unnecessary and, even worse, a waste of time. Here, we see dual levels of player agency at work. On the one hand, a player's agency over the game is increased, as he or she does not need to look for the how and where of quests. On the other hand, agency is decreased, as his or her ability to read and understand quest goals is potentially diminished. A player learns to navigate the world (and the quests within it) by having it explained to them by an external source, and not by letting the game's design "explain" it to them through discovery, trial and error.

Naturally, the level of demystification, both in terms of challenges and fiction, depends on your prior exposure to the game and its fictional world. Most players using Joana's guide will have played through the game at least once before attempting to powerlevel a character. For them, skipping or grouping quests is less demystifying, as they have probably experienced many of the quests with other characters, in a sequence that makes more sense on a fictional level.

As a paratext – a threshold of interpretation – the influence of a power-leveling guide like Joana's and, to a lesser extent, a walkthrough like the one from the official guide, is nevertheless noticeable for both experienced and novice players alike. The more loyal you are to following a walkthrough, the more you diverge from the intended flow of the game in terms of instrumental and fictional exposition. This divergence might be hyperproductive for the cause of speedrunning, but it might be counterproductive to other practices of play. I actually did try to combine power-leveling with activities that Joana's guide explicitly advised against for being too time consuming. I tried to build up my character's professions during the speedrun. One profession – mining – involved gathering all kinds of metal ore and gems hidden in the hills and mountains of Azeroth. I even used a dedicated mining strategy guide alongside the power-leveling guide to see if they could function together. As particular types of metal ore are only found in particular areas, the problem with combining professions and power-leveling became instantaneously obvious when the walkthrough ordered me to move on to the next zone while I still had not collected all the metal needed from the current zone. My power-leveling walkthrough was interfering with my mining

strategy, and the other way around. This situation also underscores that the concept of an "ideal" path through *World of Warcraft* offered by the power-leveling walkthrough is limited to its specific purpose only.

While I have limited myself to individual play throughout this chapter, I would like to add that, as a threshold of interpretation, walkthroughs can influence a player's preferences for group play also. Free group play situations like (representational) role-playing are counterproductive for power-leveling. Joana's guide even warns players about the potential dangers of instrumental group play. Clearing dungeons might lead to large amounts of experience points (and thus faster leveling) but getting a good group together with a proper class combination might take too much time. Visiting a dungeon with an unorganized, random group means risking death and is better avoided. This does not mean that power-levelers and speedrunners do not have social contact during their activities. The in-game communication system lets players chat with each other even if their characters are not physically close to each other within the game world. In fact, most individual play practices are still social by way of these communication options. Dedicated group play, however, is something else than chatting with in-game friends while playing individually; it requires characters to actively work together in organized forms of ludic role-playing. Walkthroughs aimed at highly individualized play forms can influence the way players perceive such forms of collective social action, seeing them as potentially harmful for progress rather than a productive challenge.

To conclude this chapter, we can safely say that, due to the omnipresence of these paratexts for *World of Warcraft* – produced both by amateurs and the professional paratextual industries – the use of strategy guides informs and influences a substantial part of the player community. It shows that when time is at stake from the perspective of game play, there is a large demand for increased agency over the way the game is supposed to be played from the perspective of game design. This demand is for a substantial part fulfilled through participatory activities (ie. the creation of strategy guides) from the perspective of game culture. The use of walkthroughs like Joana's power-leveling guide creates battlefields of negotiation between these three levels, with players actively negotiating Blizzard's design structures through hyperproductive deviation. As Mortensen observes: 'mastering the game is not submitting to the game: it is to know it so well that the game no longer controls the player' (2008: 220). Walkthroughs are used to achieve a new control balance between player and game, suggesting increased agency for the player. Walkthroughs nevertheless present their own levels of control over player action, potentially transforming the emergent, largely narrative-oriented progress of the game's core design into pure, linear progression, with less rather than more options for divergence.

In the next chapter, which centres on individualized group play, another form of hyperproductive deviance is discussed. This time, however, the play practices

deviate from the intended design to grant the player more agency to directly influence other players, leading to battlefields of negotiation from a game contract perspective. As such, the form of deviance discussed next is as hyperproductive as it is destructive.

10: Twinking, or Playing Another Game

In this chapter, the notion of playing "alone together" is investigated by focusing on individualized group play. As game researchers Nicolas Ducheneaust, Eric Nickell, Robert Moore and Nick Yee point out, many players prefer to be surrounded by other players rather than actually playing with them (Ducheneaut et al. 2006: 4). Here, I want to extend the notion of playing alone together to include playing *against* other players in ways that are not universally accepted and can even be considered anti-social. In the battlefields of negotiation discussed here, power between players is at stake, as players use everything at their disposal – including some activities deemed deviant according to established social codes of practice. The question here is how these tactics influence playing *World of Warcraft* for the stakeholders involved.

The form of individualized group play under investigation here is called "twinking". While a more detailed description will follow, the practice of twinking in its most basic form involves using accumulated wealth and/or power of a high-level character to boost the performance of a low-level character. Battleground twinking is a variation on this practice, where the accumulated wealth and/or power of a higher-level character helps to boost the performance of a lower-level character against other players' low-level characters in a dedicated player vs. player, or PvP, setting. In other words, battleground twinking creates an unfair advantage over players who do not have access to such wealth and/or power – or over those who consider twinking a form of cheating.

The best way to understand the practice of twinking is by doing it yourself. Over a period of several months, I built and actively played a twinked character in PvP battlegrounds. Like the previous chapter, where I used walkthroughs to level up a character, battleground twinking involves much research and planning in order to do it successfully. As with most deviant play practices, we can argue about whether this process can be considered cheating. As explained in the previous chapter, actively pursuing such controversial play practices as a research method allowed me to understand both the game and play within it from an entirely new perspective. It allowed to me to recognize and examine four different interpretations of twinking: (i) twinking as a form of luxury play, (ii) twinking as a form of dominance play, (iii) twinking as a form of transformative play, and (iv) twinking as a form of standardized play. Each of these play forms exist on differ-

ent levels of instrumental and social behaviour and additionally revolve around different stakes. All forms of twinking discussed here, however, grant players greater agency over both the game and other players. The practice of twinking is a rich topic for the study of negotiation processes, with a range of stakeholders (twinkers, their opponents, Blizzard, etc.) staking their claims around game play, game design, game culture and game contract, exhibiting *World of Warcraft*'s battlefields of negotiation at their most complex.[65]

The luxury of twinking

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a twink is, among other things, an effeminate young man or, in more commonly used terms, a sissy, pansy-ass or weenie. Twinking as a verb in the sense of creating a twink has no dictionary entry. Twinking is nevertheless a notable term in the culture of MUDs and MMORPGs, where twink is defined as something somewhat different. On Wikipedia we can read: 'In its most basic definition, a twink is a character with better gear than they could have easily gotten on their own'.[66] A similar definition comes from the official *World of Warcraft* strategy guide, where a twink is 'a character that owns items that are normally above their capability of obtaining on their own' (2005: 9). All definitions hint at the fact that twinks, or actually the players controlling them, are in fact less capable than regular players, as they do not seem to be able to manage acquiring certain items on their own. In the reality of the game, they are not lesser characters but actually more capable of defeating regular players. Twinks, also known as powergamers or munchkins in the RPG genre, are the strongest characters among their own kind, certainly not the weakest.[67] In gamers' jargon: they "own" the game in ways they should not by any normal means. As a result, twinking has been seen as an unwanted, manipulative form of playing an RPG and has spawned much – mostly negative – discussion since the genre's earliest games.

In real life, transferring power by preferential treatment, for instance through hereditary succession, involves at least two separate people. But in a game like *World of Warcraft*, the benefactor (a rich and powerful high-level character) and beneficiary (a newly initiated low-level character) are often controlled by the same person. Using the power and influence of an existing character to make progress easier for your own new character is a relatively easy step to make. For instance, by leveraging virtual money from an established to a newly initiated character, the new character's virtual life will have an easier start.

As in real life, potentially unfair wealth and power distribution in *World of Warcraft* is not always perceived positively. Twinking could be considered unfair, as successful progress is suddenly based on who has the greatest resources instead of the best skills, making competition-based playing like PvP nearly impossible when twinks are involved. One could even argue about whether distributing

power and wealth between characters is simply a clever use of game mechanics or an exploitation of them. There is nothing in *World of Warcraft*'s design or contract that prohibits it. Like most speedrunning tactics, many twinking tactics involve what Consalvo calls "found" actions or items, which 'accelerate or improve the player's skills, actions, or abilities in some way the designer did not originally intend, yet in a manner that does not actively change code or involve deceiving others' (2007: 114). These tactics allow for hyperproductive deviance; they discard the intended design where a character has to fight for its own place in the fictional world by accomplishing quests, acquiring skill and gathering items by having other characters do it for them. Like power-leveling, twinking makes the parts of the game's design that are often considered boring – grinding your way through the lower levels to get to the end game content – more bearable, especially for those who have leveled up characters several times before. Moreover, there is little difference between helping a friend with a lower-level character who is stuck in some quest or giving this character some better gear you had laying around – both totally acceptable forms of social behaviour – and fully twinking your own character with the very best gear and running them through otherwise non-reachable game situations with the help of higher-level friends. Both are forms of luxury bestowed on low-level characters by higher-level characters. Actually having luxury (ie. wealth) is a requirement for creating dedicated battleground twinks and is best illustrated by explaining the origin of this case study.

The decision to start my own twink was made more by accident than on purpose. At one point I had just created a new character, an orc shaman called Brikk, and during the lower levels of Brikk's life, I arranged for him to get some help from a friend with a high-level character. Essentially, I was asking to be twinked. Without many problems, she helped me to finish a quest in a dungeon called Shadowfang Keep. A dungeon like this one normally requires a balanced group of five characters (in this case between levels twenty to twenty-five) to successfully complete. Because Brikk, at this point only level twenty, received help from a character on level sixty (and therefore strong enough to complete the dungeon on her own), no group was needed. The level-sixty helper fought its way through the monsters like a warm knife through butter while Brikk looked on and reaped the rewards. While there was certainly twinking involved, it was one of the rewards I received which made me want to pursue twinking as a case study. Not only did I walk away with the quest rewards and some other nice pieces of gear I could use, I also picked up a pair of rare cloth bracers called Mindthrust Bracers. With Brikk himself having no use for them, I knew I could sell them through the in-game auction house. Before I put them up for auction, I decided to read up on them in one of *World of Warcraft*'s many online information databases where I encountered a new side of twinking of which I was not fully aware. On the Mindthrust Bracers page, I found the following user remarks: 'If you are lucky enuf to

get them to drop, congratz. But, if you are a twink who has to buy em, do it cuz these things OWN!' (posted by "Zarlyn"); 'Twinks rejoice. More twink caster gear' (posted by "Draw7Seven"); 'Ok i will pay 25-30g for these if u have them' (posted by "Blackwidowers"); 'I'm offering a 65 gold reward to whoever fetches me these' (posted by "Gahnrael").[68] To put all these comments in perspective: the bracers had a value of four silver and sixty-four copper coins when sold to an NPC vendor, and the accumulated wealth of most regular characters at Brikk's level was still well below one gold coin, which is equivalent to one-hundred silver coins. In other words, the bracers alone were worth several times more than the "normal" total wealth of a character at Brikk's level. I eventually sold the bracers for just under twenty gold coins within two days.

My first encounter with this "other" side of twinking touches on twinking's relationship to (virtual) money. When players do not want to invest too much time in a new character, they can use a walkthrough, or they may simply buy the best gear available from the in-game auction house to ease and accelerate the leveling process (or, even better, both). The second option of buying useful gear takes advantage of the fact that another player has invested the time to attain a certain item, time you do not have to spend. Taking into account the often outrageous prices charged for the best twink gear, twinking is a form of luxury play, an activity made possible by having enough money to spend within the game world.

A direct result from extreme examples of luxury play is hyperinflation within the in-game economy, most notably on the lower levels. Because of high demand, many of the superior low-level items are sold for many times their formal worth as quoted by Blizzard. This especially applies to rare items like the Mindthrust Bracers mentioned above, making such gear nearly impossible to obtain for players who do not have wealthy, high-level characters as sugar daddies for their low-level characters. The high prices are one of the reasons why players try to acquire more virtual money through illicit channels, which enables them to compete, including the so-called Real-Money Trade (RMT) – buying virtual money with real money. Injecting virtual money bought from external sources into the game world makes competition with twinkers even more difficult for newcomers. Hyperinflation caused by high-level characters using their fairly earned (as in: earned through play) in-game money to buy low-level items for their low-level characters is an unavoidable result of the MMORPG's design – there are no rules preventing players from bestowing luxuries on their low-level characters. External causes of hyperinflation, like the Real-Money Trade, results in game balancing issues unwanted by the game's design team, providing them with enough reasons to fight RMT activities on the level of game contracts. Throughout the years, Blizzard has closed thousands of accounts and removed many millions worth of gold from *World of Warcraft*'s realms, all the while reminding the player community that 'selling *World of Warcraft* content, such as gold, items, and characters, can result in

a permanent ban' (2006a). More on the effects of RMT, as well as an analysis of RMT-related breaches of game contract, will feature in chapter twelve.

A fascination for those players wanting to spend so much money on such a low-level item urged me not only to investigate twinking further but eventually to become a twink myself. Much of the money (be it virtual and/or real) spent on rare twink items appeared to be targeted at a very particular kind of twinking dedicated to PvP. Battleground twinks are exclusively designed to be used in *World of Warcraft*'s battlegrounds, one of the main venues for dedicated PvP competition and thus group play activities. I call them battleground twinks in this case study in order to make the distinction between them and regular twinks clear. Among *World of Warcraft* players, the battleground twink has become the defining form of twinking due to its popularity and notoriety. I decided Brikk should become a battleground twink too, because I wanted to know why players injected so much virtual money into these twinks, what the perceived and actual rewards are for twinkers, and how the practices of twinking allow players to gain agency over the game and over other players in ways normal play would not.

Going for the easy kill

Up to this point, I have described twinking primarily as a form of hyperproductive deviance, a way to increase agency with a low-level character using the possibilities of the game's design. Battleground twinking, however, is far more counterproductive and destructive in its deviance. To understand why this form of twinking has become so popular, and where the counterproductive and destructive tendencies come from, I will first explain some of the basic battleground mechanics within Blizzard's design as well as the main tactics of battleground twinking. By doing so, I will make clear how battleground twinking allows players to exercise control over the game's design and over other players.

In battlegrounds, groups of loosely organized players face each other in short matches. To prevent high-level characters from facing (less powerful) low-level characters battlegrounds matches are subdivided into level groups. For instance, all players between levels twenty and twenty-nine are grouped to face only opponents of those same levels. As soon as you reach level thirty, you must fight in the thirty-to-thirty-nine group, also called a "bracket". The players who have reached the highest level have their own top-level brackets, preventing these strong characters from playing against "younger" characters that are still in the process of leveling up. *World of Warcraft* is designed as a system to prevent destructive deviance like ganking easy-to-kill, low-level characters and to ensure that most players will be active in the higher level brackets, using their highest-level characters.

Another game design element important to the battleground twinking discussion is the idea that you need to put in some effort to get the best rewards. In

World of Warcraft, the very best gear is only attainable through highly demanding group play forms such as raiding or Arena PvP. For many players who do not have the time or interest in such play forms, the best gear in the game remains out of their reach. Such players have no chance against the players who wear a full set of "epic" gear. For some players, especially those who just enjoy dominating other players in combat, this is frustrating and even unfair. Even if they would have the same skills as those players with top-notch gear, they would in many cases still lose due to the sharp increase in attributes like health, agility and resilience that comes with epic gear. It becomes a situation of stats over skill, which is difficult if not impossible to overcome without investing a considerable amount of time. At this level, even RMT cannot help, as most of the best gear is not available through the auction house – you *must* earn it through regular play.

Like most forms of deviance, player agency is at stake. But with battleground twinking, it is not about exercising control on the level of game design but achieving more agency on the level of game play. Frustrated players looking for ways to be more successful in PvP combat without having to compete with the best of the best high-level players can look down to the lower-level battleground brackets. Players can start a new character that they level up to the maximum level within such a bracket (for instance, level nineteen within the ten-to-nineteen bracket). They should, however, be careful not to engage in any play practices that might earn their newly created battleground twink experience points. This might result in the twink leveling up to the next bracket, where they would once more be the weakest character on the battleground. Next comes the actual twinking, which is accomplished by outfitting the characters with the finest gear and magical enhancements achievable at that level, for example by using the money from their higher-level "sugar daddies". In 2006, the year I created and primarily played my twink, the twinked characters were mostly rogues or hunters – highly popular twink classes due to their ability to inflict abundant amounts of damage in quick succession. The result is a character that not only out-levels the lower-level characters in the bracket but also out-gears characters of the same level.

Battleground twinks are both hard to kill and lethal for non-twinks, which means they are vastly superior to non-twinks. Admittedly, the sensation of dominating the battlefield was highly enjoyable, even though I could often sense the frustration of non-twink players present. Sometimes players from the opposing team would use "emotes" to make clear that they did not like my presence. During some matches, entire groups of non-twinks chased me down to kill me after I killed them several times. However, non-twinks were not the only characters I faced. On the contrary: in the many battlegrounds in which Brikk took part, I seldom if ever encountered a situation in which I was the only twink. Usually, both sides had several twinks among their ranks, and at the end of each round, twinks usually scored the highest (most kills, most flags captured, etc.).

The ambiguous nature of twinking has led many players, including those who have twinks themselves, to label it a condemnable activity; many players will not admit they twinked a character and if they do, they tend to use a defensive tone. Take, for instance, this "coming out" posting on the official forums calling out to "lay off the twinks":

> I have no shame whatsoever in admitting that I have a twink alt, but I would like to ask the WoW community to stop automatically assuming all twinks are selfish b@stards. I twink FOR FUN, and because it's the only way to survive in [battlegrounds]. [...] Please at least stop to ask yourself what kind of player I am before you automatically assume I'm some heartless demon-spawn (posted by "Peregrine", 13 January 2007).

Other players responded with everything ranging from anger ('Twinks are losers who were picked last in gym class, and cheating to win a video game makes them feel superior for once in their lives', posted by "Browny") to qualification ('Hardly cheating... just not playing fair', posted by "Marlae") to support ('I don't twink myself, but I don't think it's wrong to twink either. It's about trying to get an upper hand in things', posted by "Selmack"). Remarkably but not unexpectedly, many players entering the more heated twinking discussions in defense of the practice do so anonymously rather than with their main characters – they want to have their say within these negotiation processes but seem to shy away from potential repercussions.

From my experience, dealing with twinks on a battlefield involves a certain degree of hypocrisy. While I could feel the irritation from opposing players during play and read many angry chats among my team members about twinks on the other team, I seldom received a negative remark from a member of my own team about the fact that I was a twink. Mortensen nicely sums up this contradiction: 'while everybody hates meeting twinks in the battlegrounds, having them on your side is not a social stigma, but a nice convenience' (2006a). As a result, whether deviance is destructive or not is certainly in the eye of the beholder.

Even though players tend to accept or at least tolerate twinks when they are on their side, battleground twinking is not what most players consider to be the social norm for experienced players. Using his player types (Killers, Achievers, Explorers and Socializers), game designer Richard Bartle sees a main sequence of change that an average player goes through over time in MUDs and MMORPGs:

> Players typically start off testing the immediate bounds of their behavior (killer), then begin to acquire knowledge of their environment (explorer); following this, they apply their knowledge (achiever), in the course of which they

> forge bonds with other players; finally, they retire and spend their time chatting with their friends (socializer) (2004: 165).

Bartle explains killers in terms of wanting to dominate other players. Battleground twinks, being oriented towards PvP combat, can be placed within this category.[69] Whether or not Bartle's evolutionary sequence is entirely applicable to *World of Warcraft* in general, the practice of battleground twinking seems to offer some contradiction. Dominating other players, not socializing with them, is the endpoint for these characters. Having achieved a firm understanding of the game world and its rules (ie. having leveled up to the maximum level capacity), creating a twink character purely for PvP combat in battlegrounds means using your knowledge and in-game wealth to actively (but nonetheless often covertly) return to killer status.

Besides being a potential form of destructive deviance, battleground twinks are unique amongst their twinking peers for being counterproductive, at least in Mortensen's meaning of counterproductive deviance as deviating from the plans of the game designers (2008: 208). In terms of social deviance, battleground twinking is not just destructive but can also be considered counterproductive. The reason for this is not just the social stigma that is attached to twinking but also the simple fact that battleground twinks do not level up beyond their chosen level bracket. Battleground twinking is not only a form of individualized group play by choice but also by necessity; all non-twink characters they meet during PvP combat eventually do level up, making sustained social contact difficult. Battleground twinks meeting and befriending other twinks is not unheard of, and I encountered several twink-only guilds while researching this case study. Nevertheless, most twinks I met on my server had little interest in socializing with other twinks.[70] Battleground twinking then is a negotiation process, where twinkers gain agency over other players within an individualized group context that, to a large degree, prevents sustained social interaction. For twinkers, this is not a loss but is rather intentional.

The effects of the individualized group play approach is felt not just socially but also instrumentally. Battlegrounds usually have goals that are best achieved by working together, but in most situations, twinks only opt for seeking out and destroying as much of the opposition as possible, either in small groups or alone and without much interest in shared goals. Communication during these battlegrounds is almost always limited to short messages concerning battleground objectives, the occasional insults ('l2p noob!!!') or congratulatory remarks ('gg', 'gj', 'owned!!!').[71] In several cases Brikk was even called back from achieving a battleground goal too rapidly, as a quick victory would mean less kills and thus less fun for the other twinks (non-twinks usually did not mind winning the round swiftly, especially when they were constantly being victimized by twinks).

Another effect of counterproductive deviance through battleground twinking relates to the experience of the game as a whole. By optimizing a character for a specific level rather than the endgame content the game has to offer, battleground twinking is a play practice that creates an endgame situation in what Blizzard (and most players) consider the mid-game. In the next section, I show how counterproductive deviance is preceded by a more hyperproductive approach to playing, where players construct game goals where none are intended by Blizzard and standardize character customization in a game designed around diversity.

A game within a game

As explained earlier, MMORPGs are a complex type of game, as they do not fit the typical definition of what constitutes a game. They are intrinsically open-ended, while the common conception of what defines a game is, amongst other things, a quantifiable outcome. While players can achieve quantifiable outcomes through questing, finishing instances or winning or losing a battleground match, these outcomes are only temporary and fleeting; there are always new quests to accomplish and other goals to set.

By creating an endgame situation mid-game, battleground twinking does actively pursue a quantifiable outcome. Battleground twinkers want to gather the very best gear possible without passing a certain level threshold (which would make them "lose" their particular game) enabling them to then stay there indefinitely, repeating the same play ad infinitum. I am not arguing here that battleground twinking transforms *World of Warcraft* into a classical game. What I do argue is that by creating a quantifiable outcome, battleground twinking heavily deviates from the MMORPG's overall design, because these battleground twink characters will never see the endgame as Blizzard intended.

The process of deviance starts long before a battleground twink is "finished", which is the moment a twink can no longer acquire better gear and nothing is left but to hone their PvP skills in the battlegrounds. Starting a battleground twink requires the use of certain tactics that need to be deployed strategically in order for the twink to be optimized, some of which I will discuss using Brikk's evolution as an example. Brikk had already surpassed level nineteen shortly after I came into possession of the Mindthrust Bracers, so twinking within the ten-to-nineteen bracket was no longer possible. I therefore decided to turn Brikk into a dedicated level twenty-nine battleground twink and began to read up on twinking on the many websites and forum discussions dedicated to twinking. It was soon clear that I had to approach twinking carefully. Twinking did not (only) mean hawking the auction house for those perfect rare items in order to be able to purchase them for reasonable prices (read: reasonable for twinks). Some of the most coveted twink gear items could only be obtained by undertaking quests. But each time you defeat a monster within the game world or finish a quest, your

character earns experience points or XP and increasing XP means increasing levels and therefore constitutes a danger to aspiring twinkers. As a result, minimizing Brikk's XP gain became key while his level crept up to level twenty-nine; too much XP and he would suddenly and irrevocably reach level thirty. While a regular character can just kill mobs and do as many quests as he likes – for them, all XP is more than welcome – a twinker by definition must plan his way carefully through quests.

Blizzard's design of an open, emergent world where more XP is better is challenged by the approach above, where minimizing XP gain while maximizing rewards forces a player to severely narrow his or her range of possibilities. They turn the MMORPG from a game of emergence with selected moments of progression, the main structure of MMORPGs according to Juul (2005: 72), into a game of progression with less and less moments of emergence. Creating a battleground twink is therefore similar to following a power-leveling walkthrough. In fact, a plethora of player-created twinking walkthroughs that assist you through the process is available for every class.

When all self-imposed goals (like gathering the best twink gear) are met and the ideal twink is created, the practice of battleground twinking changes once more, this time into a game of pure emergence. As battleground twinks do nothing more than endlessly repeat the same battlegrounds again and again, progress between rounds is limited. One could say that gaining skill is a form of progress, but against non-twinks, skill does not matter much – battleground twinks are built to easily dominate for a specific reason. Both game structures – progression with only some emergent elements and pure emergence – are far removed from the non-twinking experience that *World of Warcraft* offers as its dominant, main strategy.

The process of creating a twink, then, is both hyperproductive and destructive in its deviance and its efforts to gain agency. By using a transgression of the game's intended design to dominate other players while at the same time presenting players with counterproductive deviance (at least in the eyes of non-twinkers), it limits the game to a select group of practices and ultimately halts progress towards the higher levels. Within this battlefield of negotiation, there is one type of stakeholder that has not yet been included: other battleground twinks. Players who build and enter battlegrounds with their twinks are not just negotiating with Blizzard's design and non-twink players but, as I will show next, also need to deal with their peers on the level of game play.

In the form of standardization, battleground twinking introduces another quantifiable outcome that deviates from *World of Warcraft*'s open-ended design. While Blizzard has always continued to add new content to the endgame through patches and expansion packs, relatively few of these changed the mid-game in terms of new content and gear, at least not during the time I was active as a twink player. This meant that it became possible to draw up relatively stable lists of the

best gear and gear enhancements attainable at every top bracket level, and for each class. Placed within strategy guides and walkthroughs created by and for twinkers, these lists form the starting point of the planning phase of gathering the gear discussed above. Such guides not only provide the best tools to plan and execute the collecting phase of twinking, they also initiate standardization amongst twinks of each class. And when there is only one set of "ultimate" gear, all dedicated twinks eventually wield and wear the same items. For my level twenty-nine shaman Brikk, it became a matter of following such guides and checking the acquired items off the lists until the ultimate set of weaponry and clothing had been collected. A truly ultimate set which every twink of a certain class and level owns remains more hypothetical than realistic, because in reality some items are just too rare for everyone to possess, even for twinks and their wealthy owners. Different preferences in play style also lead to a diversity of worn gear. Nonetheless, the dedicated twinks whom I met on the battlegrounds consistently wore roughly the same gear.

The result of the standardization of battleground twinks is that skill is the main factor for winning in PvP situations against similarly optimized twinks, thus lessening the agency that players have against other twinks in terms of dominative power. While most fights against one (or more) non-twinks usually resulted in quick victories, especially when level differences were present, one-on-one fights against other twinks became tests of skill and endurance. This is what the fully twinked Brikk encountered many times over when he began fighting in the battlegrounds. Through the shaman class' ability to self-heal, one-on-one battles between Brikk and other healing-enabled twinks therefore could last minutes rather than seconds.

Fighting equally powerful twinks might seem to go against the notion that twinks characters are made to overpower other players. For some twinkers, gear standardization however provides a form of play which, for a long time, was not really present in the game. Clashes of super-strong, evenly powerful twinks were among the few moments in *World of Warcraft* where winning or losing a duel with another player is purely a result of skill rather than gear or level. The game is designed for diversity and variety among characters and the items they wear and use, granting players the ability to be unique. By taking the uniqueness of characters away by standardizing customization, battleground twinkers deviate from this concept of variety. Over the years, Blizzard has introduced dedicated PvP content on higher levels, creating similar situations of equality and standardization. However, due to the new end-game content that is constantly being added, players interested in these high-level items need to keep working for it to stay on top. Battleground twinks, on the other hand, offer a relatively fixed form of standardization. The true benefit of equally itemized twinks – skill being the primary and decisive factor for victory – was nevertheless hardly visible within the battlegrounds. Even when twinks had the upper hand, fights rarely took the form of

twink-only duels (usually, fights are chaotic, many-vs-many affairs). In theory, battleground twinks are nevertheless unique in their ability to exhibit skill over gear or level.

As with many of the examples throughout this book, my participatory observations of twinking practices in the *World of Warcraft* community are situated and subjective. Additionally, it also presents a snapshot of *World of Warcraft*'s evolution. Taking an active part in a deviant play practice that some players would even consider cheating allowed me to investigate ongoing negotiations concerning agency over the game and over other players as well as the impact these negotiations have for the game in general. Since the period in which I participated in the game as a battleground twink to create this case study, the possibilities for twinking changed remarkably. With patch 2.3 (November 2007), for instance, Blizzard introduced newly improved items to the old, low-level instances, including gear seemingly dedicated directly to battleground twinks. By doing so, Blizzard not only acknowledged the popularity of twinking but also institutionalized it in *World of Warcraft*'s official core design. And not without reason: the results of a 2008 survey conducted by a website dedicated to twinking indicated that 70% of respondents spent more than 50% of their time playing their twinks, with 20% even spending more than 90% of their time. Two-thirds of all twinks said they did so in a dedicated twink guild (Drayner 2009). In other words, battleground twinking changed from a somewhat controversial activity into a viable, even socially-oriented alternative to "normal" play.

Twinking's evolutionary changes show that what is considered counterproductive and even destructive deviance can – through popular demand, persistent presence and acknowledgement by Blizzard – turn into part of *World of Warcraft*'s core use as intended by the game's design team. This process of normalization, however, does not necessarily imply widespread acceptance of twinking among *World of Warcraft*'s community. It is conceivable that Blizzard simply recognized the popularity of the practice itself within the battlegrounds, which triggered the company to make it an institutionalized part of the game – whether players like it or not. Either way, what we encounter here is a battlefield of negotiation concerning power relations between players which ultimately led to an evolutionary change of the game itself.

This chapter has investigated twinking from several viewpoints, including its relation to virtual money, its dominance-oriented nature, the way it interferes with intended MMORPG design and how it standardizes a game that arguably is all about diversity. My aim is not to claim or pretend that these practices totally change the way twinkers experience their game. Being the result of luxury play, a battleground twink is rarely a player's main character, at least not during the period in *World of Warcraft*'s history when I was playing my twink. Having a battleground twink was like having an expensive hobby, while the locus of the game experience still took place at high levels, in the endgame content. Twinking is an

activity pursued as a diversion or variation in the overall play experience. What we can say is that twinking points to the fact that a considerable number of players choose a form of play activity diverging from socially accepted forms of group play. In more than one sense, twinking is a form of transformative play that provides an entirely new way of approaching play within a MMORPG, as most of the intended design led by emergent variation is replaced by a very limited form of play aiming for a clear, quantifiable outcome. In a certain way, twinkers seem to play a "game within a game" that they have created for themselves by diverging from the norm.

In the next and final chapter of this section of the book, I focus on a play practice that, while less controversial, is also about gaining agency over other players. It deals, however, primarily with gaining agency over the game itself. Having dealt with individual and individualized group play in the first and second cases, I will now turn to group play and introduce one of the most dedicated forms of instrumental play – raiding – in which a major part of the deviating practice is the creation and use of performance-enhancing user interface (UI) modifications.

11: Playing the Interface

The user interface or UI represents one of most flexible parts of *World of Warcraft* in terms of what players are able to manipulate or add to the game. Players can, to a certain extent, manipulate the looks of *World of Warcraft*'s native graphical user interface and therefore their window onto the world of Azeroth. Additionally, *World of Warcraft*'s application programming interface or API is set up to allow a certain level of access to the game's library, enabling the retrieval and – through UI modification – visualization of a large variety of data normally hidden from view. By using the appropriate UI modification, also called UI mod or add-on, players can, for instance, scan the in-game auction house to compile a pricing information database or collect information about player performance for comparison purposes. Some UI mods are relatively simple and coded by individuals, while others are large projects with groups of players writing and updating its code.

World of Warcraft's UI modding scene plays an important role in the game's participatory culture, as players have much freedom to manipulate the existing user interface to improve or enrich their play experience, a freedom they do not have in relation to the instrumental rules and structures or within the fictional world of Azeroth. T.L. Taylor warns us, however, that we should not consider the participatory nature and use of UI modding as being 'free, utopic, non-hierarchical, or unfettered' (2008: 188). Control still exists, both on the level of game contract (Blizzard has an extensive "UI Add-On Development Policy" giving Blizzard the means to allow and block add-ons as it sees fit) and, as I show in this case study, on the level of game play.[72] What is at stake here is ultimate control over the game's mechanisms to attain the most optimized forms of instrumental performance. In contrast with the previous two chapters, the deviant practices investigated here are dedicated to group play, showing that players are not just gaining more agency over the game but willingly subjecting themselves to new levels of social control in the process.

Dedicated instrumental group play in the form of raiding is such a demanding enterprise for those involved that UI mods have become more compulsory than optional. The harder the goal is, the more effort is required to get the right team together, which then needs to function in perfect unison in order to succeed. According to the more dedicated raiding groups, without modifications, the basic

user interface of the game lacks the tools to smoothly organize the players involved and manage the data streams of the ensuing battle. Through UI modification, not only does the user interface during raiding become more conveniently arranged, using UImods also results in voluntary social surveillance. As I argue in this chapter, the use of UI mods as monitoring tools is not merely limited to interplayer surveillance. Players actively engage in "theorycrafting", a practice supported by UI modification, with the goal of penetrating *World of Warcraft*'s hidden instrumental apparatus but also because it has the potential to result in a transformative play experience I call interface play.[73]

Mandatory modification

Because I decided that raiding should be part of my research into *World of Warcraft* in late 2005, I become a semi-active member of a raid guild. By semi-active I mean that I did not participate in the guild's main raid team. Instead, I joined raids whenever there was a vacancy for a newcomer like me. My first experience with the use of raiding-oriented mods, however, was not through using them but actually by forgetting to use them correctly. At one point I joined my guild in the Molten Core, at that time the hardest raiding instance of the game, requiring forty players to efficiently win. I registered my character on our guild's web forum to be able to take part in a "run" (a visit to a dungeon). I prepared by buying some fire-resistant gear and potions (after consulting some dungeon strategy guides, I learned that some of the monsters in the Molten Core will fry you instantly without fire resistance), and I made sure I was online with my character on time. I was invited to the raid party by the leader and started to make my way to the entrance of the Molten Core raid dungeon, buried deep below the Blackrock Mountain. I was all ready to go when I received a message from the raid leader asking if my "CTRA" was malfunctioning. I quickly realized what he meant. The full name of the UI mod the raid leader was referring to is called CT_RaidAssist, and although I did not exactly know how it worked yet, I knew it was important for raiding so I had actually installed it some weeks earlier. The problem was that a new version had come out during the intervening weeks, making my version outdated and dysfunctional. A quick reinstall could not prevent the fact that I was now late for the start of our run and, moreover, I had let down the raid leader and the rest of the raid team who needed to wait for me. A similar event happened a few months later. While I did not register for a run, I happened to be online when the guild had an empty slot to fill on a raid to the Blackwing Lair dungeon, which had just been released by Blizzard through a patch. I offered my services but this time, because I did not have the required add-ons installed properly, I was simply denied access.

The main reason my raid guild insisted I install certain UI mods was not necessarily to improve *my* performance but to improve the performance of the raid

group as a whole. The CT_RaidAssist mod, for instance, enables players to view the health status of all other raid members through the interface (*World of Warcraft*'s own interface is limited to showing only five other characters). It is part of a collection of raiding mods called CTMod (Cide & TS 2005) and, being the first to offer such raid-dedicated modifications, it set the 'gold standard for raid add-ons' (Gilbert & Whitehead II: 174). Raiding add-ons like the CTMod collection makes organizing and running a large group of people easier for its leader(s) to monitor the activity (or lack thereof) of each player. According to one of CTMod's creators, himself a raid-leader, the mod was created to make the job of leading a raid easier and smoother (Breckon 2007; Taylor 2008: 197). Not just the leader but every player is able to see the status of all other members in the raid group. If someone is not using CTRA, everyone instantly notices. A simple glance at CT_RaidAssist's interface frames was enough for the guild leader I mentioned above to see that I was not prepared; I simply did not show up correctly in his add-on's display.

In Taylor's work on raiding communities, where she encountered similar mod-related situations, she points out that 'because these tools have been refined through repeated use and iterative development and are widely adopted', they 'act as strong normative agents', a form of social coercion dictating how the game should be played (2008: 195). In fact, on most raid guild websites and forums I visited, it is stated that the installation of a certain set of UI mods is simply mandatory. Installing UI mods to manipulate the game's standard design is something you cannot escape from when you want to join a raid. Having add-ons like CT_RaidAssist installed is not seen as optional but as a precondition: without them, you simply cannot participate in these forms of group play.

A raiding mod like CT_RaidAssist does not just dictate the norms for play (you have to install them in order to participate), they also create a system of social control. Taylor speaks of raiding groups working with 'an extensive network of tools and functions that consistently monitor, surveil, and report at the micro level a variety of aspects of player behavior' (2008: 191). In *World of Warcraft* raiding guilds, people behave a certain way – ie. are conditioned – because they know other players might be watching and judging them, a situation which, as Taylor points out, is often thought of in terms of philosopher Michel Foucault's view of Jeremy Bentham's panopticon (1995) where people subjugate and discipline themselves without the need for or presence of a faceless oppressor or bureaucratic system.

Taylor is quick to add that 'we need to shade our understanding of surveillance a bit and consider the ways players readily adopt and enjoy what these tools afford' (2006b: 14). The widespread use of UI mods like CTMod certainly suggest that players do not mind the potentially negative side of participatory social surveillance, as it helps them to excel in ways that would not have been possible without raiding mods. Social surveillance does not limit their freedom as much as it empowers them (Albrechtslund 2008). We must remember that using UI

mods remains voluntary, even if it has become standard protocol for raiding. A link can be made here to media scholar Alexander Galloway's discussion of computer protocol in which he points out that "proven success in the marketplace generally predates the creation of a [voluntary] standard. The behaviour is emergent, not imposed" (Galloway 2004: 128). Like the computer protocols Galloway discusses, the distributed and voluntarily nature of the social protocols surrounding UI mods (rather than centralized and imposed by Blizzard) evokes what French philosopher Gilles Deleuze calls a society of control (1995), the historical follow-up of Foucault's disciplinary society. And, explains Galloway, "while protocol may be more democratic than the panopticon in that it strives to eliminate hierarchy, it is still very much structured around command and control" (2004: 13). We can see this in the way that UI modification had been standardized as a precondition as well as in the way that raid leaders can monitor and if needed react to players who, in their eyes, misbehave or underperform.

The way in which the raiding community has shaped the use of certain UI mods as a precondition for both membership as well as interaction has become one of the defining features of raiding customs and practices within *World of Warcraft*'s larger game culture. As game researcher Mark Chen shows in his in-depth study of a raiding community, just installing modifications is, however, not enough to become a raider, let alone an expert one. It requires access to raiding culture through active, social involvement which builds up the required social and cultural capital. 'Without this access', Chen asserts, 'a player is ignorant of emerging raiding and non-raiding norms and the details of their dynamic social and material practice' (Chen 2011: 168). When I was alerted to the fact that I did not have the required UI mod installed, I was reminded that, at this point, I had clearly not gained access yet. Another raiding practice I was not yet familiarized with at this point was another form of data monitoring that had less to do with social surveillance and more with analyzing the game itself. As I will show in the next section, the affordances that Blizzard has provided in terms of data library access has fuelled players' interest in the inner workings of the game itself, as players try to gain agency over the hidden algorithms at the core of the game's code to enhance game play performance.

Controlling code through theorycrafting

While UI mods like CT_RaidAssist are well suited for live in-game monitoring, many guilds prefer to capture and analyze the data streams and to evaluate their performances afterwards. Blizzard actually allows players to log a large variety of different combat data by typing in the "/combatlog" command into the game's chat window. Combat data is then saved in a simple text file in one of the game's folders. Recognizing the popularity of data monitoring and analysis among hardcore raiders as an important part of building and sharing expertise about the

complexity of the raiding experience, Blizzard has continued to expand the possibilities of *World of Warcraft*'s internal combat log system, allowing both a larger range of data tracking options as well as allowing player-produced UI mods to access more data in an easier fashion.[74] Using Blizzard's combat log data, players can export their performance – or better said, an abstract, quantified version of their performance – and upload them to a variety of websites dedicated to data log analysis such as wowwebstats.com or worldoflogs.com. On such sites, players can analyze raid activities, for example an attack on a particular instance boss, per class types (tank/healer/dps), per class (warrior, hunter, priest, etc.), per individual player, per attack type (melee, class-based ranged attacks, etc.) and so on.

While most of these sites offer the possibility of keeping data private to a player's own guild members, many guilds open up their performance data for all to see. This performance exhibitionism, where data recorded in the relatively private sphere of a raid is made publicly available, again shows that many players do not consider social surveillance an issue. In fact, top guilds can use data analysis sites alongside video recordings to showcase their skill and expertise outside of the boundaries of the game.

The possibilities for extensive data analysis in games have fuelled the practice of "theorycrafting" which, according to the most used *World of Warcraft* wiki, is 'the attempt to mathematically analyze game mechanics in order to gain a better understanding of the inner workings of the game'.[75] Many websites, blogs and forums are dedicated in part or in whole to theorycrafting. In most cases, theorycrafting aims to understand the inner mechanics of individual classes and the way their offensive or defensive methods can be optimized as well as how they benefit optimally from "buffs", beneficial spells or other effects received from other classes. While the first form of optimization might benefit individual play (like solo-killing difficult mobs), as well as individualized group play (like twinking, or PvP in general), the latter aims to optimize coordinated group play such as raiding. Theorycrafting, or 'rule mining' as Mortensen also refers to the practice, is thus one of the most hyperproductive, instrumental efforts to understand *World of Warcraft*'s inner algorithms, a part of participatory culture aimed directly at breaking down the barriers of game design that hide the official rules of play (2010: 80).

While I will not post actual theorycraft calculations here, the following list of steps from a hunter class-oriented fan site will suffice in demonstrating the extreme efforts some players go through to optimize their performance through data analysis and theorycrafting:

> **Sniff Test:** First thing is just to look at stuff and determine which [class and character abilities] won't make the cut. If something increases my health by 10%, I know that won't have any impact on my dps. This is also the stage

where I sit around for a while and try to think up clever ways to take advantage of abilities, or combinations of abilities.

Paper Napkin Theorycraft: The next step is I do some crude and simple calculations to see approximately where things stand. If there was something that was on the fence on the sniff test, I'll go ahead and eliminate it if it sucks at this stage. Mostly I'm determining what order to test in. This step is often done while driving.

Collect Data: Next step is a whole ton of target dummy testing to collect my baseline data for stuff like glyphs (dps totals without glyphs, percentage of damage from each shot, stats of each shot, etc.)

Theorycrafting: Then I sit down and do the number crunching. As I've said before, the math here isn't hard. The hard part is setting up your equations to take everything into account. The most common theorycrafting errors come from people who just set up their equations wrong so they double up on something, or leave something out. This is Data Point 1.

Testing: Next is the really really painful part of actually testing in-game. I do testing on the target dummy, because it is the only perfectly controlled environment we have (assuming no one else is attacking it). I usually do this with raid buffs. This is Data Point 2.

Spreadsheet Checking: I also plug the data into a spreadsheet and see what it has to say. This is Data Point 3.

Now I have three data points to compare. If they all agree, then it's easy to smile and say my work is done; however, if one of them disagrees, then it's time to go back and try to find out why one is wrong. I could have made an error in my Theorycrafting – it happens. The spreadsheet could be wrong – it happens a decent amount. The in-game data could actually be wrong, too! Perhaps the presence of raid buffs would radically alter the result, rather than scale it across all options evenly. That also must be investigated (Frostheim 2009).

Such approaches to data analysis and theorycrafting might not provide an entirely trustworthy interpretation of the game's mechanics; however, they do show players where they are lagging behind and, more importantly, where and how they can improve. By collecting data through add-ons and using guides and spreadsheets for theorycrafting, players aim to gain more agency over the game's mechanics that are otherwise hidden from view.

In the negotiation process that is theorycrafting, perceived agency over the game is at least partly imagined, and Blizzard likes to keep it this way. By implementing unknown and random elements into combat mechanics, Blizzard refuses to let theorycrafters attain full knowledge of the game's core algorithms. As Blizzard's lead systems designer Greg "Ghostcrawler" Street pointed out in a forum discussion on a theorycraft issue:

> We like for players to experiment with gear, talents and the like. Having black boxes adds depth and a sense of exploration to the game. When everything is known with certainty, you can do things like definitively know the best choice in every situation, theorycrafting is dead. (posted on the US forums, 17 April 2009).

So while players may use elaborate sniff tests, spreadsheets and calculations to gauge performance with every possible character setup and usable piece of gear, there is no full guarantee that a particular optimized setup is better than another: by design, Blizzard has added black boxes that shield the game's internal calculations from the player.

For players, theorycrafting is 'at the core of *WoW* metagaming, the game outside the game' (Paul 2011), where the aim is to deconstruct *World of Warcraft* down to its bare algorithms. For Blizzard, theorycrafting should remain a game: they know the practice is part of what keeps hardcore players coming back for more. Theorycrafting provides players with never-ending potential for improvement, even if this improvement is barely noticeable in play. While a particular sword may inflict a certain amount of damage on a mob, according to theorycraft spreadsheets there might be another sword which does 0.1% more damage in a certain context. Even with differences this small, instrumentally driven players usually strive to get this "better" axe, even if it means weeks of raiding, and thus a prolonged subscription to the game. As one critical observer keenly blogged, 'theorycraft provides an irresistible carrot to the MMORPG game mechanic stick' (Lewisham 2008). Again, we must not underestimate the advantages and joy that players derive from theorycrafting – whether they do it themselves or make use of other players' calculations and guides. As Mortensen points out:

> If another [player] ends up using your contribution to create a better theory of how the game works, and eventually beats you, he hasn't really won and you haven't really lost. Instead the communal knowledge has grown, and you have both used it, added to it, and learned from it (2010: 88).

As a research method and form of social knowledge production, digital literacy scholars Steinkuehler and Duncan point out, the practice and popularity of theorycrafting can even be said to foster scientific habits of mind in players (Stein-

kuehler & Duncan 2008). As a form of hyperproductive deviance, theorycrafting is not so much devious but an important way to gain and share knowledge about raiding culture as well as a prime way of gaining access to this culture.

As I have shown, the semi-voluntary nature of using UI mods and theorycrafting to gain access to and participate in *World of Warcraft*'s raiding culture results in shifts in control and agency over both other players and the game itself. In the final section of this chapter, however, I focus on how the resulting play practices transform the relationship between the instrumental and the fictional during play. Since I began using UI mods and learning to navigate and learn from theorycrafting guides, my experience of raiding – but also non-raiding play situations – changed noticeably. Judging from my observations of other players and reading forums, my experience was not an exception. Most of the changes I noted had to do with a shift from interacting with what happens in the fictional fantasy world to interacting with the interface.

Exposing the inside

We can argue that *World of Warcraft* is primarily experienced visually through its computer-generated fictional world, the diegetic information, while much of the non-diegetic UI, with all its buttons and data readouts, remains relegated to the periphery of the screen. This is not to say that the non-diegetic is less relevant during play. Even with its emphasis on the fictional world, *World of Warcraft* is no different from other video games (and especially other MMORGPs) in the way that it does not attempt to hide its underlying instrumental data flows. As Galloway expresses, video games rather flaunt the fact that data plays an important role, as game designers know that through this information players understand how a game operates and what it asks them to do (2006: 90-91). The non-diegetic layer constantly communicates key information to the player concerning his or her character and its actions. Most of the information found in the frames and bars of the UI can also be interacted with; clicking on a spell in an action bar results in your character using this spell; right-clicking on a helmet in the backpack-frame results in equipping this helmet. Playing without the UI is nearly impossible.

Installing and using UI modifications, like those for raiding discussed above, add more non-diegetic material which subsequently also moves closer to the centre of the screen due to the limitations of screen space. The non-diegetic cluttering of the screen is not perceived as a drawback of using add-ons per se, as these add-ons *require* attention in the form of constant monitoring of both individual and group performance. Therefore, the non-diegetic becomes even more pronounced during play. In my case, using the add-ons my raiding guild asked me to use meant not just a shift in perceiving the game in terms of the balance between diegetic and non-diegetic elements, it also changed the way I played the

game. In order to arrive at a constant optimal performance, I had to train myself to always keep an eye on the add-on data streams, a habit that also started to influence my play experience when I played individually or in small group formations. It made me interact less with the diegetic world (that which takes place within the fantasy world of Azeroth) and to play more with the interface (the flat layer of data located in front of the fiction).

The emphasis on the non-diegetic that raiding UI mods introduce in play can be so potent that players partly or wholly discount the diegetic world. An add-on like CT_RaidAssist alone adds several new windows to the interface. Instead of acting as pop-ups that are only brought to the front during periods of activity, it is encouraged or even mandatory to have them in view during action because the data streams they show are essential to dedicated instrumental group play. They also allow for quicker and more focused actions in chaotic battles, which can best be explained by a typical raiding situation. As a hunter (a 'dps', or damage-based class type), it was my main job during a raid to aim my bow at whatever target the rest of the group was trying to kill. Usually, one player within a party or raid is responsible for choosing the order of the targets to bring down, a position known as the 'main assist' or MA. Due to the abundance of player characters, non-player characters (NPCs) and monsters on screen at the same time, usually crowded up in one spot, it becomes very difficult to select a target by clicking on it in the game world. Raiding add-ons offer the possibility of simply clicking on an interface button that represents the MA's current target. In order to avoid chaos, you rely more and more on UI interaction (rather than on selecting targets in the fictional space) when you need to select several targets at the same time during combat. Information about ongoing combat events is not only communicated visually through UI mods but in some cases also through audio messages. The Deadly Boss Mods add-on, for instance, sends out audio signals as well as textual warnings to inform the players that a raid dungeon boss is about to unleash a certain spell or attack. This does away with the necessity of paying attention to the actual behaviour of the enemy within the fictional world. What was at first a matter of slaying monsters in gloomy caverns becomes increasingly a matter of clicking abstract boxes and observing UI health bars slowly depleting to zero.

Hence, large-scale, elaborate fights in raid dungeons become a matter of reading, interpreting and interacting with the UI data rather than trying to make sense of what is happening in the fictional world. Being habituated to the use of add-ons during raids also informed my play in individual situations and in small groups, where I began to use my UI data more than before, sometimes even triggering irritation when I witnessed other players underperforming in casual rather than highly instrumental play situations. Like walkthroughs, UI mods are paratextual thresholds: they have the potential to go beyond simply providing additional information to the player; they control one's reading of the game as a whole.

Playing with the interface instead of the fictional world is reminiscent of the types of games, such as wargames and strategy games, out of which MMORPGs such as World of Warcraft evolved (Fine 1983: 5-16). Within these games, fictional worlds may be present but the action of the player exists, as Galloway puts it, on 'an informatic layer once removed from the pretend play scenario of representational character and story' (2006: 14). When non-diegetic player actions take place within the game instead of in non-playable phases such as the setup, they turn into 'gamic actions in which the act of configuration itself *is the very site of gameplay*' (2006: 13, emphasis in original). By doing so, players 'enact the algorithm' instead of enacting a character within a fictional world (2006: 19). This is exactly what raiding in *World of Warcraft* can feel like: like playing the interface *itself*.

Theorycrafting strengthens the feeling that the data streams from UI mods are the primary tool through which to play the game. The often minute results of skills and gear optimization through this form of hyperproductive deviance can only be perceived in action through UI mods. For the instrumentally driven player, getting better statistical results during a boss fight can become as (or even more) important and enjoyable than killing the boss itself. The invention of new individual and group-oriented goals based on data rather than on fictional victories, which shifts the focus of *World of Warcraft*'s diegetic world to its underlying mechanics and data streams, is a typical way to cope with the repetitive nature of raiding, where raid dungeons are 'run' over and over, even when the challenge of beating the bosses has long passed.

While the use of UI mods and theorycrafting practices grant players increased agency over their performance as well as new goals to strive for, the emphasis on data brings with it a de-emphasis on the individual player's (virtual) identity. The heavy use of participatory surveillance and theorycrafting can be seen as part of what Taylor has called the 'relational' orientation of dedicated, instrumentally oriented group players like raiders: 'paying attention to how the competencies of people relate to each other and how they can be coordinated' (2006c: 86). It also evokes an important element of Deleuze's societies of control, which sees its members reduced from individuals to 'dividuals' (1995: 180), becoming, as political scientist Robert Williams explains it, 'endlessly divisible and reducible to data representations via the modern technologies of control, like computer-based systems' (Williams 2005). Players of games like *World of Warcraft* are already represented as game characters, as such replacing the real with a virtual embodiment. Through hyperproductive deviance making use of UI modification and theorycrafting, raiders are stratified even further into abstract, aggregated data representations within and outside of the game.

Recombined, these data representations form the measure by which players are judged. From a social perspective, the increased focus on theorycrafting and the resulting reduction of flexibility and creativity during raiding can result in more

narrow definitions of acceptable play forms during raiding as well as situations where trusting UI mods data readouts becomes prevalent over trusting the actual players generating this data (Chen 2011; Paul 2011). I would add that this process of rationalization and quantification also leads to a shift of focus away from the diegetic, fictional fantasy world to non-diegetic interface play which gives a sense of agency over the game's instrumental core that, real or imaginary, becomes the goal of play in its own right.

Through this and the previous chapters, I have not only shown a development of hyperproductive deviance that moves from individual to individualized group to group play but also demonstrated a decreasing emphasis on the fictional world during play. Using walkthroughs, especially those aimed at power-leveling, replaces the game's emergent narrative structure with a more instrumentally oriented linear progression. Battleground twinkers are hardly concerned with the fictional while they collect the best items to outfit their twink character or engage their opponents in combat. The repetitive nature of raiding, in which bosses are killed many times over, as well as the fact that much of a raider's engagement with the game during a fight takes place on the interface level, makes raiding's relationship with *World of Warcraft*'s fiction ambiguous. In all three chapters, play moves away from the fiction towards a more "bare bones" approach where player practices – both in and outside of the game – engage the inner, instrumental core of the game.

What the past three chapters also show, however, is that tactics of hyperproductive deviance do not free players from control exercised from the perspectives of game design. By manipulating and circumventing the dominant strategies of the game rather than breaking or hacking the rules of the game, players still need to make do with the affordances and limitations of *World of Warcraft*'s core design. I have, for instance, shown how the black boxes shielding the algorithmic core of the game prohibit theorycrafters from gaining full agency over the game's mechanics. Powerlevelers also still use quests as a dominant progression strategy for leveling up, even though they might have no interest in the fiction the quests have to offer. Additionally, while hyperproductive deviance grants players with more (perceived) agency over the game and/or other players, they are still subject to social codes of practice. Players might, for instance, be considered cheats while power-leveling or twinking, which could result in social exclusion by their peers. In the form of participatory surveillance through UI modification, players even add additional layers of control (through surveillance) and limitations of play (through more clearly defined roles and responsibilities) to their overall game experience.

Whether or not players see new socially negotiated forms of control – or the fact that their agency over the game's design is partly illusory – as problematic depends on the stakes of those involved. For most players power-leveling, twink-

ing or theorycrafting, the perceived agency over the game and/or its players weighs more than the potential drawbacks. In any case, the way the game is experienced by those deviating from the dominant design is transformed noticeably, both temporarily (during power-leveling or twinking a character) and potentially indefinitely (habituating interface play).

From a game design perspective, there are also visible transformations. The deviant play strategies in these chapters directly or indirectly led to evolutionary changes in *World of Warcraft*'s formal design. Recognizing the annoyance that slow leveling presented to players who wanted to start new characters, Blizzard has continued to ease the leveling process through patches and expansion packs. The popularity of battleground twinking also resulted in the practice of twinking being institutionalized into the core design through the implementation of twink-oriented items on the lower levels. Similarly, many of the tools and affordances provided by raiding mods eventually found their way into *World of Warcraft*'s native user interface, thereby making some player-created mods redundant. In such cases of adaptation and appropriation, what once was hyperproductive deviance becomes an official part of the game. Such evolutionary changes are as a much part of the outcome of battlefields of negotiation as the altered forms of agency and control that players themselves experience.

Whereas in this section of the book, most acts of defiance and deviance took place between players and between players and the game, in the following final set of chapters I will look at examples in and around the game that will include Blizzard not just indirectly (through game design) but also more directly. We will see the company engage with players on creative, legal, and managerial levels of engagement, showing battlefields of negotiation at its most complex.

Part IV
Claiming the Game

In this final part of the book, "Claiming the Game", I set out to investigate play practices and other forms of participatory practices that exist in the marginal grey areas of what is possible or allowed within – and with – *World of Warcraft*. Again, the examples presented throughout the coming chapters feature players who, through practices diverging from the intended use of the game or by judging other players playing the game differently, try to make the game their own. What is added here is an extra layer in the form of the activities of Blizzard Entertainment and its employees as they try to manage the player community. Through these activities, the following chapters provide insight into how far players are allowed to go in their efforts to claim the game through the various negotiation processes. As such, the main question in this part of the book is not just how different stakeholders situate themselves in issues concerning control, agency and ownership but also how they are *allowed* to situate themselves in these matters.

The notions of individual play, individualized group play and group play practices reappear throughout these chapters. Because most of the battlefields of negotiation discussed here take place on a meta-level of interaction with the game – not only inside but also outside of the game – the distinction between instrumental and free play will, however, receive less emphasis. Attention to practices taking place outside of the game world allows for a clearer understanding that the boundaries of play are not set by the game's design but by its use and through social negotiation – what is and what is not part of the game depends on the stakeholders and the stakes they set. As one would expect from a commercial company, Blizzard does not always agree with players on these boundaries, especially when it considers that the sustained success of its game is in danger.

The case study presented in chapter twelve deals with the ever more permeable boundaries between virtual worlds and the real world as both players and Blizzard attach monetary and affective value to game items that are not just used and traded but also sold – for real money – and stolen. Chapter thirteen focuses on creative productions made by players. It investigates the production of machinima, animations made through the game's engine, and examines their position

as both welcome cultural objects and potentially destructive forces. As such, it deals with the fine line between "good" and "bad" appropriation within creative negotiation processes. In the final chapter of this section, I deal with battlefields of negotiation relating to the management and governance of the player base following a case of community breakdown after a new content patch was introduced to the game. It shows the affordances and limitations the game (both in terms of design and contracts) provides for community self-management.

The negotiation processes discussed in these three chapters relate to money, creativity and community, which cover a wide spectrum of play norms and values under negotiation. While different in approach and topic, the examples in these chapters all push the concept of battlefields of negotiation to a level that shows how claims about what the game is and how it should be played are not just grounded in social negotiation processes but also in legal contracts. By investigating not just the socially but also the contractually negotiated boundaries of *World of Warcraft*, the affordances – but most notably the limitations – of the MMORPG's participatory culture become more pronounced.

12: Virtual Thievery

This chapter tells the story of how I was banned, for a short period of time, from playing *World of Warcraft* due to allegedly taking part in illegal activities, with "illegal" here being defined as contravening the rules set by Blizzard in the contractual documents accompanying the game. In reality, I was actually a victim of "virtual crime" – an awkwardly dual status of being both perpetrator and victim. I encountered firsthand what happens when a player collides with the legal side of *World of Warcraft*, a part of the game most players will not even notice after they click 'I agree' after installing the software. The aim of this chapter, however, is to show not just my encounters with virtual law but also the battlefields of negotiation that surround the reason I became entangled in these problems in the first place. This is an investigation of the trading of real-world money for virtual currency or other virtual services, a form of trading that is highly controversial not just on a legal level but on a community level as well, because it significantly alters the way the game can be played.

Play, work or crime

In late April 2008 I received a phone call from a friend and fellow guild member in Sweden. This immediately struck me as awkward, given that our communication was customarily conducted through email and in-game chat, and there are charges attached to calling from Sweden to the Netherlands. The reason she called was to ask a question: had I been online in the game that day? My answer was no; I had become a father just a week before, so playing *World of Warcraft* had not been on the menu for some time. She replied that she had been expecting this answer – my guild was aware that I had become a parent – and informed me that she and other guild members had still seen several of my characters online during that day performing all kinds of irregular and strange things. My characters did not reply to any in-game messages or other forms of communications when prompted. Worse still, some of my characters had been actively absconding with large numbers of valuable items from the guild's bank.

It did not take me long to understand that my account had been compromised. And indeed, after I hung up the phone and tried to log into the game I found that my password had been changed, preventing me from reaching my characters. I

quickly ran all the virus, adware and spyware scanners on my PC and, after having persuaded myself that all would be safe, I retrieved and changed my password through the official website's account management page.[76] Finally and with a freshly reset password I could log into the game. Those responsible for compromising my account had been very active indeed. All my high-level characters had been dispersed throughout the game world. The most unpleasant surprise however was that, for the most part, all the items in their bags and bank accounts had disappeared. All the gold and most of the items I had compiled were gone. My characters were robbed right down to their virtual bones.

What happened when they broke into my account and stole my virtual belongings goes beyond cheating. Duping players into giving you their virtual currency inside of the game is one thing, but breaking into your account outside of the game in order to log into the game and strip characters of their belongings is a significant step beyond the boundaries of acceptable behaviour. Calling such practices a crime nevertheless remains difficult in terms of real-world law. We could say that the robbery of my virtual goods is a virtual crime, in the same way that the robbery of real goods can be called real crime. The problem with the term virtual crime is the word "virtual". As law scholars Gregory Lastowka and Dan Hunter put it, 'the term virtual crime can be just as meaningless as the term "virtual pet" if it is defined to include all computer-generated simulations of crime', adding that 'realistic simulations of mass murder occur every day on the computer monitors of those playing *Grand Theft Auto III* and on home entertainment centres displaying DVDs of *Hamlet*' (Lastowka & Hunter 2006: 123). My aim here is not just to show that the theft of my virtual goods or the burglary of my account were indeed a crime but to convey how my quest to retrieve my virtual belongings led me to investigate what allowed the game environment to become a place where I could be robbed in the first place.[77]

The battlefield of negotiation addressed here revolves around the so-called Real-Money Trade (RMT), the buying and selling of virtual currency for real money, a practice briefly mentioned earlier in the book when I described twinking as a form of luxury play. RMT is also closely linked to the reason many players resort to speedrunning and power-leveling guides, also discussed previously, as buying gold reduces the time needed to play (after all, you earn gold by doing quests and killing mobs). The practice of buying gold is widespread in the genre. Games researcher Nick Yee gathered data on MMO users and found that twenty-two percent of all respondents admitted to having bought virtual currency at one point (averaging $135), with older respondents – likely to have less time for play and more money to spend – turning out to buy virtual gold more often, and in larger quantities, than younger respondents (2005a). Levelling takes time, as does earning gold and collecting good items in the endgame. And this is where a typical market system reveals itself; if a player wants something badly enough, he will pay any asking price for it, even if it means coughing up real-world money. The

resulting RMT phenomenon has been a significant part of a growing global virtual economy (characterized by the exchange of virtual goods, currencies and digital labour), which, according to a report commissioned by the World Bank, has an estimated revenue of three billion US dollars (Lehdonvirta & Ernkvist 2011).

A well-known early study on the relationship between MMORPGs and the real-world economy raised quite a few eyebrows when it was published. Castranova calculated in 2001 that the gross national product per capita of Norrath made it the 77th richest country in the world, on par with countries like Russia and Bulgaria (2001: 28). Norrath, of course, is not a real country but the fictional world of MMORPG *Everquest*. But, as Castranova pointed out, 'from an economist's point of view, any distinct territory with a labour force, a gross national product, and a floating exchange rate, has an economy', including virtual territories where the labour force consists of thousands of players and their labour is play (2001: 16). The most important difference between the real-world economy and virtual economies is the legal status of trade. Whereas a real-world country's government usually promotes the import and export of goods, many commercial games like *World of Warcraft* are controlled by companies who see such activities as illegal, and who do not hesitate to act accordingly when they find out you are guilty of RMT practices. Therefore, stealing virtual gold from other players is a virtual crime, but so is buying it with real money. On the level of game contract, Blizzard considers such trade punishable. One of the main reasons for deeming this form of trade illegal is that it can cause problems such as hyperinflation within the in-game economy (as seen in the twinking case), problems that could potentially interfere with players' enjoyment of the game. Still, many entrepreneurially minded players and, in some cases, companies actively promote RMT because there is money to be made.

Due to the relative newness of MMORPG money trading, RMT exists in the grey areas of real-world law and has attracted some highly dubious business practices as well as outright criminal behaviour. One of the larger players in the RMT field, virtual currency buyer/seller Internet Gaming Entertainment (IGE), is especially infamous for what journalist and author Julian Dibbell calls its large-scale 'entrepreneurial madness' (2006b: 203).[78] In addition to RMT activities, IGE is also notorious for its involvement (through its parent companies) in buying up the three biggest *World of Warcraft* information databases thottbot, allakhazam and WoWhead, leading many players to fear that these user-generated databases would be bombarded with gold selling ads.[79] Whether or not these fears were warranted in this case, they were certainly understandable.[80] *World of Warcraft* players live under a constant barrage of gold selling spam, both in the game (through in-game chat and mail) and outside of it (on websites, forums and even Twitter).

The supply side of RMT to a large degree involves the large-scale use of farm bots, third-party software programmes able to play the game without the need of human action (prohibited by the EULA), and the exploitation of workforces in low-wage countries. In the last case, we find cunning entrepreneurs who set up sweat shops where people "play" 24/7 in shifts to produce virtual goods and/or power-level characters for those who want to pay for it (Dibbell 2006b, 2007). Since their appearance on the MMO scene, these so-called "Chinese gold farmers" have become the focal point of anti-RMT player sentiment.[81]

Worse still, RMT spawned an army of "players" using phishing, keylogging and other dubious practices to try to get access to players' accounts, stealing whatever there is with real-world value. According to a report from software security company Symantec, 2007 saw the black-market price for *World of Warcraft* account details rise to ten dollars, rivalling the price of credit card details (Symantec). It is not much, considering what you could potentially get for that sum. An accounting using the exchange rate between *World of Warcraft* and US dollars at that time showed that what was taken from me was worth about $186, and that number only represents the value of the gold pieces, not the value of the huge stockpile of sellable items that was taken from my characters and the guild bank.[82] I can be considered an average player in terms of accumulated virtual wealth, yet the potential profit of stealing virtual goods is large. These acts, as well as the use of bots and other dubious practices, are far removed from actually playing the game. Even though the dichotomy between the notions of play and work is more imagined than real, these "players" are at "work" making money, using a playful medium (or their users) as their field of work.

In the two paragraphs above, I have put the terms play, player and work in quotation marks to signify that, when dealing with RMT issues, what is considered play and work becomes rather elastic. I do not share the classic view that play is an activity entirely unrelated to work or, as Johan Huizinga once put it, an activity that has 'no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it' (Huizinga 1955: 13).[83] Rather, I agree with game scholar Jesper Juul who regards potential real-world profit from play a negotiable consequence of play (2005: 36). Soccer can be played "just for fun" but also professionally, for money. The same goes for card games, or pretty much any game you can bet money on (which, arguably, can be done with all games). Games are characterized by 'the fact that they can be assigned consequences on a per-play basis', including making money through play (ibid.).

Whether people on the supply or demand sides of RMT are still playing instead of working, however, does not merely depend on social codes of practice. This is something I investigate in the third section of this chapter. First I will show that, for Blizzard, buying or selling virtual goods is very much a non-negotiable consequence of play. While for players, the negotiations concerning RMT might take place on the level of game community, Blizzard's opinion on RMT is codified on

the level of game contract – the EULA does not allow it, and if caught, your account will be blocked from accessing the game temporarily or indefinitely.

The power of small print

When I found out that my account had been broken into and plundered, the first thing I did was to report the theft by sending a message to Blizzard's in-game helpdesk. It took a mere five minutes for Blizzard to reply, although the company did not contact me within the game. Instead, I received the following email:

> Greetings,
>
> We are writing to inform you that, unfortunately, we have had to temporarily suspend your *World of Warcraft* account and place a final warning on it.
>
> Account Name: ACCOUNT
>
> Type of Violation: Involvement in online trading activities Investigation Concluded: 28/04/2008 Consequences for Account: Account suspended for 72 hours, Password Reset and Final Warning issued.
>
> It is with regret that we take this type of action, but it is in the best interests of the *World of Warcraft* community as a whole, and for the integrity of the game. After your suspension has expired, you will be able to access the *World of Warcraft* servers again.
>
> Please note that should any further violations of our Rules and Policies occur, this will almost certainly lead to the permanent closure of your account. (personal communication with Account Administration Team, Blizzard Entertainment Europe, 29 April 2008).

Instead of a talk with a Game Master (GM), the usual result after sending an inquiry to the in-game helpdesk, I was confronted with a seventy-two hour ban for 'online trading activities'. I could no longer log into the game. Even worse, the "final warning" assigned to my account pushed me all the way to the top of Blizzard's "Penalty Volcano", a tiered system of punishments ranging from temporary bans to account deletion which serves as a 'visual representation of both the severity of each of our penalties and how often each type of penalty is given in relation to the others' (Blizzard Entertainment 2007a). I was suddenly one tier away from the top-level account closure penalty, which would mean I would lose all my characters. This would potentially jeopardize years of play and potentially harm my research.

My logical reaction to this email and temporary ban was to fight the accusations and state that I was not responsible for 'involvement in online trading activities' with my account. Apparently, the person or persons responsible for compromising my account had used my account for trading activities. I sent Blizzard several petitions through the official website and, after the ban was lifted, opened a new in-game inquiry in order to contact a GM. The latter of which worked. As the excerpt from the in-game conversation I had with this GM below shows, Blizzard took this very seriously.

> 5/2 12:14:54.357 To Durngold: i got an email from blizz charging me with online trading activities
> 5/2 12:15:08.065 To Durngold: they suspended my account for 3 days and put a final warning on it
> 5/2 12:15:29.659 To Durngold: I did not involve myself in such activities, and have never shared my account
> 5/2 12:15:30.963 Durngold whispers: That would be due to the person on your accounts actions.
> 5/2 12:15:41.162 Durngold whispers: And any actions on your account, are your responsibility.
> 5/2 12:15:54.569 To Durngold: even if hackers did it ?!
> 5/2 12:16:11.461 Durngold whispers: Well yes. Because it was your responsibility to keep the account safe.
> 5/2 12:16:26.869 Durngold whispers: If you did not, you are still responsible for action taken on the account (chatlog conversation, 2 May 2008).[84]

According to Blizzard, the thievery was not just my own fault, I was also responsible for its further effects, including RMT activities. And indeed, when I looked up the 'unauthorised account access policy' on Blizzard's game support pages, I found that, as a player, I am in violation when someone *other* than me violates the EULA or Terms of Use through my account: 'it is *your* responsibility to make sure to use appropriate password protection techniques, that could include disabling file sharing, running virus checks, and other applicable measures to prevent accounts from being compromised' (Blizzard Entertainment 2007b, emphasis in original). The policy article even begins with a quote from poet Kahlil Gibran: *'If you reveal your secrets to the wind you should not blame the wind for revealing them to the trees'* (Blizzard Entertainment 2007b). The difference between this situation and a real-life burglary – where you would not find yourself punished when the burglar uses the stolen goods for further criminal activities – can be found on the level of game contract.

Even when Blizzard acts too rigorously, when it makes a mistake it tends to set it right when you push back at the company about it. Even though initially both the GM and the EULA said I was to blame for someone else robbing my virtual

belongings, the customer service department in the end did reinstate the stolen goods. Or at least a part of them: when I received all my items back through the in-game mailing system, I noticed that all my virtual gold was still missing. The following excerpt of a conversation I had with a GM after I received my items shows Blizzard's reaction when I confronted it with this issue.

> 5/6 15:32:21.658 To Frozensteel: first of all: thanks for returning all of my items, and the stolen guild bank items too
> 5/6 15:32:35.068 To Frozensteel: but as said in the ticket; my gold is still missing :(
> 5/6 15:34:24.383 Frozensteel whispers: I see. Unfortunately after an account is compromised we are not always able to restore everything that is lost, in case we were unable to recover the missing gold.
> 5/6 15:35:29.901 To Frozensteel: the hacker(s) did make a new lvl 1 char on my account, maybe they transferred it away through him?
> 5/6 15:36:22.579 Frozensteel whispers: Yes, we have investigated these avenues but were unable to recover any of the missing gold.
> 5/6 15:36:44.316 To Frozensteel: what could have happened to it then?!
> 5/6 15:38:04.227 To Frozensteel: I mean, it was quite a lot, and most of it I was keeping 'safe' for a friend who stopped playing till WotLK
> 5/6 15:39:02.930 Frozensteel whispers: I cannot discuss the details of our investigation process I'm afraid, to do so would be a breach of our policies (chatlog conversation, 6 May 2008).

While the amount of gold stolen was considerable, Blizzard did not recover it for me and it refused to tell me why or where it went. If the company was able to find the data showing when, where and how my account had been stripped empty, and which items went missing, then surely it should have been able to find information on the amount of money my characters were carrying. Even if Blizzard was unable to track where the gold went, it at least knew how much needed to be reimbursed. Not returning my gold was therefore a deliberate choice. While it's no problem for Blizzard to create virtual money by simply pressing a button in the same way a national bank is able to print new notes, doing so would mean injecting more money into the virtual economy, which is already being saturated through RMT practices. If anything, Blizzard would rather eject money *out* of the game.[85] Trying to get it back means tracing the intricate money flows that RMT traders have set up to try to cover up their tracks, in all probability a more laborious task than simply refusing to reimburse a player who lost it by his or her own fault in the first place. The EULA protects Blizzard from questions about their decision-making process; discussing the details of the investigation, as the GM informed me, is a breach of policy.

We can distinguish several forms of contract-based control at work in the above battlefield of negotiation. We can find automated surveillance of my account through *World of Warcraft*'s network, because apparently my character's behaviour was data-mined, enabling Blizzard to accuse me of involvement in RMT. There is also non-automated governance through Blizzard's GMs and other service employees, who read and replied to my mails and entered in conversations with me in-game. Lastly, we find the more passive control system of the contracts themselves, the End Users Licence Agreement and Terms of Service. While players constantly interact with the rules on the level of game design, the rules on the level of game contract are only brought up after installing the game client and subsequent patches and expansions and, as in my case, when stakeholders collide over contractual rules. Both active and passive control mechanisms are there to remind players that, as law professor Jack Balkin puts it, the 'freedom to play is the freedom to play within the rules the platform owners have created' (2006: 87). In this case, my freedom to play was limited through both control mechanisms, as I had broken the rules according to platform owners. The ban prevented me from accessing the game; the violation of agreements gave Blizzard reason to lock me out (which subsequently prevented me from disputing this decision in-game with a GM). While active control is an effective measure to stop misuse of the game instantly (as defined by the EULA), passive control produces Blizzard's ultimate defence in battlefields of negotiation like mine: I should have read the small print.

In essence, the small print of the EULA and related contractual documents describe point by point what the non-negotiable consequences of play are in the eyes of the platform owner. As explained in chapter three, these legal documents are often scrutinized for being too harsh. They enforce a plethora of rather extreme rules and limitations upon players, without providing them with many means to defy them other than not playing the game. On the level of contract, the power of the small print and the way it is enforced makes *World of Warcraft* (and similarly governed virtual worlds) a hotbed of activity for potential battlefields of negotiation. Game theorist Julian Kücklich argues that the subjects of virtual worlds 'do not pay the government to deliver the goods – security, economic stability, etc. – but rather for the packaging of the goods in the form of mythology, ideology, and history' (2009: 345). As the "government" of *World of Warcraft*, Kücklich notes, Blizzard derives its power precisely from this absence of social content from the contractual relationship with players (ibid.). That does not mean that the EULA does not serve a purpose beneficial to most players. 'Properly enforced', writes Dibbell, 'the EULA makes each virtual world its own parallel legal universe, immunized as much as it can be from the inability of existing law to reckon its strangeness and possibilities' (2006a: 144). What proper enforcement entails is a discussion that players are actively involved in, even if they cannot directly influence the way in which *World of Warcraft* is governed. Not all discussions concerning RMT deal with monetary or legal issues, however. In the

final section of this chapter, the stakes are about the affective values of play – that is to say, the ways in which RMT interferes with but also modifies existing notions of gaming capital.

Part of the game?

When I decided to pursue RMT and power-leveling services as a topic for this dissertation after what happened to my account, I hypothesized that few players would admit to participating in RMT practices or using third-party services for power-leveling. Widespread as they may be, these activities are far from accepted within the player community. On the official forums, where players need to log in using their game account in order to post, admitting to having been involved in these practices would also lead to potential investigations by Blizzard. On the many unofficial and therefore far more anonymous forums that developed around the game, players appeared to be far more outspoken on the topic. Here, the differences of opinion between players were felt strongest.

Below are two posts from a discussion on gold buying on the MMO-Champion website's forum, emphasizing both the benefits of buying gold and related "illegal" practices of the enjoyment of the game.

> I've done it all, actually. Purchased accounts, sold accounts, purchased gold, purchased powerleveling – the whole nine yards. Almost all of it was done before the big crackdown, before it was "strictly enforced". [...] At any rate, most of it was worth it. I did it because *WoW* is a hobby. I work, hang with friends and family and play *WoW*; it's a big hobby of mine thus it gets funded so I have a constant flow of fun. Sure, farming can be enjoyable, but sometimes I want to do things and not have to farm for a month – that's not fun. I'm not paying to work all the time in a game.
> At any rate, I don't see a huge deal with it. If people want to spend their money on it, let them. I don't support hackers, though. Nor keyloggers and things of the sort. (posted by "Gabriev" on the mmo-champion.com forums, 8 July 2008).

> Why waste hours and hours of farming when you can work for one hour and buy 2k gold with the money you make in the one single hour?
> I'd much rather stay 1 hour overtime at work than farm couple days @ *WoW*, any day (posted by "Janz" on the mmo-champion.com forums, 8 July 2008).

These arguments sound reasonable. As law scholar Joshua Fairfield points out in a discussion on the dichotomies between real-world law and virtual worlds: 'No one complains that I did not build my house for myself. No one complains that I did not assemble my truck by hand. No one even complains when I buy a preci-

sion-tooled set of golf clubs. And yet there is a complaint when I ask someone else to create an avatar or an account in a virtual world to my specifications' (2008: 16). The following post, however, voices one of the main arguments of players against these practices:

> Cause that's not the way the game is supposed to be played. Cry and cringe whichever way you want, it's the truth and it doesn't matter what you say in many people their eyes you are a cheater by doing so and deserve 0 respect. (posted by "Tiens" on the mmo-champion.com forums, 9 July 2008)

This somewhat angry reaction puts the finger on where it hurts: there is a way the game is 'supposed to be played' – not according to Blizzard's legal department but according to the player community – and the gold buyer therefore is not doing what he should be doing within the limitations of what is considered to be the game's boundaries. He is therefore deemed a cheater. The problem is that, for the players buying gold or hiring power-leveling services, the way the game is supposed to be played is not enjoyable. The discussion here is not about gold farmers becoming workers rather than players but players feeling that play becomes a chore, like work, instead of fun, like play.

In chapter two, I emphasized that in the constant movement of play between its free and instrumental form, the extremities of both are never reached because when reaching the purest forms of free and instrumental play, play loses its meaning. The ultimate form of free play would be a meaningless act, while the ultimate form of instrumental play would turn into the antithesis of play, a simple means to an end often referred to as work. When instrumental play turns into a chore of mindlessly repetitive operations in order to reach a goal, players usually refer to it as farming or grinding. While some players enjoy these play practices, many do not. When players must pay for the privilege to play, which is the case with *World of Warcraft* through its subscription model, the consequence is that players start 'paying to work' as the forum post above expresses it.

The "fun factor" in play is highly subjective, though; what is hellishly repetitive for one player can be joyous escapism for another. Even the most forgiving player will nevertheless reach a point at which "fun" play gives way to a boring grind. Game designer Raph Koster phrases it best when saying that 'those of us who want games to be fun are fighting a losing battle against the human brain because fun is a process and routine is its destination' (2005: 118). It is, however, also problematic to call process and routine unenjoyable – take, for example, farming and grinding. As Malaby points out, we should prefer words like compelling or engaging rather than fun, which characterizes the player experience better (Malaby 2007: 99). Most players keep the game experience engaging through socializing – grinding might be boring but you can also chat about it with others – but what they are actually playing while chatting away might hardly be exciting.

The challenge for game designers is to keep their game a challenge for the player. Players ask – in some cases demand – a 'constant flow of fun' as written in the forum post above. If this flow of fun is not present or, in the case of grinding in a MMORPG, is hindered by an uninviting amount of mindless instrumental activities, players will find ways to circumvent the problem.

Buying gold or using power-leveling services are part of the divergent tactics deployed by players unhappy with the game's limitations or design decisions they do not like, but players using them are under constant threat of being identified as cheats. As explained earlier, cheating is hard to define, especially in a constantly changing multiplayer environment, and therefore can lead to endless discussions among players. Game scholar Mia Consalvo, who studied RMT-related contestable player practices in the MMORPG *Final Fantasy XI* (Square 2002), reckons that for most players these activities are seen as forms of unfair advantage (2007: 165). I would agree with such an analysis. Recurring themes in arguments against money buying and power-leveling are that players who do so have not "earned" the right to the fruits of their financial investment.[86] In *World of Warcraft*, there are several rites of passage that are universally seen as key in the overall experience of playing the game. An example is getting your first mount, which initially became possible when a character reached level forty. New players seldom gathered the amount of money needed to buy a mount straight away when reaching level forty (a hundred gold pieces), and the process of gathering the money needed is one of the biggest challenges that players face during the levelling process during the game's first years. During this phase they begin to learn about how to use the auction house, how to use their chosen professions profitably, and how to play cooperatively in order to achieve better (and therefore more valuable) loot. The moment when the mount is bought is often celebrated as a major achievement. Simply buying your mount without having put forward the effort to gather the money yourself means downgrading the mount's status as a major achievement, a reward proclaiming perseverance and skill to a player's peers. In other words, the mount's value as a form of what could be called ludic capital is at stake, as well as what is considered fair play – or even play itself.

Among players, the devaluation of gaming capital is at the core of RMT-related discussions. Spending hours, days, even weeks on gathering the materials or virtual money for a particular highly regarded or valuable piece of equipment or other clearly definable achievement (a mount, an honorary title, a reputation with an in-game faction) leads to affective value worth defending. Be it work or play, "fun" or repetition, these required investments of time and effort are built into the game's design, giving stakeholders who value its worth a weapon against those who simply do not care: they can be written off as cheats. In many cases, name-calling does not impact money-buyers and power-levelers; they do not care about being labelled a cheat since their particular tactic is to keep their play fun. Others avoid possible public conviction by keeping their activities a secret to their

peers. Regardless of this, the only stakeholder who can have a lasting impact on the way they play is Blizzard. This impact can go as far as blocking access to play altogether through a EULA-triggered account ban.

Some players have tried to find a way out of their relatively powerless situation as stakeholders in relation to Blizzard. In May 2007, an American player called Antonio Hernandez filed a class action lawsuit against gold seller business IGE. As one virtual law blogger explained, Hernandez filed the lawsuit 'on behalf of essentially all *World of Warcraft* players', because 'by farming gold, spamming chat, camping spawns, and generally diminishing the *World of Warcraft* experience, [IGE] allegedly prevented players from receiving the full benefits Blizzard intended them to receive as third party beneficiaries of Blizzard's Terms of Use and End User License Agreement' (Duranske 2008a). During an interview, Hernandez' attorney commented that players like his client 'have paid their $15 for some entertainment, and IGE is polluting that entertainment'. He adds that 'it's kind of like, if someone pays for a ticket to go see a movie, and if someone else comes in behind them and kicks their seat, you can get them to stop doing that. We're just trying to get IGE to stop kicking the seats' (Blancato 2007). This lawsuit points to an interesting development where players do not wait for Blizzard to act on what they think are practices that are ruining their game but are actually taking their battlefield of negotiation to real-life court. While IGE might be a company, they are also using players (or, in the case of low-wage country gold farmer, "players") and thus play to make money, leading to what one virtual law observer jokingly called the 'new meaning of player vs player' (Methenitis). Here, the arguments used against IGE in the Hernandez case actually involve players defending – even legally using – Blizzard's own ToS and EULA against other players, without the involvement of Blizzard itself.[87] While the case was ultimately dismissed due to a settlement between the parties involved, what the Hernandez vs. IGE case showed was a battlefield of negotiation engaged by players on a legal level usually exclusively controlled by Blizzard.[88]

The unique nature of virtual property in virtual worlds like *World of Warcraft*, with stakeholders applying different affective and monetary values to it, shows how difficult it is to claim a separation of the real and the virtual. There are legal scholars and economists who nevertheless suggest that virtual worlds and the real world should remain separated. Castranova, for instance. calls for a specific 'law of interration', a system of real-world laws that grant EULAs a legal status 'robust enough to allow them to preserve virtual worlds as play spaces' (2006b: 79). The idea is that virtual worlds that consciously let the real-world economy enter their virtual one (like *Second Life*) should be covered by real-world law. Other virtual worlds should be closed off entirely from real-world law (examples like discrimination or certain forms of pornography would, however, still fall under real-world law, showing the difficulties of a clear separation), rendering all disputes within them the exclusive business of players and platform owners. This would preserve

(self-)selected virtual worlds as pure spaces of play, spaces in which people can escape the troubles of the real (see also Castranova 2007). Aside from the fact that it is highly questionable that such a pure space of play could be achieved (play is, after all, an experience rooted in the real world), the danger of such a system lies in the power of the designers. Even if laws of interration would bring into force all kinds of behavioural and ethical rules and guidelines for platform owners, in the end these platform owners are the ones setting up non-negotiable rules through code as well as contractual roles. Outside the reach of real-world law, they can "rule" their world as they please. Players, of course, wield an even more powerful weapon against unacceptable forms of control by platform owners: they can quit by cancelling their subscription. As I will show in chapter fourteen, switching costs (to another game for instance) are nevertheless high, ensuring that there will always be players who will try to make do rather than get out. As an alternative to Castranova's rather far-fetching concept, Balkin instead proposes a selection of different statutes of interration for virtual worlds, each depending on the basic principles of the virtual world's organizational structure, which would bring all types of virtual worlds under real-world law. The underlying goal is to protect both players and designers under all circumstances (2006: 107-113). While *World of Warcraft* is not covered by any law of interration, the lack of clear real-world laws tackling the type of virtual crime I was a victim of effectively meant that Blizzard was the only authority to turn to.[89]

What we have seen in this chapter are negotiation processes where the stakeholders – Blizzard, "regular" players, "cheaters", cybercriminals – all try to set or cross boundaries – some legal, some not. Questions about what is fair play, what is cheating and what is crime are socially as well as legally negotiated. Through these negotiations, the actual rules of play are constantly challenged, showing that even on a contractual level, these is no such thing as a shared understanding of what the boundaries of *World of Warcraft* are or should be.

13: Performing on the Edge of Rules and Fiction

This chapter deals with creative productions by players, homemade fiction and non-fiction films to be more specific, made within but also with the game. They display free play in its most outspoken form: here we see players who do not just play the game to beat its goal-oriented content but instead seek ways to expand or in other ways manipulate the fictional world, or who try to find the edges of what is possible in the game's design in terms of the coded rules and boundaries. These creative productions do not always conform to what the designers and other players find an acceptable appropriation of the virtual world and its fiction. It makes this chapter as much a discussion on fan creation as one on game design exploitation, both of which can lead to creative and in some cases legal processes of negotiation.

The forms of creative production discussed in this case study are machinima, films made through a game's software engine. They are creative productions mimicking real film by having players act out roles according to self-authored or adapted storylines. Scenes are framed and subsequently 'filmed' through dedicated recording software (often using the first-person perspective of an off-screen player) and, ultimately, cut and scored as needed. The practices of play and production we see here turn players into performers or virtual puppeteers; their goal is not just to amuse themselves but also to entertain an imagined audience, as most machinima productions are shared through video-upload sites such as YouTube or dedicated machinima databases like Warcraftmovies.com.

In the first part of this chapter, I discuss the creation of fan fiction and its role in player agency over Warcraft's fictional universe. The second part shows how the machinima filmmaking process exists in a legal grey area, with Blizzard condoning – even actively promoting – the creative practice but not allowing all the tools to make it possible. In the final part, I look at machinima filmmaking as a practice that can trigger legal action by Blizzard on the level of content as well. Two *World of Warcraft* machinima productions are featured, both made by dedicated teams of players. The first, *Tales of the Past III* (Falch 2007a), is an epic piece of cinema featuring characters from Warcraft lore. The second, *Exploration – The Movie* (Dopefish 2005) shows free play at its most devious, as a team of explorers

show hidden game content not meant for the public eye. Comparing the way Blizzard handles both productions – the second actually contributed to formal changes in the game's design – shows the thin line between creative endorsement and opposition among stakeholders.[90]

Our story, your story

In an interview, Chris Metzen, Blizzard's VP of creative development and the creator and warden of Warcraft's fiction, has summed up the genesis of Warcraft's fictional universe as following:

> I grew up with Dungeons & Dragons, as a Star Wars fan, as a comic fan, with their vast continuities. They hooked me so young, and kept providing me with serial instalments of IP that I thought: that's where it's at. I'm always confident we'll build cool, fun games to get people to play – but what if we attempted to construct more of a universe for them, and keep people thinking about them when they're not playing (EDGE 2004: 84).[91]

This 'thinking about them' only reflects the bare minimum of agency that players actually derive from the fictional universe that Metzen and his colleagues have envisioned. On this level of agency, the player serves, as media theorist Henry Jenkins puts it, as 'a more-or-less passive recipient of authorial meaning' (1992: 25). Instead, players act as *active* readers and act as what Jenkins calls 'textual poachers', picking up those elements they find pleasurable or useful for their own needs and, in some cases, deploying them in new, unexpected ways outside of the formal narrative or fictional world on offer (ibid., 2002b). In the case of machinima filmmaking, this deployment is not limited to the time players are not playing but takes place during play as well.

Unlike fans of television series, films or books, however, players of a MMORPG are allowed a more active engagement with their beloved fictional world and its inhabitants through play. Even though the agency players acquire over the fictional world is limited (as shown in chapter eight), the elaborate fictional universes of MMORPGs and the fact that players are active within these worlds with their own characters can elicit great emotional investments from the players. As I show in the following case, Warcraft players/fans can be highly vocal stakeholders in the fictional material, causing minor and major battlefields of negotiation when elements of the existing fiction are changed or altered by the design team during content updates.

In October 2005 and with much ado, Blizzard announced the first expansion pack for *World of Warcraft*, called The Burning Crusade, which would add a considerable amount of new content to the game world, including entirely new additions to the established fiction. During the months that followed, Blizzard

constantly unveiled what these additions would be, creating much heated speculation and discussion among the player community. One of the more controversial additions was a new playable race called the draenei. Descendants of the demonic and highly evil eradar race, the draenei were met with great hesitation by fans of the Warcraft fiction, especially as the draenei were to be allied with the "good" alliance instead of the "evil" horde faction. Moreover, the draenei were to arrive in the Warcraft universe with the help of an inter-dimensional spaceship-like vessel.

The clash with expectations and established fictional tradition (spaceships in a fantasy setting?!) caused an uproar in certain parts of the player community, triggering a response from Blizzard. As Blizzard's head of creative development responsible for the changes, Metzen personally addressed the issues on the official message board, admitting he might have made some mistakes:

> Right... To be totally up-front with you guys, it's my bad, straight up. The obvious lore contradiction with Sargeras and his encounter with the eredar was clearly documented in the Warcraft III manual. I wrote those bits about four years ago, and to be totally honest, I simply forgot. Genius, right? [...] I can assure you, no one's more crushed about this mistake than I am. I've spent the last few days kicking my own ass over this one. Sucks to fail. It may not always be evident, but we take this story stuff really seriously at Blizzard (posted by "Tseric" on the official forums, 5 May 2006).

Without going into detail about who Sargeras is and how his encounter with the eradar would matter, it is interesting to see that Blizzard felt it needed to respond to continuity problems with something that was printed in the manual to a game released several years prior to *World of Warcraft*. As Jenkins points out, 'within the realm of popular culture, fans are the true experts', with trivia like these being the main source for this expertise (1992: 86-87). It grants players cultural authority, 'claiming moral right to complain about producer actions challenging their own interests' (ibid. 87). In this case, the complaints were met with a conciliatory reaction and what could be considered a formal apology from *World of Warcraft*'s main story creator and keeper.

While Metzen did excuse himself to the community for his "faults", in the end no changes were made to the origins of the dreanei; the spaceship-like vessels and other controversial additions to Warcraft's fictional universe remained. It would simply be too expensive to change all the designs around the time a game is launching, so instead, the history was just rewritten to fit it in. These re-written bits and pieces of fiction have become part of Warcraft's "retcons" – a term coming from "retroactive continuity", which originated in the culture of serialized comics. In comics, retcons describe the liberties that comic writers and artist sometimes take to reinvent superheroes with a longstanding narrative tradition,

like Batman or Superman, just to keep them fresh or introduce them to new audiences.[92] While in this case the retcon might not have been entirely deliberate, it does reinvent the fictional universe, and the degree of its impact varies depending on which player you talk to. Most players will not even have noticed the changes, while for some, retcons can ruin "their" game.

Applying retcons to *World of Warcraft* is a practice that is not solely limited to Blizzard alone. Players also like to write and rewrite their favourite (or less favourite) parts of *Warcraft* to make it better, or just to play around with retcon possibilities. While such retcons might not have much formal weight – only content designed by Blizzard's creative team is considered canonical by most players – they can form and become popular extensions and alternations of the acknowledged fictional universe. In the same way that fictional trivia plays a part in criticizing the established fiction, we should also consider them as forming the 'basis for critical reworkings of textual materials' (Jenkins 1992: 87). The machinima film *Tales of the Past III* actively uses and reworks fictional trivia from Warcraft's fiction to create a story dealing directly with some of Warcraft's biggest story lines.

Since its release in December 2007, the third and most popular part of the *Tales of the Past* machinima series has been downloaded more than a million times from its main hosting site, warcraftmovies.com, with an average of almost 3,500 downloads a day.[93] *Tales of the Past III* is an eighty-nine minute film, produced in the European Dunemaul realm by an all-player cast and crew; it has become one of the most widely seen *World of Warcraft* machinima.[94] The creator of *Tales of the Past III*, Martin Falch, introduces its story as follows:

> Since the death of Yimo and the shattering of the Orb of Visions, the Horde and the Alliance have accepted an unstable peace agreement. However, old hatreds stand in the way of cooperation and at the same time, chaos erupts as the Lich King finally takes action.
> In the meanwhile, Blazer travels to Northrend to hunt down Mograine, the Death Knight, and retrieve the legendary blade that may decide the fate of Azeroth – The Ashbringer... (2007b).

This short introduction in itself is enough to show that this machinima honours and at the same time changes Warcraft's canonical fiction. The looming danger of the Lich King, the Death Knight Mograine and the legendary Ashbringer blade are all fictional stalwarts of the Warcraft series. They are beloved, even sometimes revered, icons of Warcraft's fiction and are "poached" for the purpose of creating the narrative of this machinima. The other characters mentioned, Blazer and Yimo, are not part of the official Warcraft canon, nor is the Orb of Visions. These additions, which turn *Tales of the Past*'s version of Azeroth into an alternate fictional universe, originate not just from the imagination of its director/writer but

from an entire guild of players. The *Tales of the Past* series began with a self-promotion video by a guild named Eden Aurorea (Falch 2005). From there, it evolved into a series focusing more on *Warcraft*'s fiction, including the canonical icons mentioned above, but still rooted in the Eden Aurorea guild with its members as the main actors.

The player-created characters of *Tales of the Past III*, which for a large part constitute the retconning we find in the film, are therefore not purely fictional; they exist inside the game as actual player characters, with very real players behind them who in many cases had been playing these characters for a long time. In an interview with the film's creator Martin Falch, it became clear that this element of *Tales of the Past*'s gestation was a big draw for participation: 'a lot of people wanted to join in, get their character famous etc, while the actors already in the movie had a lot of fun being recognized – I guess when we were recording you could say they were "actors", but for outside recordings they were walking around in the game with the gear they used in the movies and the names of their own characters' (chat interview, 18 November 2008).

Falch and his crew's blending of new with existing fiction signals not only a shift from consumer to prosumer as discussed in the first chapter but also what machinima specialist Henry Lowood considers a 'metamorphosis of the player into a performer' (2007: 64). This in turn allows for performance-based adaptation, where players are able to adapt their own personal and shared Warcraft stories into film form through the performance of play. As I have shown in chapter three, *World of Warcraft* does not allow players to change much in the fictional world in any persistent manner – even killing famous characters has no lasting consequences, as they will just reappear later to be killed again by other players. The role of the fictional world, however, changes when viewed through the virtual lens of the machinima filmmaker. As literary scholar Marie-Laure Ryan puts it: 'the original game world becomes a quarry of visual materials, a matrix out of which players generate other worlds' and, as I would add, create retcons in existing worlds (Ryan 2008). 'Lost in the process', Ryan continues, 'is the interactive character of the source world' (ibid.). Machinima may record and document the performance of play, but the end result has the same non-interactive qualities as regular film. In machinima such as *Tales of the Past III*, however, narrative agency shifts towards the players, as their play performances can suddenly take new meanings through machinima filmmaking. When seen by hundreds of thousands of players, these meanings can transform players (or at least their player characters) into community celebrities or, to keep it within Warcraft's fictional universe, heroes who can become famous like their canonical counterparts.

While *Tales of the Past III* is a good example of textual poaching in the way that it modifies and expands the core text through the active appropriation by players, we should be cautious not to confuse these forms of appropriation with resistance. Jenkins borrows the notion of poaching from De Certeau who considers

appropriation as an important tactic to resist and challenge constraints set by a text's formal producers (De Certeau quoted in Jenkins 1992: 23-27). While I would argue that the production process of *Tales of the Past III* involves the film's creators actively negotiating what is possible within *World of Warcraft*'s design and fiction, conflict in terms of fictional appropriation was in this case carefully avoided. In the process of creating a machinima like *Tales of the Past III*, Blizzard and the film's creative team are not the only other stakeholders involved. The player community also plays a major part, expressing strong opinions of what can and cannot be done with Warcraft's fictional universe. As Jenkins points out, fan fiction creators might consider themselves individualistic and nonconformist in the way they approach the source text, they are 'nevertheless responsive to the somewhat more subtle demands placed upon them as members of fandom – expectations about what narratives are "appropriate" for fannish interest, what interpretations are "legitimate", and so forth ' (1992: 88).

As one would expect, there are infamous examples of machinima filmmakers purposefully resisting the established norms and expectations. Lowood points to a sexually explicit machinima (as far as such a thing is possible due to limitations of the game's design) called *Not Just Another Love Story* (Pope 2005), which was published on warcraftmovies.com. After the film was picked up by the community and started to cause flame wars on the official forums due to its adult content, Blizzard removed all forum links to its location and locked any threads discussing the machinima (Lowood 2008: 190). Even though it was censored on the official forums, the film itself has remained untouched on its hosting site. In another particularly controversial *World of Warcraft* machinima, a raid guild filmed itself while crashing and destroying a funeral ceremony staged within the fictional world which was honouring a player who died in the real world. In the credits, the responsible guild simply says 'Yes, we know we are assholes :D' (Serenity Now 2006). While it is debatable whether this particular production is a machinima film or simply a (highly subjective) documentation of an in-game event, the outcry over this particular video was even felt outside of *World of Warcraft*'s community (Combs 2006). Regardless, fan fiction usually does 'respond to the perceived tastes of their desired audience', devious productions like the one mentioned above being more the exception than the rule (Jenkins 1992: 88).

The negotiation process between stakeholders before and during the actual appropriation (ie. filmmaking) process is as much a part of the negotiation process as the end result. As Falch pointed out in my interview with him, preparation is key: 'to get the upper hand in the potential lore discussions [...] I made sure to read up on any material related to some of the lore I included, such as WoWwiki.com and I also read through 3 different canon books' (chat interview, 18 November 2008). When recreating famous characters, Falch tried to fuse existing canonical fiction with audience expectations of how such characters should behave:

> For instance, in order to portray Thrall in a plausible way, I was inspired by his appearance and actions in Lord of the Clans [a *World of Warcraft* book] and in the games, coupled that with some of the "fan speculation" such as the subtle romantic hints between him and Jaina Proudmoore [another famous character] and added my own interpretation of him and what he'd do (chat interview).

According to an interview Falch did with a *World of Warcraft* fan site, he nevertheless had to reel in his own ambitions with this character: 'Thrall was originally going to die alongside Blazer in the sacrifice towards the end. However, I sort of decided to not do it [...]. I felt it would be dangerous to change too much of the lore since it seems to be a rather dangerous area to move in' (Toumia 2008). This dangerous area of course hints at pontential conflict with the perceived audience within the player community.

With machinima such as *Tales of the Past III*, authority over the fictional universe of *World of Warcraft* thus no longer lies solely in the hands of the formal design team, nor does it entirely rest in the hands of the player(s) adapting it to machinima film format. Instead, textual authority becomes negotiated, shared and staked. Like any other fan-created text, machinima like *Tales of the Past III* are 'shaped through the social norms, aesthetic conventions, interpretative protocols, technological resources, and technical competence of the larger fan community' (Jenkins 1992: 49). If acceptance from the community is desired, machinima filmmakers are required to find the perfect balance between new content, retconned content and the canonical. Some actively defy acceptance by refusing to conform to accepted fictional or behavioural liberties, but most filmmakers try to expand their audience, not limit (or anger) it.

Next, I will show that the negotiations surrounding machinima filmmaking are not limited to the level of game design. Not the adaptation and appropriation of the fictional universe for fan fiction but the tools needed to produce machinima films boost these forms of filmmaking to the level of game contract. The ensuing battlefields of negotiation put players in an awkward position vis-à-vis Blizzard.

Looking the other way

As a stakeholder directly benefiting from a committed and involved gamer community (active players stick to a game longer, which means larger revenue), Blizzard is well known for nurturing player creativity. The company has set up a fan sites programme, which brings out reports on community news, player-organized events and hosts many examples of fan art on its official site alongside its own artwork. Throughout the years, it has also hosted fan fiction and art contests, some of which were oriented towards machinima films. The way Blizzard pro-

motes machinima filmmaking has nevertheless remained somewhat vague in terms of the affordances players are allowed.

Even though many machinima and other non-fiction player-created videos (like recordings of raids, pvp action or walkthroughs) have been around since (and even before) *World of Warcraft*'s release in 2004, Blizzard published its first official endorsement information dedicated to making machinima only in September 2007.[95] The stated goal of the information was to 'nurture the advancement and growth of this young artistic community' and to 'say with resounding clarity: Blizzard is a fan of your works' (Blizzard Entertainment 2007c). It is made clear, however, that the information should be considered as a 'guide for fair-use video creation: a new reference document which outlines the rules and guidelines that should be followed when crafting your videos' (Blizzard Entertainment 2007c). The guide assists in helping to 'avoid "grey area" decisions for which there is no definitive answer out there for whether a course of action is permissible or not according to Blizzard' (Blizzard Entertainment 2007c). This grey area as well as the rules and guidelines provided to avoid getting there reveal Blizzard's stakes regarding machinima moviemaking. Machinima artists may use a game like *World of Warcraft* as what Lowood calls a 'found technology' (2008: 184, a reference to Duchamp's object trouvé) to produce new creations but are not allowed to fully appropriate the game. While the guide stresses that it wants to assist machinima filmmakers to 'provide inspiration and show what the art form is truly capable of achieving' – including creating machinima for educational purposes or sending them in for consideration to film festivals – there are nevertheless very clear "don'ts" filmmakers should avoid; for instance commercial use, R-rated content, or more than '10 seconds total of sponsor promotion per production' (Blizzard Entertainment 2007c).

It took Blizzard a relatively long time to set up the machinima fair-use guide, something that might be explained by examining Blizzard's rather ambiguous relationship with the film form – a relationship not wholly solved through the fair-use guide it eventually published. The reason is this: in order to make more ambitious machinima like *Tales of the Past III*, players often make use of third-party programmes and private servers, allowing them more creative freedom than the core game. In contrast to prior games famous for the machinima creations they spawned (first-person shooters like the *Quake* and *Half-Life* series), *World of Warcraft* does not allow for modification beyond the user-interface. The possibility to modify a game partly or entirely through open instead of closed game design is seen as one of the driving forces behind the rise of machinima in the mid to late 1990s (Jones 2006; Lowood 2008). As I have shown in chapter three, in *World of Warcraft* such practices are in violation of the Terms of Use and are thus not allowed.

An example of a third-party programme used to make *World of Warcraft* machinima is *WoW* Machinima Tool, written by Mads Hagbarth Lund alias Malu05. It gives machinima artists access to a host of fully controllable in-game cameras,

time control (changing from day to night), weather control (instant rain if needed), expanded animations for characters and the ability to spawn NPCs and objects which can also be animated at will. None of these options exist in the main game software and can be readily considered an exploitation of the game's design.

I argued earlier that we should be hesitant about calling all forms of fictional appropriation resistance and the modification of games using tools like the one described above are, as game scholar Robert Jones points out, indeed 'part of the intended use of the product – as indicated by the source code being made available to gamers', and as such 'hardly seems resistive' (Jones 2006: 267). In the case of *World of Warcraft*, with its closely guarded source code, modification beyond the user interface is certainly *not* the intended use of the product, making a programme like the WoW Machinima Tool a potentially resistive force.

In many cases, machinima filmmaking using private servers and modification tools can nevertheless be considered involuntary rather than deliberate forms of resistance. The creator of WoW Machinima Tool is fully aware that his programme does not sit well with *World of Warcraft*'s exploitation policy:

> It *ONLY uses simple direct memory modification* to gain access to its features and ability to change variables in the game memory. *It does not use any form of code / dll injection or attempt to call functions* in any other way. It currently accesses playerbase, playercam, speccam, worldtime and weather soon too. The *World of Warcraft* Machinima Tool *does not alter any gameplay related features.*
> [...]
> From a Ethical point of view this application still does violate the Terms of Use. However not the bottom line for the policy itself. But help machinima authors to express Azeroth and beyond, and thereby help other players "mentally" explore it on 2nd hand (Lund 2007, emphasis in original).

Even though the aim of the tool is to give machinima audiences the possibility to explore Warcraft's fictional universe indirectly through the medium of film and to provide machinima filmmakers more means of expression, the tools *could* be used by those with a view to exploit or cheat. Fearing this, Lund states that he is 'still not 100% sure' whether he should keep the project open source, 'since I know it in the end can cause more damage than good for a project like this' (ibid.). He concludes his discussion on the tool's legal status with an open question addressing Blizzard: 'I respect any word from Blizzard about this project and will take any word to consideration' (ibid.).

Blizzard's fair-use guide does not provide all the answers the *World of Warcraft* machinima scene is looking for and the company could even be said to contradict itself in the way it approaches machinima. It makes no mention of using third-party programmes or other technical means that violate the terms of use. In 2006,

before it published its machinima guide, Blizzard co-sponsored a machinima competition with up to ten-thousand dollars in prize money. All movies could be entered, provided that they comply with the entry rules, most of them comparable with those stated in the game's EULA (no profanity/obscenity, no unauthorized use of copyrighted material, no derogatory characterization of any person or group on age, race, gender and so forth).[96] No mention was made about using third-party programmes, but the contenders, among which the elaborately made and ultimately prize-winning comedy *Illegal Danish – Super Snacks* (Hackleman), could not have been made without them. *Tales of the Past III*'s creator Falch recognizes this situation from the Blizzard-organized Blizzcon community events:

> Blizzard's claim on one hand (and even stated so [...] to some other authors), that they'll "hunt down" people using private servers for machinimas or people using third party programs, even those using modelviewer, that extract files from *WoW* – while at the same time, each and every single category winner in both this year's Blizzcon and that of last year's were made using modelviewer and a lot of them using private servers (chat interview).[97]

What we see here is a situation in which Blizzard as a stakeholder seems to allow, even to sponsor, a violation of its own Terms of Use policies. Outside of the few machinima contest the company organized or sponsored, Blizzard tends to have no official opinion about individual machinima projects due to this contradictory situation, instead opting for a general endorsement of machinima as a creative process. Even though *Tales of the Past III* has an audience of over a million players, Falch was never publicly acknowledged for this achievement by Blizzard. As Falch explains: 'thing is, I use private servers and extract their MPQ files etc, things that are against their EULA – basically they can't officially compliment my movies, since they'd have a huge community uproar as to why I can use private servers while others aren't allowed to' (chat interview). To prevent community unrest and to keep the machinima scene intact as an important pillar of the game's participatory culture, Blizzard keeps silent about the practices going on behind the scenes of machinima making. In the process, machinima makers are left in the dark about what they are and are not allowed to do.

By remaining vague or ambiguous about what is allowed and what is not, Blizzard has created a situation wherein it can act, or refrain from acting, at its own discretion when it disapproves of certain machinima productions.[98] In the next section, I discuss a machinima that crosses the line between what is deemed acceptable by Blizzard, both on the levels of game design and game contract.

Exploration or exploitation

Not all machinima poach the existing fictional universe or even present a narrative setting in Warcraft's fictional universe. As explained earlier, publication platforms such as warcraftmovies.com host many other types of video productions ranging from recordings of play sessions to walkthroughs and much more. Such films have their historical roots in the replay culture of real-time strategy games (like the original Warcraft games) and the demo scenes of early first-person shooters, and they are usually of little interest to those viewers who are not also players. Those who are interested in these videos, says Lowood, 'watch them incessantly as a means for bringing detached analysis to bear on the improvement of their own skills and strategies' (2006: 364).[99] On the popular Warcraftmovies.-com, less than ten percent of all submitted films are "traditional" narrative-based machinima, the rest are recordings of in-game performances (ibid. 366-367).

Not all machinima or related video productions are in line with Blizzard's EULA or fair-use guide. You can, for example, find parodies of real commercials lampooning real-life brands with *World of Warcraft*-oriented humour, Warcraft-themed remakes of music videos, or mischievous films showing nude characters in various stages of implied sexual conduct. In some cases, Blizzard acts on machinima of which it does not approve.

One of the machinima types Blizzard sees as particularly unwelcome, in some cases triggering the company into action in order to get them removed from hosting sites, are films focusing on extreme forms of exploration; free play practices often looking for ways to exploit the game's design. The process of making these productions not only violates the EULA, the final film might also teach other players how to do so. A machinima can, for instance, show in detail a discovered bug in the game's software that allows players to reach areas in the game world they are not supposed to visit. Such a video can subsequently cause a surge in copycat behaviour but also result in new ways to exploit such a bug that the initial discoverer did not conceive of, which then are also recorded on video and distributed to the community.

The more extreme explorers, always looking for the limits of the game's design, are seen by Blizzard as unwanted 'culture jammers', participatory culture's opposite of poachers, and in Jenkins' eyes 'classic avant-gardists' celebrating their 'own freedom from media control even as they see the "masses" as still subjected to manipulation' (2002a). By spreading their practices among the community through machinima, they entice others to join the uncontrolled fun. Jenkins disagrees with the originator of the term, Mark Dery, who sees jamming as a practice actively perverting existing mass media productions as an almost political act of counter-culturalism (Dery 1993). In his discussion on television fandom, Jenkins emphasizes that 'fans do not see television content as "ugly, dull and boring" or necessarily see themselves as acting in opposition to dominant media

institutions' (2002a). The same goes for *World of Warcraft* explorers; they usually do not want to resist the game but at the same time they want to show its hidden marvels to the rest of the community.

Whether the makers are poachers or jammers, some exploration movies have actually led to (threats of) legal action and formal changes in the game's design through patching, thereby frustrating potential copycat behaviour. In May 2005, an avid explorer by the name of Dopefish published *Exploration: The Movie*, a machinima showing content that few people outside of the core design team had ever seen. It showed characters walking through regions many thought did not even exist yet. Some of these regions have been published in the years following the movie, like the Ahn'Qiraj ruins, the Caverns of Time or the Outlands. Other regions shown still have not been announced as being in production when this study was finalized in mid-2010 and might never see the light of day in finished form. Dopefish and his explorer friends nevertheless managed to get inside of rough and temporary design versions of these regions, and in the process surprising friend and foe. Embarrassingly enough, *Exploration: The Movie* also claims to show the secretive GM Island and Designer Island, regions never meant to reach the public eye. Here, the game masters and designers "live" and play with the game's design. Among other things, we can see an explorer ride his mount over large, barren terrain with the sentence 'chum is my love monkey' written all over it, probably the work of a designer making fun of another Blizzard employee. Not surprisingly, Blizzard was not amused by this disclosure of secret content, and some of the websites hosting the movie were asked to take it down.[100]

A follow-up movie by the same team called *Nogg-aholic the Movie* (Dopefish & Forg) appeared in November 2005. Even though this movie featured an even bigger collection of explorations of *World of Warcraft*'s hidden content, it was not pursued by Blizzard in the way *Exploration the Movie* had been. One major difference was that this new production did not *show* how to use exploits to explore terrain normally hidden from view. *Exploration the Movie* at one point shows an exploit technique that has become known as "wall-walking" – walking up a steep hill at a very specific angle making it possible to "stick" to the surface, enabling players to climb them. Through the mountaineering-like wall-walking, players were shown how to get up the hills surrounding the human city of Stormwind, showing the see-through "backside" of the city's architecture, a façade of hardly discernable forms and textures. *Nogg-aholic: the Movie* does not show the technique itself, lessening the potential for copycat behaviour.

In contrast to most exploration videos, the creators of these machinima productions were far more dedicated to providing a resistive commentary on the game. Judging from the Nogg-Aholic blog, wall-walking and exploring in general is very much seen as an act of defiance in Jenkins' original meaning of culture jamming.[101] Clicking on the topic 'why do we wallwalk?' on the blog leads to a six-panel cartoon, showing a man who tells a friend why he enjoys walking on a

little wall on his way to work. The man frames his activity as a 'pleasing physical activity' which elevates/estranges the wall-walker from the surrounding world ('for a minute when I'm done the world is strange') as well as its inhabitants ('I pass these rich fucks with their little bags of dogshit – shithandlers in fancy track suits').[102] This suggests that the wall-walkers see their deviant practices as a transformative experience that not only provides an altered view on the fictional world but also sets them apart from players who just follow *WoW*s dominant play strategies. It is not the continuous collecting of bigger, better and more expensive items – one of *WoW*s core instrumental goals – that makes these wall-walkers happy; it is the gratification of free play in its purest form.

Additionally, the blog offers a series of posts entitled 'Why *WoW* is a bad game', which provides a host of reasons why the owners of the blog are dissatisfied with the core game as designed by Blizzard. Their stake in the *Exploration* and *Nogg-Aholic* machinima productions seems clear: they want to break open established norms in, and views on, the game. The films are both explorations of the game's limits and at the same time critiques or exposés of the game's merits and failures. The fact that Blizzard actually took steps to limit the distribution of *Exploration: The Movie* both established and confirmed the explorers as rebellious, strengthening the exploration community and pushing it underground.

The attention to these machinima productions contributed to the popularity of wall-walking as a form of exploration, with the initial films and their subsequent removal from video sites by request of Blizzard spawning a multitude of machinimas showing off new discoveries. Blizzard, however, eventually announced that it officially considered wall-walking an exploit of the game's design. Many explorers reacted furiously: why take away this "innocent" form of free play? Blizzard Community Manager Caydiem reacted on the community forums:

> Now, I completely understand the desire to defend the act of cliff-walking, but I want you to step back for a second and look at it objectively – cliff-walking is the act of hitting a very steep slope at juuuuust the right angle so you don't fall down. If you hit it normally, you would slide to the bottom. That is an exploit, as it's doing something that goes against the proper game mechanics (in this case, the steep slope stopping people from gaining access to these areas). It's a small exploit, mind – nothing horrendous or game-breaking – but it's an exploit nonetheless.
>
> As such, I want you to understand that there's no way that we should allow this exploit in the game. It does cause problems in PvP – accessing areas you should not in order to gain an advantage over the enemy. Yes, exploring is fun, and it's one of my personal joys in these games, but this particular method of exploration was never meant to exist and cannot be condoned (posted by "Caydiem", 28 November 2005).[103]

Soon after, patch 1.9.0 (released 3 January 2006) removed the possibilities for wall walking.[104] As a farewell to their favourite pastime, a group of dedicated explorers did one last wall walking trip on the evening before the implementation of the patch, capturing their adventures in the nostalgia-ridden machinima *Last Wallwalk the Movie* (Dopefish 2006).[105]

The case of wall walking and its removal from the game by patching reveals the influence that divergent forms of free play – especially when they are recorded and distributed through popular machinima – can have on formal changes in the game's design. In this case, players were appropriating the game in ways Blizzard did not expect them to and, ultimately, decided to hinder them from doing so any further. Usually, exploration is more about immersing oneself in the fictional world than it is about achieving structural goals – a form of play that is allowed, even encouraged by Blizzard through the environmental design of the game world. The fact that wall-walking also caused players to exploit more goal-oriented content – for example in the PvP battleground situations Caydiem pointed out above – caused unwanted overlap between free and instrumental play. Not only did players get to places they should not be, they also caused unfairly balanced game situations. Cultural poaching and jamming became so intertwined that Blizzard ultimately found itself reacting with the removal of the possibilities for wall-walking altogether.

The stakes of wall-walkers are about valuing the freedom to explore, and to play and otherwise behave in such a way as to defy the norm; machinima movie-making is an important tool to express these values. Even if Blizzard would appreciate the free play forms of the explorers, it cannot condone what it sees as exploitation. Patching out the option of wall-walking stops the practice altogether, whether it is used innocently or deviously. Players valuing exploration beyond the limits set by Blizzard are continuing their efforts to explore and exploit. Machinima showing their activities still appear on many video hosting sites, including Warcraftmovies.com, as well as in peer-to-peer networks – placing them further out of the reach of Blizzard's sphere of influence.

In this chapter, I've shown practices that widen the possibilities for free play by extending or adjusting the fictional universe as designed by Blizzard, involving the use of third-party programmes, exploits and other deviations from the core game. Such practices, meant for and/or captured by machinima filmmaking, can lead to battlefields of negotiation with other players or, in some cases, Blizzard, who might consider these forms of participatory culture undesirable. Not all "illegal" practices are punished by Blizzard, as in the use of certain third-party tools used to produce popular machinima such as *Tales of the Past III*. This is because Blizzard has (or takes) the freedom to differentiate between "good" and "bad" appropriation. This decision-making process is not necessarily negotiated with players, nor is it entirely transparent; machinima makers remain uncertain about whether their practices of appropriation and creative productions move within or

stray beyond the contractual boundaries of the game. While this does not stop players from engaging in machinima filmmaking practices and distributing their productions to the community, it does show the fickle nature of setting, or wanting to set, boundaries for creative appropriations of games such as *World of Warcraft*.

14: The Fragmented and the Multiple

In January 2006, Blizzard released patch 1.9, titled *The Gates of Ahn'Qiraj*, which implemented highly anticipated new content. This patch would finally open a huge gate in the south of the fictional world which had remained sealed since *WoW*'s release, offering access to the mysterious city-kingdom of Ahn'Qiraj which consisted of two major raid dungeons. For the first time in *World of Warcraft*'s history, new content was not instantly accessible to the players upon release of the patch. Opening the gates to Ahn'Qiraj (and thus the new content) required players to participate in a "War Effort"; without this effort, the gates would remain shut. As I will show in this chapter, this design decision led to major struggles between different player groups, each displaying different stakes in opening the gates.

I will not primarily investigate, however, how the battlefield of negotiation concerning the opening the Gates of Ahn'Qiraj was triggered but rather how players negotiated the differences of opinion and agency within this situation. It therefore deals with issues of (self-) governance in times of social unrest among a player community. The difference between this chapter and the previous ones is twofold. First, I do not look at what players can and cannot do but what players can and cannot *say* within *World of Warcraft*'s contractual bounds. Therefore, this chapter is less about negotiation play and more about negotiating communication. Second, I look less at individual player practices but focus more on a player community as a whole through participatory observation of a specific realm during a time of distressing events. And on the realm I was active on, agitation was surely noticeably.

Let me quickly explain what the patch entailed. Opening the Gates of Ahn'Qiraj required two acts from the player community, which also called for a certain degree of cooperation between the competing Alliance and Horde factions. To begin with, there was a (voluntary) assignment for all players to collect nearly four million items (supplies for the war effort such as bandages, food and so on), a requirement without which the opening of the gates would not commence.[106] As the new Ahn'Qiraj content behind the gates consisted of two new raid dungeons aimed only at the raiding community, many non-raiding players did not bother to participate in this collecting effort. The second part of the war effort consisted of a series of extremely difficult quests involving visits to all of the most

challenging dungeons, as well as collecting another 40,000 (and much more difficult to collect) items. This assignment was not meant for the general player community but only for the most hardcore raiding guilds, many of whom put in the effort to be the first to complete the tasks at hand. According to members of the raid community I had spoken to in the realm in which I was active, only three raiding groups had, at the moment of the patch's release, managed to beat the dungeons' bosses which formed the threshold for partaking in the Ahn'Qiraj quest series – meaning that this new challenge was truly for the very best raiders only. Blizzard even introduced a competitive element in the form of a sceptre that functioned as a key for the gates – only one player within each raiding group who managed to finish the challenges could receive this sceptre. The first sceptre to strike a gong near the gates would start the actual opening of the gates.

By wielding this sceptre, a raiding community could obtain the key to unlock the new content for all players on a realm, and the power it exerted became the basis for the battlefield of negotiation that would unfold. Even though the new Ahn'Qiraj content was solely aimed at the top raiding guilds, other players also had stakes in the actual opening of the gates. The opening event itself, dubbed "the War of the Shifting Sands" by Blizzard, was introduced as a major happening in *World of Warcraft*'s fictional universe, including a pre-scripted re-enactment of the historical events by famous NPCs which led to the initial closure of the gates, as well as a ten-hour invasion of giant insectoid creatures all over Azeroth. Understandably, players invested in *World of Warcraft*'s fiction did not want to miss out on this one-time-only event. Even if they were not interested in the Ahn'Qiraj raiding content, they considered the opening as an event that was also theirs.

For the first time in *World of Warcraft*'s history, a small handful of players therefore held the key to new formal content as well as when this content would become accessible. By gaining the power to decide when to open the gates, they could also exclude or include other players in the opening event. This power asymmetry between a few raiding guilds and the rest of the player community was granted to them through Blizzard's design of the event. These raiding guilds, then, acquired a level of agency over the game normally reserved for Blizzard alone, while other players remained powerless.

Before continuing with the battlefield of negotiation that took place prior to and during the opening of the gates in my realm, it is useful to discuss some basic power hierarchies in and around *World of Warcraft* in terms of agency over the game's design and regulation or governance of its community. Both the powerful role of the sceptre-holders (and the resulting power asymmetry with other players) and the way the community upheaval was dealt with by Blizzard are strongly linked to the way *World of Warcraft*'s formal community governance is structured.[107]

Community control, controlling community

As I have shown in earlier chapters, players are constantly negotiating the rules of play on the levels of game design, social codes of practice, cultural norms and values, and game contracts, but in many cases the only stakeholder with formal influence over the core game is Blizzard. Players can modify their user interface; they can play in a divergent or devious manner; they can role-play or produce fan fiction; they can create behavioural norms; but they do not have access to the game's code. Nor do players have access to the managerial tools of Blizzard, both within the game and on the official forums. Blizzard is not a faceless entity but has an actual presence in *World of Warcraft*'s community through Game Masters (GMs, primarily active within the game) and Community Managers (CMs, primarily active on the forums). Using the tools at their disposal, these Blizzard employees help, police and in other ways govern and support the player community in ways that players are unable to do so by themselves.

The sceptre-holders during the Gates of Ahn'Qiraj events found themselves in a position between the relatively powerless players and the "all-powerful" Blizzard. This created a situation in which the distribution of formal power was more varied rather than strictly oppositional, a situation which might not usually be common in *World of Warcraft* but nonetheless is important, even fundamental, to many of the game's precursors.

Comparing MUDs and *World of Warcraft*, game researcher Torill Mortensen points out that when it comes to player creativity, '*WoW* allows it, whereas MUDs depend on it', explaining that in MUDs 'new administrators, builders, and developers are recruited from among the player base or from friends of the current developers' (2006b: 411). In many MUDs, players are not just players, they are also active on various levels of influence over the core game experience. MUDs thus present a hierarchical power order far more complex than just powerless players and all-powerful company employees or, as they are called in many MUDs, "Gods". In between basic players and Gods, we can find more privileged players including the so-called "wizards". As the highest achievable title for a person who is not part of the initial design team or in other ways employed by the company, wizards have access to all administrative functions of the MUD except for direct access to the main code. As virtual worlds scholar Elizabeth Reid explains, these privileged players are not democratically elected but often chosen by the Gods on the basis of demonstrated talents, be it imaginative object design or excellence in conquering the game world (1999: 119). As they are so experienced in the game and its challenges, wizards – or "wizzes" as game designer Richard Bartle calls them – are 'on the whole no longer concerned with the virtual world *per se*, just in its inhabitants' (2004: 165-166, emphasis in original). These privileged players actively help to manage both the game and the community, helping out and, if needed, punishing players for any wrongdoing. This

level of self-governance by players greatly differs from *World of Warcraft*'s community organization. In MUDs we see a system where basic players can raise considerably their influence as participants, leading to both governance and development becoming a collective effort.

In contrast with MUDs, *World of Warcraft*'s "Gods" (the CMs and GMs) usually do not share their power with players. One significant reason is that most MMORPGs form a business, while most MUDs are non-commercial – the companies behind MMORPGs simply cannot afford to have players potentially ruining their game through mismanagement. Comparing this situation to real-world political situations, Castranova compares the dictatorial, non-sharing power of commercial MMORPG companies to despotism (even going as far as to call them tyrants): 'for reasons involving business competition and the like, the developer state does not make any efforts to legitimize its rule through, say, effective lines of communication or transparent decision-making processes' (2005: 208). This does not have to be a problem, though, because bad governance in these worlds results in the game's "citizens" – and paying customers – walking away. This could create a 'highly efficient despotic regime that, thanks to competition with other despotic regimes [ie. other commercial MMORPGs], does its best to provide legitimate services for the people' (ibid.). The problem is, these service representatives are spread out thinly and, unlike the wizards of the MUD, are not participating as players in the game. The "government" remains a mostly invisible force that only shows itself when the EULA is broken (such as in the prior case studies of this chapter).[108]

In the case of *World of Warcraft*, Blizzard does not use/employ players as in-game customer service assistants or as any other official form of co-governance where players receive more agency in the game or in its community than other players.[109] Blizzard's GMs and CMs do indeed offer valuable help and assistance to the community, but unlike the wizards do not do so out of sheer philanthropy. They employ service managers whose job it is to uphold the law in the form of the EULA and ToS. Due to the costs of employing all these customer service workers, explains Castranova, a 'for-profit government will provide just enough service to maintain its population', which in practice often means that the players are left to govern themselves, without any formal power to actually do so (2005: 214). The fact that all players are equal (be it equally "powerless") can be an advantage over the more varied power hierarchy of MUDs, where privileges can be used for favouritism (Reid 1999: 126). But without the constant presence of GMs and CMs within the game and on the forums due to constraints dictated by commercial concerns, Castranova ultimately sees not despotism but 'anarchy spiced with occasional profit-oriented tyranny' as the most common governmental situation in modern MMORPGs (2005: 210). In the case of the Gates of Ahn'Qiraj event, "profit-oriented tyranny" came to the fore, as some players began to disagree with the notion that they needed to work for content they had already paid for through

their monthly subscription. More outspoken opponents of the mass collection of items even called this part of the war effort "slave labour".

When one particular player or a guild within a MMORPG such as *World of Warcraft* suddenly *does* acquire real power that can change or affect the whole community – "being wizard for a day", so to say – it can lead to unique situations of strife between players. This happened with the opening of the Gates of Ahn'Qiraj. As I show next, in the battlefield of negotiation that ensued in the realm I was observing, despotism and anarchy were felt as different stakeholders both claimed agency over the situation.

With great power comes great responsibility

The main actors in the Ahn'Qiraj case were those who, after weeks of intense instrumental group play, finally acquired the means to open the gates in the form of the sceptre. A character named Fang, a member of a Horde raiding guild named Heroes of Thrall (HoT), and Cassandra, a member of an Alliance raiding community called The Alliance League (TAL), became the sceptre holders and decided to join forces to open the gates together.[110] Both groups worked intensely to get their hands on the sceptre, and opening the gates together was seen as a welcome inter-faction gesture. As the most vocal sceptre holder on the realms' forum, part of the dedicated European *World of Warcraft* forums, TAL's Cassandra became the most prominent figurehead of the endeavour for the rest of the community. Communication about their progress was made public through the realm forum.

While initially being very open about the whole process, the raiding guilds became more hesitant and even somewhat secretive about the extent of their progress after a negative experience with the realm's player community. An earlier public announcement of a large event by TAL and HoT that was part of the quest series to reach the sceptre attracted many other players and with them unwanted disruptive behaviour such as ganking and spam in the various chat channels. The raiders and players interested in the events taking place (the historical re-enactment, the invasion) thought such devious players ruined the experience. As Cassandra later recalled in a forum post:

> We made that one public. And I still regret it, as what was supposed to be a really nice event was ruined by people yelling "OMFG, I PAYD 10G IN TRAVEL FOR THIS??", "LOL DOWN IN FRONT" and finally "GANK THE HORDE!" after everything was done. The people writing back and forth through the event mounted weren't really helping either (posted on the official EU forums, 1 March 2006).[111]

Expecting the worst with a large public opening of the actual Gates of Ahn'Qiraj – in other realms where the gates had already opened, massive player presence even crashed the realm's servers – TAL and HoT decided to make the event semi-public through an invitation-only system. The player community was informed through the forum that they could "whisper" (a direct, personal message) either the Horde or Alliance sceptre holders about the date and time of the opening in-game in order to allow access to those interested while discouraging troublemakers. What sounded like a good idea quickly turned sour when someone under the name "Deepfroat" suddenly posted the date and time in a new forum thread called "The AQ Gate Scandal" (posted 2 February 2006).[112] As previously explained, players can only post on the official forums by logging in with one's personal account, and as a result, most players post on the forums as their main characters. Deepfroat can be identified as a pseudonym because this particular character was only level one and as such was in all probability an alternative character created solely for this posting. Although sceptre holder Cassandra later found out who was behind this pseudonym – 'I know who and hold no hard feelings to him' (chat interview, 14 June 2006) – her first reaction to Deepfroat's post was less forgiving:

> Congratulations in ruining it for all those who wanted to see it.
> Was it really so hard to contact Fang or me if interested?
> We're changing the date. And keeping it completely secret this time.
> If you need to blame anyone, blame this guy (posted 28 February 2006).

To recapitulate this complex series of events: the gate-opening event was the main stake for all involved. A broad and varied segment of the realm community wanted to witness it but the raiding community carrying the sceptre to open the gates attempted to find a way to limit the number of players present during the event through a social threshold (the whispering method). Though difficult, it was nonetheless possible for non-raiders to participate in the events; the raiding community attempted to distribute or at least negotiate their hard-won power with other stakeholders (particularly those interested in *World of Warcraft*'s fiction) without sacrificing the experience of the event itself – that is, until Deepfroat spoiled their plan by announcing the date and time to the entire realm community. This caused the sceptre holders to withdraw from an open process, leaving other stakeholders without any means of knowing when the gates would open. Suddenly, the sceptre's power was no longer shared but monopolized by the raiders.

The reaction of the sceptre holders surprised quite a few players, especially those who did contact the sceptre holders through whispers. In hindsight, sceptre holder Cassandra explained her actions as a slight overreaction: 'I felt hurt and betrayed. No other way to explain it. So I lashed out' (chat interview). What fol-

lowed on Cassandra's post was a slew of reactions either supporting the sceptre holders' case or flaming commentary about this Deepfroat character. With increasingly more people joining the discussion, opinions on the matter began to shift. While most agreed that what Deepfroat did was inexcusable, the decision to make the opening of the gates a private event was met with antipathy. One of the first to vent their concerns was a player called Raidor:

> It annoys me that TAL and HoT can choose to keep this hidden just for themselv. Doing that scepter quest wasnt that hard work i think, and there were other guilds \ coms [communities] on the server that would be more than glad to do it. This is a WORLD event, not a event for 2 raid communities. Alot of people worked hard to open these gates, and now you're just screwing everyone over... way to go (if the server will crash at the event. There's nothing you can do about it, and it will do so even if you keep it secret or not. The place will be packed with tons people 2 minutes after you hit the gong. you guys gonna make a human shield outside the place and say to people invite only. /shoo?) (posted 28 February 2006).

Another player joined the discussion with a similar comment:

> I would love to assist and witness such a unique event, but considering the elitism and arrogance shown by those organizing it, I might as well just try to be there on my own, or just curse them for their pride and selfishness on keeping to themselves an event that the whole server worked on.
>
> I overheard that on a certain server the guild taking care of the scepter, once they took it, they asked for a rescue to the rest of the server in the shape of gold among other things. While what's being done on [this realm] isnt that bad, it will certainly kill any hint of reputation that these two guilds had (posted by "Pehar", 28 February 2006).

TAL and HoT's argument that they deserved a more private opening rather than a public one – after all, they were the ones who finished the difficult quest series and grind sessions – was not accepted by many non-raiding players, though several raiders also voiced their concerns. With these groups colliding, and with more players joining in, the discussion progressively turned into a large flame war within a twenty-four-hour period. At one point, a poster called Kratora provokingly suggested that the raid communities were "basement virgins". After flaming back with comparable sexually tinted remarks, and subsequently deleting these, HoT's Worgal reacted with:

> It's people like you who drive raiding communities to be selfish/elitist and such about these things, you and the people of your kind are not a welcome contribute to my gaming experience nor my everyday life.
>
> And simple to say this, yes it was wrong of me to consort to flaming and sexual remarks and sinking to your level.
>
> But for all I care right now, let the AQ gates open, let the server crash. Why should the communities try to do a nice thing when apparently they get flames/name called/harassed no matter what they do (posted 2 March 2006)

In the end, the guilds did announce that the gate opening would be a public event, with the date and time no longer being a secret. The Gates of Ahn'Qiraj were opened in the early Sunday morning hours of 4 March 2006, with the announcement coming the night before. The raiding community's initial efforts to keep the event relatively stable did not turn out successfully; several server crashes occurred before, during and after the opening event, and excessive connection latency (better known as "lag") made playing nearly impossible for hours. The fact that the opening of the gates became a public event instead of a private affair for the raiding guilds involved did, however, result in peace (or at least a temporary ceasefire) between the raiding community and the sub-communities that had formed to oppose them.

As Bartle points out, successful virtual worlds often reach a point of balance in which all different types of players are content enough with each other's presence that they will stay and play (2004: 133). While I did not encounter any players actually leaving the game because of the Ahn-Qiraj incident, the events described above did reveal tensions between different groups of players, each with their own play preferences, interests and stakes. With only the raiders getting new content with the opening of the Gates of Ahn-Qiraj, for non-raiders, part of this tension was the result of a lack of attention to their needs by Blizzard. At the same time, the raiders were left in a position where they now suddenly had to contend with the entire player community about an event that many considered primarily theirs. A key element in the build-up of tension, however, was the sceptre and the power it held. If one group of players is offered the power of access to new content that many other players also desire, the equilibrium between player groups becomes unbalanced, and the differences between player groups becomes more pronounced and problematized. It shows that a game (or at least a realm's) community that might appear whole and balanced can become rather fragmented when faced with stressful situations due to power asymmetries.

Playing identity and community

The community fragmentation mentioned above was not extinguished but rather ignited by identity play. According to communication scholars Beth Kolko and Elizabeth Reid, it is exactly the fragmentation and multiplicity of virtual identities in worlds like these that appear potentially problematic for community building in virtual environments in terms of social coherence and continuity (1998: 220). As they explain, 'it is all too easy on-line to find oneself becoming entrenched in a position that is increasingly indefensible or merely uncomfortable to maintain', for instance during flame wars, while it is equally easy to abandon that position by abandoning the persona through which it was projected (ibid.). While the options for building and rebuilding characters and thus a virtual identity (or identities) differ with each MUD or MMORPG, in *World of Warcraft* the notion of easy abandonment as described above is problematic.

In *World of Warcraft*, identities are bound to and articulated through player characters, both in game and on the dedicated forums. The switching costs – the cost of abandoning everything you have with a particular character to start a new one – are high, as identities are linked to the enormous time investment related to levelling up these characters. Making a controversial character "disappear" to avoid harassment from other players is thus emotionally and financially costly if that character has been created through months or even years of play. For the companies behind these games, high switching costs can even be beneficiary. As Castranova points out, 'if switching costs are high', it becomes less attractive for players to move over to a competing MMORPG, potentially resulting in a situation where 'the amount of government service necessary to keep the citizenry sedentary is low' (2005: 214). Through the years, Blizzard introduced different character re-customization services for a price: a name change (€8), appearance and name change (€15), realm transfer (€20), race change (€20) and faction change (€25). In doing so, Blizzard made switching costs a very real part of virtual life in *World of Warcraft*.

One would think that due to the more stable link between characters and identities due to high emotional and financial switching costs, *World of Warcraft* would produce relatively stable communities. As all players can create several characters without other players knowing which characters are played by the same person, both identities and communities can still be fragmented and multiple. Additionally, we should keep in mind that these players are not bound to a community, a certain realm of the game, or even the game itself. As virtual worlds scholar Vili Lehdonvirta points out, individuals are 'simultaneously part of numerous other social worlds, which shape their identity and regulate their behaviour' (Lehdonvirta 2010). The fact that players can create new characters on a whim just to post sensitive matters on the dedicated forums, as was the case with Deepfroat, and delete them shortly after is still quite easy and cost effective. The same goes for

starting flame wars on the forums, spamming the in-game channels with advertisements for gold sellers, or verbally assaulting other high-level players in-game through whispers. According to Cassandra, the latter actually happened to TAL members during the flame wars on the forums (chat interview).

Even though the stakes may not always be significant in flame war situations (I have witnessed flame wars erupt about very futile matters), the means for players to wreak havoc within the bounds of the character creation system run deep. Flame wars or other forms of social upheaval are hard to solve or contain by players themselves, as they have been granted no formal power by Blizzard to keep fighting parties apart or to correct or punish wrongdoers. The "Gods" of *World of Warcraft*, however, do have such power, most notably from the perspective of the game contract. Investigating the way these Blizzard employees handled the situation in the realm I was observing during the Gates of Ahn'Qiraj events provides valuable insight into collisions between powerful and powerless stakeholders in this battlefield of negotiation.

When power asymmetry causes virtual community breakdown and civil unrest, virtual law and order are useful tools to avert chaos. In MUDs, for example, "toading" is a well-known way to deal with offenders of a community's peace. It represents the practice of Gods and Wizards 'using their special powers to change the name and description of the user to present an unpleasant appearance (traditionally that of a warty toad) and the moving of the user to some very public area of the MUD where other users can taunt and chastise him or her' (Reid 1999: 117). Toading can also result in the total annihilation of a player's account, making the practice a virtual death warrant (Dibbell, 1998: 18).

Toading is a community-appeasing way to show that law and order is indeed something players themselves are involved in, of which we do not find a counterpart in *World of Warcraft*. Players have the ability to report other players' wrongdoings, which is a form of self-surveillance; however, they cannot act on them themselves in any formal way, which can be seen as a lack of self-governance. Not having the manpower to police all situations of player struggle, Blizzard's GMs and MCs primarily come into action when their EULA is being violated (for instance in the case of RMT of exploitation practices). When the violations are of a social or behavioural nature, Blizzard usually does not punish perpetrators publicly. Instead, they temporarily or indefinitely ban them from the game and/or official forums.

Blizzard did eventually act during the ongoing negotiation processes between player groups concerning the opening of the gates, but not in a way that most players were expecting. At some point during the ongoing flame wars, a friend of Cassandra posted the following under the header "Well isn't this comical":

> After God knows how many pages of absolute mess and utter stressed debate over something Cassandra and Fang were doing for the community, I log in

> this morning and find Cassandra, of all people, has been banned from the forums.
>
> The grounds cited were verbal harassment.
>
> It makes me seriously question the eyesight of our CM's on these forums. Are you sure you didn't intend to ban half a dozen people trolling that thread with anti-raider remarks?
>
> Now seriously. Which one of you clowns was it that got her banned? (Posted by "Kellandra", 3 March 2006)

As became clear soon after, Cassandra was banned from the forums for forty-eight hours for severely threatening the aforementioned character Kratora (who had become one of the most prominent opponents of HoT and TAL's actions). Whether it was unfair to punish a player for (over)reacting after an endless barrage of verbal assaults against her and her raiding group was hardly relevant for Blizzard – and if it was, the Community Managers certainly did not show it. The fact that Cassandra went beyond the boundaries set by the forums rules and guidelines during the back-and-forth flaming was the main reason and justification for Blizzard to place a temporary ban on this player.

As the contractual rules for participating on Blizzard's dedicated forums have been accepted by all players, it is hard to argue that Blizzard acted unjustly in this situation. It does, however, point to the fact that instead of offering a solution like the somewhat medieval but community-appeasing toading of the MUD, now those in power only swoop down from above to uphold the EULA and ToU without any direct or transparent communication with the community. Eventually, the discussion thread following Kellandra's post, which mostly consisted of a new flame war on the fairness of the ban, was "locked" by a Blizzard CM with the austere statement:

> Please respect the forum guidelines by keeping all discussions in a civil tone, especially if you reply to a poster of a different opinion than your own.
>
> If you keep a civil tone when posting, you will not get banned (posted by Vaneras, 3 March 2006).

Community governance through EULA and ToU enforcement here covers, and even tries to subdue, the anarchy that arose due to the fact that players had no real means of governing themselves while negotiating their stakes in the Gates of Ahn'Qiraj incidents. Verbal harassment aside, Blizzard also remained impartial on the larger issue of whether or not the raiders should have the right to keep the

opening a secret. Actions on behalf of one group of stakeholders (for example the raiders) on this realm would force them to take a similar stance on all realms, where different player groups might have similar, different or no problems at all.

While exceptions exist, the multiplicity of realms of MMORPGs also marks a difference between them and MUDs, where all action tends to take place within one world. In theory, in *World of Warcraft*, players who do not like the community of the realm they play in can switch characters to another realm (at a certain cost, that is). While the community in this realm might be different, from the perspective of game contracts it is treated exactly the same. Players cannot, however, change the realm itself into something else (for instance from a PvP to PvE type of play setup) without access to the necessary powers, whereas in MUDs, 'if players are not happy with the game as it is played, they develop a new one' with the privileges they already have (Mortensen 2006b: 411). Due to the multiplicity of realms and the impartiality it requires to manage them as one singular game, Blizzard's in-game and on-forum assisting and policing of the players is based on objective contractual agreements and codes of conduct and less so on subjective moral or ethical judgments.

Impartial or not, Blizzard was acutely aware of the possibilities and dangers of giving one group of players power over the revealing of new content before handing this power over to the players. At the time patch 1.9 was released in January 2006, Blizzard's Jeff Kaplan spoke about their upcoming Ahn'Qiraj event in a *New York Times* interview:

> This is the first time that we've really put all of the power in the hands of players. So you see some really interesting things going on. In some places, you see multiple über-guilds that have treated each other with respect, or who have called a truce, and are engaged in some massive collective farming. You see a lot of guilds setting up contests to encourage others to participate. The event really comes down to the politics and diplomacy on each realm (Schiesel 2006: 2).

Blizzard's intentions, as shown through Kaplan's remarks, echo Castranova's idea of MMORPGs as possible 'petri dishes for social science' (2006a: 170). As this chapter only investigates one such petri dish, I do not claim to offer a broad, cross-realm inquiry of the Ahn'Qiraj case. As such, the situation described here was experienced differently on all other realms. I nevertheless came across more stories of severe power struggles during and after the event. A wiki post on the US Illidan realm, for example, lists 'The Gong Affair' as one of the most (in)famous events to take place among its players, with some guilds still being "blacklisted" by the community for using the sceptre while other guilds were not present to witness the event.[113] Kaplan talked about 'really interesting things going on', and the aim of this chapter has been to show just that in the form of a temporary

community fragmentation. Both the power introduced through the sceptre and the resulting politics and diplomacy mentioned by Kaplan were largely bestowed upon one particular subgroup of players: the raid community. Implementing such power asymmetries in the design of a game like *World of Warcraft* remains a tricky affair. If not all subgroups agree that the privileged group handled this power in the right way, and when they have no means to negotiate such asymmetries in any democratic way but are subject to the whims of those with the power, a community can turn on itself.

In this and the previous two chapters, I have investigated what can best be described as the difficulties that different stakeholders in *World of Warcraft* encounter when disagreements arise about what is "good" and what is "bad" behaviour in or around the game. Investigating the various ways in which not just social codes of practice but also forms of contract and management play a part in stakeholders' efforts to claim agency and ownership over the game has allowed me to shed light on the question of how both players and Blizzard situate themselves in battlefields of negotiation where certain forms of play and/or appropriation of the game are preferred above others. Blizzard's active part in negotiation processes that tackle breaches of contract is, in most cases, greeted positively by the player community. The codes of practice that players create and (re-)negotiate among themselves are not always sufficient to deal definitively with devious behaviour. From observation and experience, I can say that most players, for instance, agree with Blizzard's tough stance on the black market of the Real-Money Trade, even if it results in some collateral damage (like my temporary ban from the game due to supposed involvement in RMT activities). The RMT case study, however, also demonstrated that not *all* players agree with Blizzard's tough stance against buying gold with real money. For some, acquiring gold through RMT is the only way to compete with players with more time to spend on the game. While these players can openly engage in negotiations about the rights and wrongs of such practices with other players, when interacting with Blizzard, they find that their rules on RMT are nonnegotiable.

While contractual rules of *World of Warcraft* do not stop players from breaching them, they certainly have the effect of enlarging the stakes involved, with the outcome of these battlefields of negotiation being a potential temporary or indefinite ban for the player. A pressing issue discussed in these chapters, however, is that Blizzard does not always enforce its contractual rules in a transparent way. Similar to the way black boxes are built into the game's design to keep players guessing about the inner workings of the game, vague and/or inconsequent contractual rules and the enforcement thereof leave players in the dark about what they can and cannot do within – or in the case of the machinima filmmakers discussed, *with* – the game.

The methods that Blizzard employs to govern *World of Warcraft* on the levels of game design and game contract do not make the company exceptional. In fact, many commercial virtual worlds are set up as what Lawrence Lessig calls 'merchant-sovereignties' (2006: 287). 'Our recourse with respect to merchant-sovereigns', he points out, 'is simply to take our business elsewhere' (ibid.). What I have shown in this chapter is that players do not always take what could be considered the easy way out. Manifesting a large investment in this particular game, players continuously create arenas of negotiation through which control, agency and ownership are consolidated and contested, even if it implies opposing omnipotent ruling sovereignties.

Conclusion

In July 2008, I ventured to Paris, France to visit the Blizzard Worldwide Invitational, a large convention celebrating Blizzard's computer games and spinoff products. Thousands of Blizzard fans from all over Europe and beyond – a considerable part of which were hardcore *World of Warcraft* players – gathered in a giant convention centre somewhere on the Parisian outskirts to attend developer Q&A panels, play unreleased games, get the latest scoops, buy merchandise, meet other players and be part of the Blizzard brand community. This particular edition of the Blizzard Worldwide Invitational preceded the release of the *World of Warcraft*'s *Wrath of the Lich King* expansion pack (which was playable in demo-form on the convention floor). As a player/researcher, I was both in awe of the scale of fandom present but at the same time felt a certain unease. The following excerpt comes from a blog post I published soon after the event:

> The whole thing started with a giant opening ceremony. The most fascinating part about this ceremony wasn't that the hosts whipped the crowd into a cheering frenzy for the presence of Blizzard's "superstars". That was to be expected. No, it was because these superstars included not only the designers and founders of the company but also the heads of PR, marketing and, yes, even global finance. So here was a crowd of thousands, cheering for those who did not make the games and virtual worlds they adore, but for those whose job it is to make a lot of money out of this love. [...] Most of the crowd didn't even know these "suits" (I didn't hear their names being called out due to the deafening music) but cheer they did (Glas 2008).

What this observation illustrates is that the Blizzard Worldwide Invitational is an unabashed celebration of all things Blizzard. I was amazed by the players' enthusiastic reaction to what constituted the corporate rather than creative part of the game industry. In hindsight, however, I realized that the crowd was, in fact, not just cheering for Blizzard but also for *itself*.

The reason the crowd's reaction can be considered self-celebratory has everything to do with the negotiation processes central to this book. By investigating *World of Warcraft* on the levels of game design, game play, game contract and game culture, I have shown that a traditional dichotomy between the consumer

and the producer does not convey the complexity of a game of this type. The fact that the game is designed to offer a broad range of different play styles and preferences, ranging from individual play to group play and everything in between, has attracted a wide variety of players, each with their own take on – and stakes in – *World of Warcraft*. All these players and player groups have different views on the game – what it is, how it should be played and how it should evolve – and these views guide the way they play and *play with* the game. Blizzard, as I have shown, is an especially powerful stakeholder, too. It has designed *World of Warcraft* in a very particular way, with both game design and game contracts expressing certain preferred uses through a host of formal affordances and limitations. As a company, it does not shy away from enforcing players to keep within the limits of what it deems acceptable forms of play or appropriation. Players nevertheless find ways to circumvent, deviate from or transgress these dominant uses if they so please. Power over the game therefore does not reside with Blizzard; formally, it might own the game but in reality, all stakeholders involved can (and do) claim the game to be their own. *World of Warcraft*, then, does not just contain battlefields of negotiation between stakeholders; it can be defined as a battlefield of negotiation itself.

Control, agency and ownership over the game, I argue, do not reside with either the consumer (the players) or the producer (Blizzard) but instead are constantly shifting between them. In other words, *World of Warcraft* is continuously at stake. Negotiations over what the game is, how it should be played and how it should evolve take form in various configurations of participation. As I have demonstrated throughout this book, these negotiation processes convey both converging and diverging stakes, leading to situations of both cooperation as well as conflict, which convey that power is not always distributed equally. *World of Warcraft*'s evolution over time results from these negotiation processes; it conveys the constant back and forth between Blizzard and the player community in all its ways and forms.

The fact that players themselves are just as much "owners" of the game as Blizzard, I would argue, is for a large part the reason why the crowd reacted so audaciously during the Paris convention. A game like *World of Warcraft* is, after all, as much their accomplishment as it is Blizzard's. It is their play, and the ongoing negotiation thereof, that shapes and defines the game. When, for instance, players feel the dominant strategy of leveling up is too slow, they can powerlevel through the game using walkthroughs, ignoring most of the game's emergent content by replacing it with a wholly linear experience. Battleground twinkers make shrewd use of the game's mechanics to dominate other players by fashioning a new, unique way of player-versus-player combat. Explorers put game design flaws to use to show an eager audience what lies beyond Azeroth's otherwise unscalable virtual mountains, teaching other players how to exploit the game's design in the process. It is through such processes, and others discussed in this

book, that players showcase their tactics to gain or keep control, agency and ownership over and in *World of Warcraft* – tactics that change the game considerably.

While players display a wide range of practices that ignore, bend or in other ways deviate from *World of Warcraft*'s design, players nonetheless do not possess direct access to the game's code or contract. Nor is the game designed to be appropriated and adapted by players in any formal, persistent manner. The power to truly change the game resides solely with Blizzard. Players can negotiate their own particular game experience and, through (individualized) group play, the experience of others. Players, however, have indirect rather than direct influence on *World of Warcraft*'s formal evolution. To use examples from this study: it is Blizzard, not the players, who at a certain point decided to incorporate more item options for battleground twinking into the game due to its continued popularity. It was also Blizzard, not the players, who appropriated certain player-created UI mods, making them part of the official UI. It was also Blizzard who, in a reaction to devious exploration machinima, patched the game so that wall-walking practices enabling players to escape the boundaries of the fictional world would no longer be possible. All these examples show Blizzard adjusting the game to prevent it being exploited, or attempting to change it in such a way that it becomes more appealing to the player community (and potential new players). Depending on the stakeholder you ask, the changes mentioned above constitute negative or positive evolutionary steps. Either way, these changes are triggered by players deviating from or transgressing the rules of play – deviations and transgressions which, when accepted through negotiation, become the rules of play themselves.

The concept that *World of Warcraft* does not only display continuous battlefields of negotiation but should be considered a battlefield of negotiation itself is not just an ontological claim about this particular game or similar titles. The concept of studying these negotiation processes – that is, the what, how and why of a particular media object by its various stakeholders – is easily transferred to other forms of participatory media objects and environments. Battlefields of negotiation contain the struggles that various stakeholders encounter when dealing with a contested space of interaction, struggles that have less to do with consumers vs. producer dichotomies than they have to do with the stakes these negotiating parties represent in terms of control, agency and ownership.

Looking at negotiation processes by "going native" – becoming an active player and participant in the game's community – has other benefits for research. Having spent a substantial amount of time playing the game and participating on the many websites surrounding it, I not only became a highly proficient player but, as researcher, I also managed to understand the game and the way it is played in ways not possible without actually playing. Game designer Richard Bartle has pointed out that researchers who play a game to study it eventually reach a point where they "grok" (ie. profoundly and intuitively understand) the game's con-

cepts (2010a). He does not, however, consider this process of grokking games as necessarily positive:

> Study game after game after game, eventually you'll reach the same point that game designers reach: you'll merely have to read the manual to know what a game is going to play like. Actually playing it will tell you more, yes, but with swiftly diminishing returns (2010a).

Bartle actually goes on to argue that 'anyone who advocates privileging play at the centre of Game Studies is dooming themselves, because either they are incapable of gaining any meaningful insight into their play or the gradual accumulation of such insight will rob them of their ability to enjoy playing' (2010a). According to Bartle, the bonus (or price to pay) for grokking games is that rather than finding fun in play, you now find fun in *thinking* about play (2010a). There is, however, another argument to be made when it comes to diminishing returns after prolonged play. I would argue that for the study of negotiation processes in and around games, prolonged play and even the potential reduction of fun Bartle warns against do not diminish returns per se.

At moments where play seems to become repetitive and intuitive rather than challenging, players are more prone, I argue, to engage in devious, transgressive or otherwise divergent play practices. Players usually do not use walkthroughs when they experience the game for the first time; they do so when they need to revisit it for the umpteenth time. They do not twink their first character either but use the knowledge of the game they gained with their main characters to shape a new character into a twink. Players make machinima when they have "grokked" the game. Many battlefields of negotiation, then, are born from the interplay between boredom and fun, and to truly understand why players engage in various processes of negotiation, grokking a game as a researcher can be as valuable as playing it for the first time. Whether play should be at the centre of Game Studies might remain debatable, but without prolonged play, studying – and most importantly – understanding battlefields of negotiation can be difficult indeed. For this reason alone, play is of great value to this type of research.

While play provided insight into complex processes of negotiation which was otherwise hard to attain, many of the cases presented still lean towards the activities of the more vocal and/or participatory players, especially in the later chapters. This relatively small contingent of players is responsible for the large majority of participatory contributions to the game – not only in the form of the production of creative material (fan fiction, UI mods, information wikis) but also in the form of active forum and guild participation. Both for in- and outsiders, the most vocal/active players are the face of *World of Warcraft*'s player culture, and naturally their voices are heard by Blizzard and inform the decisions the company makes in order to improve the game. They do not, however, represent all players.

We must not underestimate the influence of the "silent majority" of players who play rather individualistically or even anti-socially; who do not engage in the more socially oriented endgame content due to time constraints; who simply like to follow *World of Warcraft*'s preferred play strategies without much deviation; who may be deemed "casual" by hardcore players. These players do not just represent the lion's share of players. More poignantly, they represent the lion's share of *World of Warcraft*'s paying customers. For Blizzard, catering to their needs through game updates in patches and expansion packs is just as important for sustained success as focusing on the most active and vocal players. As these players do not stand out from the crowd, both their play practices and its influence on Blizzard's design decisions remains elusive; they are less active on forums and, arguably, deviate less dramatically (or at least less visibly) from the game's dominant strategies. I have nevertheless dedicated considerable attention to individual and individualized group play throughout this book, and investigated the way *World of Warcarft*'s design shapes such forms of play in terms of affordances and limitations, in order to provide insight into play practices that might be overlooked when only focusing on the more active, participatory players.

Additionally, there is an argument to be made about the level of control, agency and ownership that casual players wish for – both in terms of the freedom they desire in their engagement with *World of Warcraft* and in terms of the amount of authority they concede to Blizzard. Whereas the more vocal, participatory players shown throughout this book claim the game to be their own, in my experience many casual players do not seem to mind following the dominant strategies as provided by the game's design, nor do they object to Blizzard's sometimes tough enforcement of the rules. They like their play environment to be managed by an external controlling force, which they do not consider antagonistic. Game scholar Espen Aarseth negatively compares *World of Warcraft* with a theme park, a 'hollow world' where players are 'allowed to see, but not touch – let alone build or destroy' (2008: 121). For many players, however, the safe, self-contained, tightly controlled characteristic of the world of *World of Warcraft* forms the main attraction, in the same way that shopping malls, gated communities and, indeed, theme parks themselves form attractive environments for many people. This argument once more suggests that the traditional dichotomy between consumer and producer as well as the concept of convergence between the two as recognized in participatory culture are limited. In a game like *World of Warcraft*, consumers and producers do not exist in an oppositional relationship, nor are they in perfect unison when it concerns control, agency and ownership. Instead, we should think of players as a highly diverse group of stakeholders with very different needs, desires and stakes in the game. Similarly, we should be hesitant about identifying power over the game – or participatory media in general – as either a (negative) top-down or (positive) bottom-up force. Many consumers desire producers to control their leisure pastime of choice.

The fact that players with a preference for individual and individualized group play perform an important role in *World of Warcraft*'s evolution does not mean that a company such as Blizzard does not listen to the most active, community-oriented crowd. Conventions such as the one described earlier are a prime example of such attention. Other MMORPG developers take it one step further. Game developer CCP Games, for instance, has set up a "Council of Stellar Management", made up of players chosen through election, for their MMORPG *EVE Online* (CCP Games 2003). This council represents the player community in CCP Games-organized meetings and at a certain point was even transformed into its own formal department within the company (Augustine 2010: 21). Developer Bioware also initiated a player summit for their MMORPG *Star Wars: The Old Republic* (Bioware 2011), stating that the goal is to 'facilitate an open discussion between guild leaders and the game design team', adding that the event provides 'an opportunity for attendees to voice their feedback directly to the teams responsible for the design of *Star Wars: The Old Republic*, hear the team's thoughts and reasons behind design decisions, and discuss the current direction of the game' (Bioware 2012). The results of such conventions, councils and summits are subsequently communicated to the greater player base through the various community websites and other game-related websites.

Even if the players who read about these gatherings do not actively engage in the practices these gatherings often deal with (high-end raiding and PvP combat for instance), many still read about it. To use the analogy that Ducheneaut et al. give to explain how MMORPG are as much about audience/player interactions as social play, playing *World of Warcraft* is 'like playing pinball in a crowded arcade, where spectators gather around the machine to observe the best players' (Ducheneaut 2006: 7). To observe the spectators, however, participant observation through play is not always enough. Procuring access to Blizzard's databases for data mining purposes of casual play practices would, for instance, produce a valuable addition to the more qualitative research found in this book. Game researchers Nick Montfort, Nick Yee and Scott Caplan, for example, were permitted formal access to the back-end database of the MMORPG they studied, *Everquest II*, from its operator, Sony Online Entertainment, offering them a wealth of data on player behaviour beyond the most active ones. As they pointed out in 2008, 'this level of access and cooperation between a game developer and an academic research team is the first of its kind' (2008: 999). Blizzard appears to be hesitant to allow outsiders direct access to its game development. To my knowledge, Blizzard has, as of 2012, not allowed external parties direct access to their back-end databases. Without such access, Nick Yee et al. more recently compared online survey data with a large set of data made accessible by Blizzard through the Armory, a web portal that published in-game statistics of all player characters in the game. The result, a mapping between in-game preferences and real-world demographics, provides quantitative date that underscores 'a crucial point about

gamers: they play the same game for very different reasons' (Yee et al. 2012). This book has shown how these different reasons result in battlefields of negotiation through which not just play but also the game itself is subsequently defined.

While there remains much to be studied when it comes to the influence of the various different play practices as well as the battlefields of negotiation initiating or resulting from them, *World of Warcraft*'s influence is felt throughout the game industry and beyond. It has become a model for successful game development, not just in terms of income but also in terms of its huge, diverse but at the same time loyal user base who, through their participatory activities, are just as much a part of its massive success as its developer. *World of Warcraft* certainly was not the first MMORPG but it might just be one of the last of its type, at least in terms of its business model. The competition in the MMORPG genre never caught up with *World of Warcraft*'s player numbers over the past years but, at the same time, had to keep up with or surpass its production values to attract – and keep – players. The game's success forced competitors to adopt new business models, including various free-to-play options with monetization systems like micro-transactions, which no doubt influences the stakes and subsequent negotiation processes for both players and developers.

For these types of games as well as similarly shared (and therefore staked) environments beyond the realm of gaming, investigating issues of control, agency and ownership by looking at ongoing processes of negotiation between many different stakeholders on various levels of engagement shows us how complex these products of contemporary participatory culture have become. As I have demonstrated, a game like *World of Warcraft* is played, created, owned, shared, appropriated and negotiated by game designers, role-players, raiders, customer service employees, Chinese gold farmers, machinima filmmakers, UI mod builders, twinkers, Game Masters, casual players, cheaters and, yes, even researchers.

Notes

1. *World of Warcraft* was released for the Windows and Macintosh platforms in November 2004 in the US, Australia and New Zealand. The South Korean and European releases followed in early 2005, with China and other Asian countries following suit in late 2005.
2. The writer and exact origin of this text remain unknown. Who or what caused the leak has also remained unclear, even though a hacker named "Skull" was supposedly involved. Information retrieved from the *WoW*Dev EmuHistory (available through the Internet Archive, http://web.archive.org/web/20091208044610/http://wowdev.org/wiki/index.php/EmuHistory).
3. Blizzard Entertainment is a subsidiary of American game publisher Activision Blizzard Inc., one of the largest companies in the game industry, which in turn is majority-owned by French media conglomerate Vivendi SA. According to Activision Blizzard's annual report for fiscal year 2009, a 'disproportionately high percentage' of their profits come from a relatively small number of popular franchises, among which *World of Warcraft* – a game that, according to the report, surpassed the one billion dollar in net revenue threshold (2010: 4). As such, Activision Blizzard and Vivendi SA have major stakes in Blizzard and its game. The negotiations concerning *World of Warcraft*'s evolution on the corporate level between Activision Blizzard/Vivendi SA and Blizzard Entertainment are, however, beyond the scope of this study.
4. Non-humanities disciplines have developed a wide range of methodological approaches to digital games and play, some of which do not necessarily include play. Examples are surveys, interviews, server data analysis and observation of gameplay practices (for an overview, see Montfort, Yee, & Caplan, 2008).
5. A similar argument is made by anthropologist Bonnie A. Nardi, who also studied *World of Warcraft* extensively. She refers to Dewey's theory of aesthetic experience (Dewey 2005) to understand the process of playing a game. As she points out, 'to understand aesthetic experience we cannot stop at analyzing an artifact as a text, or narrative or set of functions or compositions of elements, but must also undertake to examine the actual activity in which the artifact is present' (Nardi 2010: 43).
6. As Nardi shows in het anthropological account of *World of Warcraft* in China, Chinese players are not that different from western players, liking the same elements of the game. A significant difference, however, is the setting in which the game is played: not alone at home but surrounded by fellow players in *wang ba* or Internet cafes (Nardi 2010: 179). For more studies about Chinese and other Asian *World of Warcraft* players and cultures, cf. (Lindtner et al. 2008; Kow & Nardi 2009; Nardi & Kow 2010; Lin & Sun 2011).

7. In the original *MUD1*, the 'D' stood for dungeon, as it was based on a derivative of *ADVENT* called *DUNGEN* which Trubshaw and Bartle played often (Koster 2000). The game was called *DUNGEN* rather than DUNGEoN because of the limitations early computers had for filenames. At the time of this writing, a version of *MUD1* was still playable at http://www.british-legends.com.
8. The term MUD now stands for multi-user dungeon, domain or dimension, describing a very diverse variety of virtual worlds that are possible through the online, text-based format.
9. As Reid points out, it is sometimes hard to differentiate between the two if they contain both a fantasy setting and a strong social structure. That is because categorizing MUDs depends on the styles of interaction that they encourage, and not the way they are designed and programmed (1999: 109).
10. Richard Bartle famously proposed four main player types – 'Achievers', 'Explorers', 'Killers' and 'Socializers' – each representing a different approach to game play (Bartle 1996, 2004). Achievers see virtual worlds as games, Socializers see them as social entertainment, Explorers view them as pastimes and Killers see them as a sport (2004: 136, 137). Players are not limited to one type: as they become accustomed to the game over time, players move from Killer to Explorer to Achiever to, ultimately, Socializer in what Bartle calls the main sequence of player type drift (2004: 165). While there certainly is some truth in these descriptions, Bartle's approach to player types suggests that players are always in an either/or situation at any given time. In reality, players are constantly moving between different play practices and therefore play types, even during one single play session. Psychologist Nick Yee, who has conducted extensive research into player motivations, comes to a similar conclusion, pointing out that Bartle's types force players to have primary motivations which might exclude other motivations (Yee 2005b, 2005c). Another issue with Bartle's types is highlighted by game designer and early MMORPG commentator Raph Koster. He thinks it is strange that (representational) role-players are not among Bartle's types even though they have a strong presence in these games: 'under this system, they are merely a variant of socializers, and the line between in fiction chatting and out of character chatting is blurred' (1998). While I do not wish to enter into a discussion about the different types Bartle could or should have included, Koster's remark is interesting for the distinction he makes between in-fiction and out-of-character chatting. It reminds us that players are not just playing differently but also moving in and out of different frames of engrossment.
11. An extensive case study on ignoring group play in order to speed up progress is introduced in chapter five.
12. The term "casual" can mean many things in terms of game culture. As game scholar Jesper Juul points out, there is nonetheless an identifiable stereotype of the "casual player": 'this player has a preference for positive and pleasant fictions, has played few videogames, is willing to commit little time and few resources toward playing video games, and dislikes difficult games' (2010: 8).
13. It was actually Blizzard's own lead content designer Jeff "Tigole" Kaplan who coined the term (and subsequently caused a controversy) at the 2007 Blizzard Entertainment Conference (Paul 2010: 158).

14. Shane M. McGee, speaking during the panel on 'The rules of play: Copyright and fair use in Machinima', *Play Machinima Law* conference, Stanford University, 24 April 2009.
15. It must be noted that not all members of *World of Warcraft*'s participatory culture are also active players. There is a considerable amount of ex-players who still follow developments of the game and its players, as well as people with a general interest in fantasy, MMORPGs, the *Warcraft* series and so on. Depending on their participation level, most of them will be at the lower or tail end.
16. The notion of play as an always productive form of participation fits well with what new media scholar Mirko Tobias Schäfer calls implicit participation, a design-channelled form of participation which 'does not necessarily require a conscious activity of cultural production, nor does it require users to choose from different methods of problem-solving, collaboration, and communication with others' (Schäfer 2011: 51). Rather, he explains, it is 'a design solution that takes advantage of certain habits users have' (ibid. 51).
17. The overly optimistic views inherent in Jenkins' work on convergence culture closely mirrors less academic Web 2.0 business manifestos on the co-creative consumer which, as media scholars Van Dijck and Nieborg have pointed out, makes it unclear if Jenkins offers a cultural or business model, as 'the distinction between the two is rendered entirely irrelevant because [user and creator] converge beyond distinction' (Van Dijck & Nieborg 2009).
18. A growing body of work on the appropriation of free labour by the game industry and related issues is forming (Postigo 2003, 2008; De Peuter & Dyer-Witheford 2005; Humphreys 2005; Nieborg 2005, 2011; Kücklich 2005, 2009; Balkin & Noveck 2006; Prügl & Schreier 2006; Taylor 2006a; Nieborg & Van der Graaf 2008; Dyer-Witheford & De Peuter 2009).
19. MMORPG designer Raph Koster sees managing an online community – whether a non-commercial MUD or commercial MMORPG – as an act of governance; 'Just like it is not a good idea for governments to make radical legal changes without the period of public comment, it is often not wise for operators of online worlds to do the same' (quoted in Jenkins 2006: 160).
20. In Europe, on the server zone I played, there are close to one hundred separate *World of Warcraft* realms, each with a unique IP address with which clients can communicate. They are distributed over physical locations in Paris, Frankfurt, Hamburg and Stockholm. The first part of each realm's IP address refers to one of these locations, with the latter part indicating the unique realm itself. For a European realm list including dedicated data centres and IP addresses, see: http://www.wowwiki.com/EU_English_-Realms_Info.
21. Blizzard defines third-party software as 'any third-party software, including without limitation any add-on, mod, hack, trainer, or cheat, that in Blizzard's sole determination: (i) enables or facilitates cheating of any type; (ii) allows users to modify or hack the game interface, environments, and/or experience in any way not expressly authorized by Blizzard; or (iii) intercepts, mines, or otherwise collects information from or through the game' (2004c).
22. Hoglund eventually created a piece of third-party software called the Governor, which spied on the Warden. While it does nothing more than look at the Warden's activities,

it remains unknown if using the Governor will get you banned, as no bans caused by this programme have been reported (Gilbert & Whitehead II 2007). Others have argued for less-intrusive server-based detection methods (Mitterhofer, et al. 2009).

23. Mob is an umbrella term for all the creatures roaming around in the virtual world. The term is derived from "mobiles" or "mobile objects" and dates back to *MUD1* (Bartle 2004: 102).
24. These so-called RP realms exist both in PvE and PvP varieties. RP-PvP realms did not exist upon the game's release. The first RP-PvP realms were added in patch 1.8 in October 2005.
25. Eventually, Blizzard made it possible to *migrate* characters from one realm to another if certain conditions are met (including a payment of 20 euros per character). For the full official character migration FAQ, see http://www.wow-europe.com/en/info/faq/paidcharactertransfer.html.
26. From *wowwiki.com* (http://www.wowwiki.com/Server:Agamaggan_Europe).
27. The initial game offered nine classes: the druid, hunter, mage, paladin, priest, warrior, shaman, rogue and warlock. A tenth class, the death knight, was added to the game with the *Wrath of the Lich King* expansion (Blizzard Entertainment 2008), and an eleventh, the monk, will be introduced in the *Mists of Pandaria* expansion (Blizzard Entertainment 2012). Such class types are not unique to *World of Warcraft* or the MMORPG genre; many of them can be found throughout fantasy culture, and most of them having been a staple in role-playing games since the early titles (McCubbin 2006).
28. The Alliance's draenei and worgen and the Horde's blood elf and goblin races were added to the game world with the *The Burning Crusade* and *Cataclysm* expansion packs (Blizzard Entertainment 2007d, 2010).
29. While the features to configure a character's gender – or more precisely the lack of them – have been the subject of much discussion in the discipline of cultural analysis (see for instance Cassell & Jenkins 1999; Kennedy 2002; Kafai et al. 2008), this discussion is beyond the scope of this book. Research on gender in MMORPGs, including *World of Warcraft*, is available, however. Taylor, for instance, assesses that while the hypersexualization is the same for male and female characters, in many cases women experience more hesitation in accepting this fixed perfection, perceiving conflicting meanings instead. Many female players active in *Everquest*, the MMORPG investigated by Taylor, had the feeling they had to 'bracket' or ignore character appearances to be able to enjoy the game (2006c: 110). For more views on characters, identity play and gender issues in *World of Warcraft* and other MMORPGs, see (Corneliussen 2008; Hagström 2008; Tronstad 2008; Massie 2011).
30. Male players especially appear prone to choose a female character as their favourite character to play. According to survey-based research by psychologist and game researcher Nick Yee, 23% of male players prefer a female character as their main character as opposed to 3% of female players preferring a male character. Coupled with the gender distribution data, this results in a 55% chance of a female character being played by a male while less than 1% of all male characters are played by a real-life female (2005e). As one student following a game studies course I taught once put it: 'If I'm going to play this game for such a long time, why not pick something nice to look at'. It must be noted here that in some cases, male players actively choose female

players for beneficial reasons, as male players tend to help female characters more easily than they would male characters. Thus, actively or passively fooling other male players into believing you are female can actually result in rewards (Yee 2001).

31. Adding to the basic naming policies, characters in role-playing realms are not supposed to include partial or complete sentences (Inyourface, Welovebeef, Howareyou), real-world references (Britneyspears, Austinpowers, Newyork), 'Leet' or 'Dudespeak' (Roflcopter, xxnewbxx, Roxxoryou) and immersion breaking titles (Privatemike, Knightpotatoe, Masteroftheworld). These can be deemed 'mildly inappropriate' and, among other penalties, result in a forced name change. In most cases, players report other players for using inappropriate role-playing names but in the end, what is deemed inappropriate is left to those who enforce the naming policy rules. All examples come from the official role-playing realm policy (Blizzard Entertainment 2005a).
32. This sudden appearance in the world is actually preceded by a short, introductory "cut-scene" – a non-playable moment, often in the form of a short movie – with a voiceover introducing the race, its history and your place and goal within it. The moment this cut-scene stops, play may begin.
33. The primary attributes *World of Warcraft* incorporates and keeps track of are strength, agility, stamina, intellect and spirit. Other attributes are found on gear or through upgrades like enchantments like (ranged) attack power, critical strike rating and hit rating. All these attributes are given numerical values which, through computational calculation, result in a certain amount of health (the amount of hit points a character can sustain before it "dies"); armour (the more, the higher the chances are that you can withstand physical damage); mana (the amount of magical power for spell casting); dodge chance; critical strike chance (the chance that you inflict double damage); hit chance and dps or damage-per-second. The importance (and even existence) of the attributes mentioned here varies between patches and expansion packs, with Blizzard constantly adjusting them for game balance purposes.
34. Many of *World of Warcraft*'s attributes and the way they compare to each other originate from classic wargaming, where the strengths and weaknesses of army units were also articulated through attributes (see for instance Fine 1983). This system allowed referees to calculate the outcome of battles on the basis of these numerical values, a process taken over by the computer in a game like *World of Warcraft*. Like in wargames' units, the attribute numbers of a character will tell you much about his strength and potential weaknesses. Each class, for instance, benefits from certain attributes more than from another.
35. An even more dressed-down definition proposed by Aarseth for the quest game is 'a game which depends on the mere movement from position A to position B' (2005: 2).
36. Blizzard even accommodated players uninterested in the quests' stories by changing the way the quest UI pop-ups function. In the initial version of the game's design, quest text would slowly appear to players, forcing them to take the time to read it before being able to accept a quest. From patch 1.7 (September 2005) onwards, the slow scrolling quest text could be disabled, allowing players to ignore the story bits entirely. For players uninterested in the reasons why their characters were actually sent on quests, this transformed NPC quest-givers from storytellers into purely instrumental task-providers.

37. When a character dies, his ghost is transferred to the nearest graveyard. Returning the character's ghost back from this graveyard to the spot where the dead body lies in order to resurrect it, a practice known as corpse running, is the most common way to revive a character. Some classes like the priest can also resurrect dead characters.
38. Judging from the many death stories Klastrup has gathered, death in *World of Warcraft* can provide fun and entertainment too, especially in a social context. Strategic use (or exploitation) of the death/resurrection-system can even result in gameplay advantages on one's opponent (2008: 162-163).
39. Fine takes this principle from folklorist Alan Dundes' work on 'folk ideas' as the integral components of world views (1971: 96-97).
40. Blizzard itself makes an insider joke about this situation when it lets one of the bosses in the Blackwing Lair instance, Lord Victor Nefarius, call out 'You fools! Go after the one in the dress!' to his minions, referring to the fact that the healer class almost always wears robes.
41. For this reason, many players create several characters with different classes who can jump in when needed. The drawback is that one has to put in considerable amounts of time to raise each character to the same level of strength – time that not everyone has.
42. Initially, the Honor System turned out to be one of Blizzard's most controversial implementations due to the sheer amount of time players had to put in, in order to reach military Honor ranks. At the height of its popularity, to reach the highest rank ("Grand Marshall" for the Alliance, "High Warlord" for the Horde) players needed to play weeks, even continuous months of more than ten hours a day, seven days a week. Missing a week or even a day was not on option as the danger of falling back in rank was too high. Acknowledging that such a system would lead to unhealthy situations, Blizzard replaced the old Honor system with a new one in patch 2.0.1 (December 2006), replacing the weekly honor calculation with a simpler points-per-kill system. These points could be exchanged for the same (and new) dedicated PvP rewards.
43. Good examples were the Hillsbrad Foothills including the almost adjacent towns of Southshore (Alliance) and Tarren Mill (Horde) or the The Barrens zone with the Horde town Crossroads being in the middle of a busy traveling route. Here, large gatherings of characters, often in loosely, usually chaotically organized raids, faced each other trying to improve their honor rank.
44. Attacks without mutual consent are, by design, allowed only in dedicated PvP realms . On a PvE realm, players give their consent by enabling the PvP function manually (by typing /pvp in the command window). In this case, the colour of the character's name changes to bright red (being "flagged" for combat), alerting members of the other faction that he or she can be attacked.
45. While not the sole creator of Warcraft's fictional universe, Chris Metzen is its official keeper. As a consequence, he attracts most of the blame when players' expectations are not met in newly added Warcraft fiction.
46. Rare examples of choice within quests do actually exist. In the case of The Burning Crusade's Aldor and Scryer factions, players must choose between quest-routes. Following quests from one of these factions blocks access to the other, and the other way around.

47. According to the official *World of Warcraft* website, the Horde and Alliance are actually in a state of "truce" on Normal realms, explaining on a fictional level why players from different factions cannot simply attack each other. On PvP Realms, where both factions are allowed to attack each other without warning, the website notes that the factions are "at war".
48. Similarly, the Middle-earth as presented in the MMORPG *The Lord of the Rings Online: Shadows of Angmar* (Turbine Inc. 2007) is, when measured, likely as small and compartmental as *World of Warcraft*'s version of Azeroth.
49. In the zones that were added through the expansion pack *The Burning Crusade*, the players on the highest level and with enough money could buy a mount which enables flight. Suddenly it was possible to fly over all barriers and see what lies behind or on top. Flight was nevertheless restricted to the new zones; "old" Azeroth was never designed as a fly-over zone. Hidden behind the barriers are temporary, test and/or abandoned geographical content and other environmental design work never meant to be seen by the players, proof of which came out after dedicated explorers/exploiters found ways to reach it anyway. Movies showing the hidden content are still around, some of them banned by Blizzard like the infamous *Exploration: The Movie* (Dopefish 2005), showing early designs from the expansion pack years before it came out. Exploits enabling "wall-walking" or other ways to get over, through or past the barriers are constantly being fixed by Blizzard. More about wall-walking as design exploitation will follow in chapter twelve.
50. Azeroth's transportation system is for a large part dependent on inter-city flights (with characters sitting on the backs of flying fantasy creatures like wyvern or giant eagles). Other means of transportation also exist. Between continents and other particularly large distances there are boats and zeppelins, some classes and professions enable characters to instantly zap themselves elsewhere, and characters are always able to use their own mount (if they have bought one) to speed up travel.
51. A full timeline including the location of all the games and related reading matter (novels, manga comics) can be found on the official site at: http://www.wow-europe.com/en/info/story/timeline.html (accessed January 2012).
52. Environmental storytelling is a term coined by amusement park show designer Don Carson to argue that 'by manipulating an audience's expectations, which they have based on their own experiences of the physical world', storytellers can infuse a physical space with story elements in such a way that it 'does much of the work of conveying the story the designers are trying to tell'. As Jenkins notes, this form of spatial storytelling, present in many digital games, suggests that we should think of game designers 'less as storytellers than as narrative architects' (2004: 129).
53. In a discussion on the size of *Second Life*, a virtual world growing continuously by virtue of the fact that users have no restraints in terms of their impact on the virtual environment, game designer Mike Sellers argues that unbridled spatial growth can lead to very barren landscapes. Due to its enormous size, Sellers points out, 'the average population density in [*Second Life*] is like playing in a world the size of WoW's Azeroth – but containing only nine other people' (2007).
54. It was not until the *Cataclysm* expansion pack, released in December 2010, that the old content of the leveling phase of the game received a thorough design overhaul. As

Brown points out in his study of *World of Warcraft*'s endgame, Blizzard justifies their focus on the endgame up to this point with the desire to look forward rather than backwards (Brown 2011: 80).

55. Guides are not the only alternative in this case. Commercial parties can be "hired" to power-level your character to the highest level, which often involves using people in low-wage countries to actually do the playing. More on these often controversial practices can be found in chapter twelve.
56. Parts of this chapter have been published as part of (Jørgensen et al. 2011).
57. Joana sells his guide through his website, Joanasworld.com. I bought my copy for thirty-seven dollars in 2007, almost twice the price of *World of Warcraft* itself, which demonstrates that not all of the production of participatory culture is distributed through a gift economy and that players are not always victims of an industry that capitalizes on player-created content (see also Sun, Lin & Ho 2003).
58. The need for strategy guides like Bradygames' product has diminished over time. Since *World of Warcraft*'s release, an extensive array of information databases and guides has popped up online for free, most of them far more comprehensive and advanced than commercial print guides. I should also add that Blizzard includes a mini strategy guide in the box in which the software is sold. This booklet, which is thicker than the usual instruction manual included with most videogames, includes some basic information about initial choices (classes, professions, etc.) and gameplay. Additionally, the official website offers an extensive database of information and is constantly expanded. Naturally, these too form important starting points for many players. As these paratexts do not present themselves as strategy guides or walkthroughs – instead, opting for the more neutral "game manual" and "game guide" – I did not include them here.
59. For example, the description of the quest 'Cutting Teeth' mentioned in the excerpt is as follows: 'The first order of business will be to put a little strength in your backbone. I could send you out to the Barrens to hunt kodo, but well, in all honesty, you're more useful to us alive than dead. I believe you would find a good match with the mottled boars you'll find to the north of here' (Blizzard Entertainment 2004a). The writing style here signals the higher status this NPC has in comparison to your new, low-level character and also hints at the larger fictional world that will be explored and your part in it.
60. One particularly flamboyant speedrunner playing under the pseudonym of Athene gained notoriety among the *World of Warcraft* player community and beyond for being quite brash about his activities (including claiming most if not all world records) by creating a "reality web-series" and a DVD showing his and his friends' endeavours.
61. For more speedrunning records, see Speed Demos Archive: http://speeddemosarchive.com/.
62. More background information about individual quests is available through hyperlinks (the italicized fragments are pointers to the information database allakhazam.com), but the walkthrough itself focuses on one thing alone: the most desired route.
63. Consalvo actually uses the term 'de-*Myst*-ification', referring to *Myst* (Brøderbund Software Inc. 1993), the classic puzzle game (2007: 45, emphasis in original).

64. The most profound moment I encountered related to this form of sequence breaking came when nearing level sixty. Prior to the release of the first expansion pack, level sixty was the maximum level your character could achieve. The expansion pack added an entirely new landmass to the game world, the so-called Outlands, as well as ten extra levels. To gain access to this new content, a player must first reach level fifty-eight. While the first version of Joana's guide provides a walkthrough all the way to level sixty and doing quests on the old continents, the updated version simply commands the player to leave the old world at level fifty-nine immediately and start "grinding" easy mobs (killing them for experience points) on the new continent until level sixty is reached. The reason stated by the guide for moving to the Outlands so abruptly could not be more instrumental: 'Because you earn about twice as much XP per mob kill than you do in Azeroth' (2007: 33).
65. A previous version of this chapter has been published as (Glas, 2007).
66. Available at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twinking.
67. An often-used term in role-playing games, the term munchkin also refers to being silly or immature. For a satirical discussion of munchkins, see Desborough and Mortimer (1999).
68. Quotes retrieved from *Thottbot.com* (http://www.thottbott.com/?i=11136, retrieved April, 2007).
69. Bartle sees the desire to dominate as an unavoidable but nevertheless negative side effect of virtual worlds. Therefore, he includes not only attacking other players but making other's lives difficult in different ways as well, including verbal harassment, within his definition of Killers (2004: 130). While griefing is unmistakably a part of PvP play, this is a somewhat limited view of player versus player behaviour, especially in a MMORPG such as *World of Warcraft* where dedicated, sports-like options for PvP exist in the form of battlegrounds. Bartle's main sequence, in which "killer" behaviour only (or most outspokenly) exists among new players who are still experimenting with the boundaries of play, therefore becomes problematic when dedicated, high-level PvP engagement enters the picture.
70. Twink guilds are still very domination oriented; some guilds revel in "steamrolling" the opposition by joining a battleground match with a full twink team. As I did not actively pursue a twink guild for Brikk, further research would be needed to investigate what this means for social play within such guilds.
71. These abbreviations and examples of jargon translate into 'learn to play, newbie' (newcomer), 'good game', 'good job' and 'owned' (referring to a person having just dominated another).
72. According to Blizzard's 'UI Add-On Development Policy', add-ons must be free of charge; the code must be completely visible; they must not negatively impact *World of Warcraft* realms or other players; they may not include advertisements; they may not solicit donations; they must not contain offensive or objectionable material; they must abide by *World of Warcraft* ToU and EULA; and Blizzard has the right to disable add-on functionality as it sees fit (Blizzard Entertainment 2009). It further adds that 'failure to abide by them may result in measures up to and including taking formal legal action' (ibid).
73. A modified version of this chapter has been published as (Glas, forthcoming).

74. In the periods directly after the implementation of changes in the combat log system, usually during a patch, mod makers usually need some time to adjust their mods to the changes. When the changes Blizzard makes are substantial, this can take more than a few days; sometimes even weeks are needed for adjustment. As one UI mod scene observer commented: 'that first week or two without our beloved add-ons such as Omen [a popular threat meter add-on] and damage meters reminded us just how much we've come to rely on them, for better or worse' (Porter). Remarks like these show how much the raiding community has come to depend on using UI mods for play.
75. From wowwiki.com (http://www.wowwiki.com/Theorycrafting). See Paul (2011) for a historical overview of the practice of theorycrafting before *World of Warcraft*.
76. I could find no virus infections, keyloggers or other malware on the three computers on which I had installed *World of Warcraft*. To this day, I still have not found a conclusive answer to how someone could have gotten access to my account details. Later that April, Blizzard and Adobe released a statement that old versions of Adobe Flash Player for browsers had vulnerability issues potentially targeting *World of Wacraft* players and their accounts. This might have happened, but a definitive answer remains elusive.
77. A narrower definition of what happened to my account is cybercrime, a crime committed against a computer by means of a computer. These forms of computer-mediated and computer-oriented crime, including "phishing", are on the books in the real-world law of many countries (Lastowka & Hunter: 123-133).
78. IGE's long-time CEO, former child actor Brock Pierce, became notorious for his allegedly sordid history, including 'the purchase of illegal drugs, child molestation, the transport of minors across state lines and the death of Pierce's dog at the hands of the "Spanish FBI"' as well as running a dotcom bubble company into the ground, for which he fled the US (Cavalli 2008).
79. IGE's involvement of acquisitions and other takeovers is difficult to track. Several "exposés" written by mostly anonymous sources provide a "paper trail" of news items and other bits and pieces of data, showing that IGE had created a new company, RPG Holdings, to function as a friendly looking front through which to buy websites and networks like thottbot.com and mmorpg.net in 2004. These sites became part of the freshly created Zam.com network, to which popular MMORPG database allakhazam.com was added in 2006. Another company, Affinity Media, swooped in in 2007 to become the new owner of Zam.network and IGE. In this period, WoWhead.com, the third biggest WoW database, was purchased as well as several Korean gold-selling websites (see for example "Advocate" 2005; Looterslounge 2008).
80. The owner of the databases after the acquisitions, Affinity Media, publicly stated that it was 'no longer in that business', but new rumours and evidence kept emerging that showed the link with IGE was still there-some even claim that IGE is the secret owner of Affinity Media (Edan Van Zelfden 2007).
81. The person or persons responsible for plundering my goods actually made a new character on my account called Gouyun. Either this person was from Asian/Chinese descent, or this nametag cheekily hinted at the prejudice that all hackers/bots/gold farmers are from China.

82. Rate of exchange taken from *MMOBUX – Advanced MMOG Currency Research* (http://www.mmobux.com/, data retrieved 8 May 2008).
83. If anything, we are looking at what Dibbell considers 'the emergence of a curious new industrial revolution, driven by play as the first was driven by steam' (2006b: 297).
84. Names in this and following conversation excerpts have been changed for ethical and privacy considerations.
85. Take this forum post by a community manager as an example: 'In our continued efforts to combat cheating in World of Warcraft, more than 105,000 accounts were closed and over 12 million gold was removed from the game economies in Europe, Korea, and the US in the month of November. The closed accounts were associated with activities that violate World of Warcraft's Terms of Use, such as using third-party programs that allow cheating, and farming gold and items. These types of activities can severely impact the economy of a realm and the overall game enjoyment for all players' (posted by "Thundgot" on the official forums, 22 December 2006). Posts like these occur every few months, revealing to the community that Blizzard is indeed watching closely.
86. There is a strong similarity here with the matter of welfare epics discussed in chapter two. As game and rhetoric scholar Christopher A. Paul notes in relation to welfare epics, due to 'the consistent use of language such as ''work'' and ''earn'' to describe the effort and reward structure in *WoW*, it can be argued that *WoW* players consider themselves paid in epics' (2010: 169).
87. Blizzard publicly stated that it strongly supports the goals of the lawsuit, adding that it 'believe[s] that shutting down gold farming and real-money transfer is in the interest of all World of Warcraft players and that a victory in this case would have a positive long-term effect on the online gaming industry as a whole' (Magrino 2007). While Blizzard did support the goal of the lawsuit, it did not legally support the lawsuit itself.
88. IGE ultimately agreed that it 'will not engage in the selling of World of Warcraft virtual property or currency (commonly referred to as "gold," "gold farming," "real money trade" or "RMT") for a period of five (5) years', but because the setup of IGE as a company changed a few days before the lawsuit was filed, IGE was not required to change its business model (Duranske 2008a).
89. I called the main information line of the Dutch government ("Postbus 51") to ask if my case could be labelled as internet fraud or another form of cybercrime. They found my case amusingly unusual and at first made a serious attempt to find any sort of information about it in their database. After a twenty-minute search, all they could offer was to send my case on to the Department of Justice itself in order to have experts delve a bit deeper into the Dutch law books. Unfortunately, I never received a reply.
90. A modified version of this chapter has been published as (Glas, forthcoming).
91. Blizzard's art director Samwise Didier proudly adds to this firm rooting of the company's design team in fan subcultures: 'It's like a geek squad here [...] And that's a badge you wear with honour' (EDGE 2004: 82).
92. According to Wikipedia knowledge, the term "retroactive continuity" originated in the early 1980s during a discussion between the writers and readers of the *All-Star Squadron* comic, which put famous superheroes in alternative universes. Since then, it was shortened to retcon and has spread to other media with deeply invested fan cultures.

93. With its size being 2.4 gigabytes, a large part of *Tales of the Past III*'s audience probably saw it through streaming media. These viewers are not counted in the initial million plus downloads, making the film's actual audience considerably larger.
94. The success of the machinima *Leeroy!!* (PALS FOR LIFE 2005) eclipses that of *Tales of the Past III*. The short film featuring the hijinks of a fictional player called Leeroy Jenkins (a character created by player Ben Schultz) has even found an audience outside of *World of Warcraft*'s culture. Leeroy Jenkins has become an internet meme, a cult phenomenon even referenced on TV's *Jeopardy!* and *South Park*.
95. During the beta test phase of *World of Warcraft*, players already created a large variety of videos, most of which aimed at simply showing various aspects of the game in action to people who were not allowed to participate in the beta testing.
96. Other terms are more vague: 'depictions of any conduct, language or other context deemed inappropriate by the Sponsors [Blizzard, ed.] or any of the judges selected by the Sponsors' (Xfire 2006). Here, we see that even on the level of content, Blizzard retains the possibility to reject those practices (or depictions of them) it feels are inappropriate.
97. A Modelviewer is a relatively simple programme allowing players to view game models like characters or weapons in the game files.
98. Being vague about this matter might just serve a purpose for Blizzard in dealing with other companies, not just with the players or machinima makers. As Falch notes: 'the benefits of actually enforcing those rules are close to zero from Blizzard's point of view, so in all honesty, I think Blizzard added them mainly for legal reasons: "it's not our responsibility if authors use copyrighted music etc"' (chat interview).
99. To differentiate between machinima and this type of film, Lowood introduces the term game films; the difference lies in the fact that they are historical in nature (2006: 363). As my interest lies in the means of production, I will use the term machinima to describe both, signaling differences when needed.
100. *Warcraftmovies.com* still lists the film's original entry, noting that 'This movie is no longer available due to a Blizzard request. It violates their Unreleased Content policy' (Warcraftmovies.com). The film can nevertheless still be found on various other video hosting sites and peer-to-peer sharing networks.
101. The now defunct *Nogg-Aholic* blog can be found at http://nogg-aholic.blogspot.com.
102. The cartoon image can be found at: http://photos1.blogger.com/blogger/8095/1604/1600/wallwalking.jpg. The *Nogg-Aholic* blog does not mention the author of the cartoon nor its origins.
103. Retrieved from screenshots posted on the Nogg-Aholic blog (http://nogg-aholic.blogspot.com/).
104. Not much attention was given to this exploit removal in the patch notes. Under the header 'world environment' it simply stated 'Players should no longer be able to walk on steep terrain' and included many other changes (retrieved from *Wowwiki.com*, http://www.WoWwiki.com/Patch_1.9.0). Since the release of the first expansion pack, an even more severe measure was taken to keep players from reaching areas they should not (which still continued through other means and exploits). Since then, players who venture into areas they should not be in according to Blizzard get to witness their character being automatically teleported away from such a place.

105. In *Last Wallwalk the Movie*, we see a group of more than 80 gnome characters in an epic journey through the mountainous regions of Azeroth on the European Moonglade server. At several points, they actually meet GMs who turned up to see the bizarre parade of gnomes, one of them informing the group that 'This area is restricted and offlimits to players I would all to ask kindly to please leave this area and be sensitive to the Role-playing element of this realm'. informing him that they thought they were allowed to wall-walk until the patch – following statements made by Caydiem – he simply stated 'Well I am sorry Caydiem is a US CM and therefore I am asking you to please leave this area'. This shows how hard it is to manage a player community that spreads all over the world, with individual players following statements made by US Community Managers, statements not always communicated to their European counterparts. In the end, the wall-walking participants were all booted out of the game, their accounts were given an official warning and a three-hour ban from the game (Dopefish 2006).
106. Later, this communal collection part of the war effort turned out to be optional; as it turned out, the opening event would happen even without turning in these resources after a certain time. As one of Blizzard's lead designers Jeff Kaplan explained: 'we don't want to punish players on realms that aren't cooperating, so in a week or two the resources will start to just come in on their own' (Schiesel 2006: 2).
107. A previous version of this chapter has been published as (Glas, 2006).
108. Exceptions, however, do exist. Sony Online Entertainment's *Everquest* features a voluntary guide programme. In exchange for free subscription, these volunteers are asked to spend several hours per week helping out other players through a dedicated guide account SOE created for them. Their function is to be 'peacekeepers' or conflict resolution agents, as game scholar Sal Humphreys calls them, assisting in the collection of information about player problems before sending this information on to GMs (2005: 217). However, these volunteers are recruited from the *Everquest* website and are effectively "paid" for their work in the game by receiving a free subscription. We can consider these players as participants in co-governance with the game's GMs. However, as Humphreys points out, these forms of volunteerism are also a way for SOE to outsource customer service functions for little or no cost (2005: 218). As in many cases of participatory culture within commercial environments, the line between participation and exploitation is thin.
109. Blizzard did introduce the 'Most Valuable Poster' or MVP programme on the game's dedicated forums for a handful of players who have proved themselves to be valuable assets to the community. As with the community managers active on the forums, posts made by MVPs are of a different colour than posts by regular players, signifying their importance and – more importantly – credibility as a source of information. In terms of power, however, MVPs are not granted more access to the forums' admin tools. Blizzard does not make a secret of the outsourcing benefits of the MVP programme: it 'frees up the time of Blizzard representatives to focus on their primary job duties' (from the "MVP FAQ", official US forums, posted by "Nethaera", 3 July 2007).
110. Due to ethical considerations, all guild and character names have been changed to disguise their identities. The specific realm the developments took place on remains

unmentioned for the same reason. If indicated, gender was not determined through information about the player in real life. Instead, the characters' gender was chosen.

111. Unless stated otherwise, from here on, all quotes come from postings on *World of Warcraft*'s official EU forums.

112. Being a pseudonym itself and an obvious reference to the secret informant called "Deepthroat" in the Watergate scandal, the character name "Deepfroat" was not changed for this study.

113. From *Wowwiki.com* (http://www.WoWwiki.com/Server:Illidan_US).

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